

Lyric Image as Sensuous Thought

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*Recent scholarship has given considerable attention to lyric poetry as a form of sensuous knowledge. This approach emphasizes the corporeal origins of poetry, its genesis in the body or in language viewed as material. The question of sensuous knowledge is central to the larger theoretical issue of modernity itself, in which lyric holds a central yet ambiguous status. The question of sensuous knowledge is ultimately a question of meaning. However, modern thought—thought pertaining to “modernity”—is fundamentally circular. This would seem to establish an epistemological impasse for aesthetics. But I argue that this circularity offers an important, and necessary, way to limit knowledge and thereby ground an ethical subjectivity. My essay places formalism at the heart of sensuous knowledge. In this essay I develop an account of the importance of abstraction in sensuous knowledge by way of Kant’s concept of *Darstellung*, “presentation [of sensory experience].” The “presentation” is the object as it has undergone a structural process of internalization and been made available for psychic use as meaning; that requires a recognition of loss. Where this is important for literature is that twentieth-century American poetry frequently uses very personal images of family life as a way of conveying sincerity about corporeal experience. I use this discussion of circularity in modern aesthetic thought to argue that there is a risk to taking shortcuts to meaning through images of the material bodies of children. In these contemporary poems by Gary Snyder, Sharon Olds and Rita Dove, the poets reject loss in favor of a very modern “affirmation” of the material. But affirmation and the visual image as a sign of affirmation cannot alone bind meaning to us. That meaning must be internalized through the work of poetic presentation.*

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The question of sensuous knowledge has been raised as a way of addressing the status of materiality within thought itself. Epistemologically, the question becomes how and on what level are we connected to our objects? In terms of lyric poetry, two important approaches to lyric as sensuous knowledge, from quite different perspectives, are Susan Stewart’s *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* and Daniel Tiffany’s *Toy Medium*. Stewart calls her work a “general theory of poetic forms” through the “common human experiences of the senses” (ix). She claims that poetry does “culture work” in that it provides forms to renew

the language. In her dramatic formulation, the “cultural, or form-giving, work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness” (1); poetry is a “force against effacement” (2). She means that as the referent fades, the form the poet created survives. Form resists the pressure of the senses even as it shapes those senses and gives them value. Stewart’s study concludes on a note of poignant loss, almost an elegy for the decline of sensuousness in human culture. Poetry works to renew our connection with the body through our common human breath.

Daniel Tiffany’s work is even more “theoretical” than Stewart’s, if only because he essentially strips lyric of its status as a historical genre in order to claim it as a “discourse.” Tiffany’s stated project is one of “reassessing the discursive import of poetry in contemporary culture” (4) and of demonstrating the “inherently figurative character of Western materialism” (9). In Tiffany’s argument, lyric becomes less a matter of craft than of the principle informing matter. As Tiffany attempts to develop a notion of “lyric substance,” he asserts that poetry is the locus of the image and then argues that matter can only be known through pictures. Like a true Romantic, Tiffany makes “lyric” the unacknowledged basis of science and of historicist scholarship. The melancholic aspect of Tiffany’s work is less overt than Stewart’s, but more foundational to his theory. Tiffany refers somewhat cynically to the “regime of analogy” associated with doctrines of materialism. At the same time, he employs meteorological disturbances and mechanical toys as analogies for lyric.

There are two striking things about these approaches to lyric as a mode of sensuous knowledge. Both are informed by a sense of loss — to the point of being “haunted” in Tiffany. And both treat meaning as a type of ephemeral image, which is always under threat of fading. For Tiffany atoms are images. Stewart writes of form as a “representation” of its author’s “intention” toward another (12). This network of connections between literature, modernity and meaning deserves further consideration. First, literature and modernity as concepts are inextricably intertwined. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have famously argued that the very concept of “literature” arose with modernity, out of a crisis in philosophy inaugurated by Kant. “Literature” in the Romantic period became the equivalent of “theory,” characterized by fragmentation, the most obvious formal marker of an ironic dual condition: both autonomy and the incompleteness of knowledge.

In modernity, formal patterns become suspect, as indicating a perhaps overreaching effort to suggest the completeness of the subject’s claim to understanding. And yet autonomy is important as well, for it underwrites the subject’s detection of form in the first place. This is part of the circularity of modern thought. The idea of “fragmentation” becomes a way of talking about a particular kind of relationship — the link between self and object, which is incomplete. Attempts to reconceive poetry as giving insight into the material and the senses are part of the general modernist project to *embody* knowledge as a way of overcoming the divide between a perceiving self and an external, material object. This urge to embodiment arises as a felt need to overcome loss, hence the interest in “sensuous knowledge.”

In modernist aesthetics, image and object have a strong tendency to merge.¹ The connection of image to object has a long history both in Western culture and in scholarship. They are linked by a sense of loss. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben traces this connection between melancholy and the image back to the ancient period but notes particularly twelfth-century Provençal poetry, where the image undergoes internalization, as it comes to stand for the courtly lover's lady. A particularly vivid example of this is Bertran de Born's "dompna soiseubuda," or "borrowed lady," composed of the body parts of other women. The image becomes tied to subjectivity and the internalization of the sense of one's own body. Frank Kermode, writing of the nineteenth-century Symbolist "Image," insists on its connection with genius and with melancholy. Kermode writes: "The Image belongs to life in so far as the artist suffers for it" (164). The poet conveys that suffering through "metaphor (the rhetorical vehicle of the Image) which is an essential component of the modern poetic" (157). Peter Schwenger argues that the modern object is imbued with loss (our "tears"). Our melancholy comes from our separation from the material world and the way the image activates that separation. The notion of the image then is central not just to modernist poetics, but also to modern Western thought. It is foundationally connected to the questions both of subjectivity and of meaning.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy point to Kant as the source of both "literature" and of modernity. And yet Kant was trying to *save* the phenomena from skeptical incursions by empiricism. In his Third Critique, the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant established a "critical" method for determining the status of human knowledge. Responding to the skepticism of eighteenth-century empiricism, Kant attempted to "defend the appearances" and provide philosophical support for the possibility of *a priori* synthetic knowledge. Such knowledge comprises knowledge-claims that are both certain and substantive, not simply tautologies. In the face of radical skepticism about the possibility of any genuine knowledge of the world based on empirical, sensory evidence, Kant held that we do have genuine knowledge. Such knowledge pertains not to the world itself, however, not even to the noumenal world as a theoretical construct of "reality," about which we can know nothing. It pertains only to the foundational conditions for the possibility of knowledge *at all*, that is, those structures by which we can know *at all*. Concepts can only be formed by means of the transcendental categories of space and time and according to rules of judgment under the aegis of the understanding. Kant offered a rule-based system for conceptualizing a place for epistemology in a world whose anchors in empirical and rational certitude had been dislodged.

Kant established the aesthetic as constitutive of knowledge. From that basis, his system influenced Romanticism and post-Romantic movements in literature. In many ways, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy point out, Romanticism *is* modernity and we still inhabit modernity, however contested that notion of "modernity" has become. For Kant, the aesthetic is the mode of thinking that is rule-based and universal yet non-conceptual. The aesthetic allows Kant to link the realms of freedom and necessity (reason versus nature) by establishing a connection

between them through feeling. The process is fundamentally circular, and it is that circularity with which I am concerned in this essay. The *feeling* that results from aesthetic experience allows Kant to posit a supersensible substrate to sensuous reality. This substrate, however unknowable, is only accessible to the human mind by way of that imaginative act of judgment which gave rise to the feeling in the first place. Kant thus instantiates an inescapable circularity in knowledge production.

This circularity informs much of the major scholarship on modernity. In *Singular Modernity*, Frederic Jameson points to Paul de Man's theory of allegory as a model for modernity, in which the diachronic *reading* of a text as representative of modernity merges with the synchronic *model* of modernity *as* a text (125). Modernity is an allegory of the making of meaning, one that is, of course, relentlessly circular. In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens concludes that under conditions of modernity *all* knowledge claims are circular (176); modernity is thus "unsettling" because of this "circularity of reason" (49). Aesthetic experience is inherently circular, because the object presents itself as showing evidence of form, yet it is the mind that locates that form in the object. Therefore whether it is a case of the beautiful or of the sublime, aesthetic experience is, according to Kant, inherently subjective. Neither beauty nor sublimity is an attribute of the object but a *judgment* made upon an object.

The key is that such judgment gives us pleasure. Pleasure is the sign of a judgment of taste and is not due to the object's own innate features, but to the mind's self-satisfaction at having judged. Pleasure becomes an aspect of form itself. Kant deliberately removes content from aesthetic experience, declaring it to be non-conceptual. Furthermore, it is non-purposive; it has no "end" or goal. We don't have aesthetic experiences in order to *get* something. Aesthetic experience is not a tool. Kant's famous formulation is "purposiveness without purpose," though in fact in his teleology Kant posits man as the final end of nature. If aesthetic reflection resulted in a concept, it would actually be a determinative judgment. If it conformed to a concept and a purpose, it would be a moral evaluation. Instead the aesthetic is a matter of the free play of the mind; its function is to harmonize the faculties.

Such harmony between the faculties results from a tension between general and particular in aesthetic reflection, a tension that generates movement. Frances Ferguson points out that with respect to eighteenth-century aesthetics, the relationship between the particular and the general was a central concern (31). Kant's explanation for the very possibility of a supersensible substrate—which underwrites our empirical experiences even if we cannot know it—assumes this tension. Aesthetic experience points toward a supersensible substrate, because aesthetic experience indicates the harmony of the faculties. The logic is that only a supersensible substrate could bring these unlike fields into unity. Yet this expansion of possibility beyond the empirical is based upon deliberate limitation, so a sort of paradox is written into aesthetic experience from the start. Kant insists that we restrain our imagination: "We only have to do with nature as phenomenon. . . .

[I]t must be regarded as the mere presentation of nature in itself (of which reason has the idea)" (*Critique* 108). It is this idea of *limitation* within the notion of "presentation" (*Darstellung*) that I see as the basis for an ethical subjectivity.

Darstellung ("presentation") is central to any approach to modern aesthetics. Martha Helfer argues that it is one of the most important threads in modern aesthetic philosophy. She writes: "*Darstellung* is perhaps *the* defining force of German Idealism and early German Romanticism and arguably forms the basis of our own critical consciousness today" (Helfer 3). Kant gives us two kinds of image in the *Critique of Judgment*: representation (*Vorstellung*), which is any passive mental image, and presentation (*Darstellung*), which is the manner in which the supersensible—the realm of Idea—is made manifest to limited human intelligence in sensuous terms. Just as an intuition synthesizes the phenomenal manifold, making an object available either to the understanding or to the imagination, the presentation undertakes the formative process of developing a visual image, a representation (*Vorstellung*).

I argue that, paradoxically, the logical condition of presentation is invisibility rather than visibility; it underlies the representation structurally and constitutes a sort of negative image, as it were, the foundation for a visual image. Kantian presentation is, as Rodolphe Gasché puts it, the "mere form of the representation" (98). "Mere" (*bloß*) means bare or naked; the "mere form" unifies a manifold for which there is no determinate concept (Gasché 10). The presentation verges on a condition of invisibility as a latent image, an image of possibility, even as it constitutes the link with sensuous reality. Its tendency toward invisibility facilitates its mimetic function by increasing the level of its abstraction, which is what allows feeling to cross the boundary from one entity to another. This is the basis of the *sensus communis* in judgments of taste. Neither the feeling itself nor the content is transmitted, but rather the pleasure of response. That pleasure is aesthetic feeling that grounds the *a priori* universality that Kant seeks as an intellectual warrant for his system. We can only bind ourselves to material reality—not in its raw aspect but as shaped and therefore aesthetic—by means of the mimetic aspect of "presentation," which both *points to* another element and places itself *in relationship with* that element.

Because Kant's account of aesthetic reflection is rule based, and the *sensus communis* or common feeling is what justifies the universality of judgments of taste, the issue becomes the *relationship* between subject and object. Alison Ross, discussing Kant's account of presentation, states: "if we can attach moral feeling to a material form it is not because of the *content* of the presentation but the *relation* we have to it" (28, *emphases original*). Kirk Pillow argues that Kant's aesthetical ideas point to the "affinity of the manifold" (264), that sublime reflection gives us insight into the "affine networks" of the manifold (250). Through aesthetic experience, in Ezra Pound's word it all "coheres." But the symbolic relations we have with material forms, with things, are our contribution to allowing them to be meaningful for us. As Ross puts it: "we relate to these objects *as if* they were made for us" (30, *emphasis original*). Presentation (*Darstellung*) is the vehicle for

subjective purposiveness, which promotes binding, making the audience feel that “this experience is for *you*.” But one can choose *not* to have an aesthetic experience; an audience has to be *available*, that is, motivated, willing, to see form.

Michael Taussig defines mimesis as “the nature that culture uses to create a second nature” (70). A fetish object, Taussig observes, can be very crude and in fact bear no close resemblance at all to the thing it is meant to influence. The elements required are resemblance and contact, but only a generic resemblance is necessary, since it is the *abstract* nature of the fetish object that allows such resemblance in the first place. A figurine can be devoid of specific features, but with a bit of hair or clothing “contact” can be made and the figurine thereby credited with the power to cure or resolve a problem. The abstraction of the figurine *points to* resemblance; the personal item—blood, hair, clothing—establishes a connection through contiguity, by means of touch, with the individual whom the agent intends to influence. The example of the fetish object underscores the close, and vivifying, connection between *deixis* (the pointing function of language) and abstraction.

Mimesis has an ordering function. According to Michael Taussig, it is the ordering function of mimesis which makes representation possible *at all*. Taussig stresses many of the same points about mimesis that have been made about presentation. Taussig says mimesis is *dependent* on alterity (the Other) and that it is *inseparable* from both images and thought itself (70, 72). Taussig calls mimesis a “visual contract with reality” (70). Alterity is not a thing in itself but a *relationship* (130), which suggests that mimesis, like presentation, provides a way of thinking about dualism by means of that very circularity. If abstraction is not simply a universal or type, but it also provides an indeterminate ground for relating, then it is essential in the sense that it facilitates the crossing of boundaries to make contact with an Other. For Taussig, images are related to spirit, and the entire point of making a fetish figurine is to destroy materiality in order to release the image. The image is *more* powerful, finally, than the thing it was originally representing, having become fully spirit. Like *Darstellung*, the image is most fully powerful when it is invisible. Indeed, I believe the idea of “presentation” most usefully functions as a way of talking about mimesis in structural terms, through the deictic function of abstraction.

I want to take some time to examine a passage of Kant’s that provides a seemingly literal lesson in how to see. This passage has been controversial, and it helpfully sets up some of the issues we will face when we turn to contemporary American poets’ use of images of the bodies of their children. In particular, we will grapple with the manner in which we should look at an entity to make it meaningful to us, yet at the same time acknowledge its separateness from us. In §29 of his Third Critique, in the Analytic of the Sublime, Kant gives the examples of the sky and the ocean as sublime landscapes. He privileges the sense of sight as most connected to reason. Since an aesthetic judgment is to be rational (in accordance with reason) without attaining to a concept, this almost literal mode of seeing that Kant demonstrates constitutes a particular *discipline* of aesthetic perception. Kant points to “the sight of the starry heaven” and specifies that “we

must regard it, just as we see it, as a distant, all-embracing vault” (*Critique* 110). With respect to the ocean, he declares: “To call the ocean sublime we must regard it as poets do, merely by what strikes the eye—if it is at rest, as a clear mirror or water only bounded by the heaven; if it is restless, as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything” (*Critique* 111).

Notice the extent to which these sublime sights tend toward the condition of objects, if strangely vacant or empty objects. The sky becomes a vault. The ocean becomes a mirror when it is still; when restless, an abyss. Each of these images hold in common a certain negativity, not only in terms of being threatening (the abyss, for example), but also in their position with respect to humans. The vault is an architectural space waiting to be filled, whether with things or with people, a space that encloses. The mirror is usually associated with domesticity and femininity, that is, with the *oikos*, the domestic hearth. These objects speak of human use and human presence. Their negativity points to a condition of waiting for purposiveness. They derive their meaning from humans. The mimetic is indicated through that suggestion of purposiveness. Until they are imbued with purposiveness, they remain abstractions only.

Nevertheless, though in §29 the sense privileged as most connected with reason is vision, the sense truly present throughout is touch. Kant repeatedly invokes contact at boundaries. The vault is “all embracing.” The ocean-mirror touches the sky at its edges, its boundaries. These boundaries become tenuous with the dangerous sublime due to the risks of swallowed edges and borders and obliterated form. Kant’s effort to construct a sensuous knowledge is to establish form that facilitates touch—in the sense of contact between boundaries—without allowing that touch to escape control. That is, the abstraction enables us to broach boundaries without getting mired in the object.

As an “invisible image,” the presentation gives us a way of “seeing” what it *like* to have consciousness, to have a “destiny.” The formative principle of a work brings an audience into relation with the piece by giving that audience the power to “see” the work’s inner structure as purposive for them, *as if*, thereby binding the audience to the work by means of visual images activated by the formative “image” beneath. The way to see aesthetically, to see purposiveness for objects in their relation to the mind, is mimetic. How Kant limits meaning is by virtue of a certain chaste discipline—we must consciously employ chastity of vision in order to bind objects to ourselves. This is how we can “touch” without compromising the object’s freedom of separateness from us. On this basis, we can recognize loss in that separateness.

In Kant’s aesthetic thought, visual appearance (*Schein*) becomes a form of *deixis*, of pointing. That makes sense: in a subjective system, the fundamental role of *deixis* is to direct our attention. Aesthetic experience consists of an act of judgment; the object has no meaning in and of itself. In Kant’s epistemology, we can never know the thing itself. Thus aesthetic experience requires a certain quality of attention, and consequently of energy, directed toward an object, thereby bringing it into relationship with us. This suggests that it is not simply the role of judgment

in aesthetic experience that gives us pleasure, but the bestowing of our *attention*. That pleasurable attention is an aspect of relationship and is part of binding to an object. Again, the structure of this process is circular: in aesthetic experience the very fact that we bestow our attention forms its own proof that the object somehow “caused” us to direct our attention to it in the first place. The object “attracted” us to it. This seems intentional, “purposive” even though there was no “purpose.” I find it profoundly moving to think about aesthetic formalism in this way because it provides a framework within which to imagine and articulate relationships with objects, while at the same time recognizing and acknowledging their existence as separate.

Now, Paul de Man roundly criticizes Kant for his discussion of the aesthetic in §29. According to de Man, in Kant’s comparison of the starry heavens to a vault Kant opposes the architectonic to the teleological in a negative mode of imagination (81), which de Man identifies as a collapse of the aesthetic. He claims that Kant’s critique of the aesthetic ends up in a “formal materialism” that undermines the aesthetic even as the aesthetic cannot ground the transcendental. De Man wants texts to resist phenomenalization, or to use Frances Ferguson’s term, “systematization.” That is, he wants them to proliferate in significance through ambiguity and evade pressure to settle into any one meaning. Ferguson, however, points out that all materiality is “formality without idealism” (158). This criticism suggests that de Man’s claim as he puts it has a certain emptiness, which is, ironically, mimetic of the objects in Kant’s passage. If Kant’s philosophical system were in fact materialistic, then it would still be formalist, by definition. But Ferguson’s criticism of deconstructionism, including de Man, has larger consequences. Ferguson charges deconstructionism with seeking a “technology” for the production of sublimity through an infinity of materiality (14). De Man’s objection to Kant’s “materialism” would then not be that it is “materialist” *per se*, but that it fixes meaning, hence is “formalist.” It is Kant’s *formalism* with its effort to *limit meaning* that de Man objects to, not his putative materialism. De Man wants a proliferation of meaning for its own sake.

Jonathan Loesberg supports de Man with the intention of defending aesthetics from Bourdieu’s charge that the aesthetic always tends toward ideology. In “Materialism and Aesthetics” Loesberg analyzes de Man’s materialism with §29 in mind. He argues that de Man is employing Kant’s aesthetics to deconstruct Kant’s critical philosophy (90). That is, de Man has an *agenda*. De Man’s argument is “motivated”; it has a “purpose.” For de Man, the sublime scenes in §29 reveal “no mind” (93), and Loesberg accepts this and agrees. He argues that de Man’s “theorizing of lifelessness” involves attributing to Kant’s formalism a view of the human body as a “set of severed body parts” (96). This cold dismemberment allows us, Loesberg maintains, to “critique” “ideology.” He affirms the “de Manian-Kantian counteraesthetic materialist principle of reinterpretation via deanimation” (105). He concludes, on de Man’s behalf, with an affirmation of “the value of a constructed, dehumanized, dead form as the model through which to identify various ideological animations” (107). And here, with the language

of “ideological animations,” we are in the conceptual territory that allows Daniel Tiffany to refer to lyric poetry as the property of the fetish. Our poems, indeed all our commitments, are zombies that haunt us.

To my mind, Loesberg’s defense of aesthetics via de Man is a scorched-earth policy. The human body can be a beautiful object for us provided that it be entirely dismembered first, and it can be made meaningful by voiding it of all meaning. Yet when we read §29, we find that Kant’s German stresses contact and a certain activity, both through the verbs and by means of simile. We should, Kant argues, look at the sky, the starry heaven, “*wie man ihn sieht, als ein weites Gewölbe, was alles befaßt*” (*Kritik* 127), that is, as a wide or vast arch or vault, that touches or handles everything. The mind’s participation is necessary to register the simile consciously: *als Gewölbe*. The verb *befassen*—touch, or handle—is active here. Likewise we should view the ocean, “*wie die Dichter es [tun]*” (*Kritik* 128), as poets do: if calm, “*als einen klaren Wasserspiegel*” (*Kritik* 128), as a clear water mirror, and if not calm, “*wie einen alles zu verschlingen drohenden Abgrund*” (*Kritik* 128), as a menacing or threatening abyss or precipice, that threatens to devour or swallow up everything. When Kant briefly turns to the human body (*die Menschengestalt*, human form or figure) after discussing the sky and the ocean, it is not to dismember it, as Loesberg holds, by separating the body’s limbs from their purposes. Rather, he intends to focus our attention on the body’s lines—on “mere form,” as Gasché would put it—with a mental discipline of indifference to the *use* to which the body can be put. This indifference (or “freedom”) is the source of our pleasure in judging. Kant writes: “*Das Wohlgefallen an dem Gegenstande hängt von der Beziehung ab, in welcher wir die Einbildungskraft setzen wollen*” (*Kritik* 128) [“The pleasure in the object depends on the *relation* in which we want to put the power of the imagination” (my translation, emphasis added).]

I would argue that this passage does not reveal “no mind,” but rather the vital connection between desire and will and the meanings we find in objects. We establish beforehand our orientation to our objects. Kant’s landscape does not promote a dismembered body, but a mind engaged chastely, by means of “pure” judgments, with its objects both internal and external. This allows it to make judgments cleansed of immediate political considerations, such as might concern pictures of natural landscapes devastated by pollution or toxic spills; cleansed also of prurient response to depictions of the nude body. Such a pure (“*reine*”) judgment stems not from *lack* of mind but from *discipline* of mind, as is indicated by Kant’s use five times in this paragraph of the verb “*müssen*” (must). I certainly would not accept Kant’s aesthetic thought uncritically; I think he short-changes the role of the other senses in aesthetic experience. But his emphasis here on a necessary discipline of response does seem to engage us directly with questions of how aesthetic experience can expand our sense of possibility, and even “freedom.”

In fact Kant concludes this thought with a reminder of our imaginative freedom: “*Die ästhetische Zweckmäßigkeit ist die Gesetzmäßigkeit der Urteilskraft in ihrer Freiheit*” (*Kritik* 128, emphasis original). That is, aesthetic purposiveness is

the conforming to law, or legitimacy, of the judgment in its freedom. This is a paradox, requiring great discipline on the part of the perceiving mind. Aesthetic vision should conform to “*was der Augenschein zeigt*” (*Kritik* 128), that is, what visual appearance shows or *points to*, being a form of *deixis*. Visual appearance is thus a particular kind of materiality: an object-mirror. The mind is in relationship with its objects. If it maintains its discipline, it can reflect itself in them in unity and wholeness. If agitated or agenda-driven (“ideological”), the mind consumes itself, its faculties and qualities. *Schein* becomes a counter-intuitive basis for sensuous knowledge; we seem to be inherently attracted to wholes. All landscapes then, whether of nature or of the body, are on one level metaphors for the mind. How we see gives us insight into how we think.

Gerald Graff has argued that the function of literature is to enable us to see reality. His position is that capitalism pushes “de-realizing” images to attract people’s desires falsely. Capitalism as a modern thought system that values “consumers” over “citizens” promotes a fake reality and undermines freedom. Literature should provide substantive images that give access to reality and allow us to recognize it. I have been developing the argument that a fundamental condition for creating substantive images is limiting and thereby deepening the meaning images have for us. This involves recognizing the separateness of our objects from us, and the inevitable potential for loss in our relations with them. The project to see reality by means of the aesthetic constitutes a material avant-garde. The effort to see reality clearly through aesthetic experience is not simply an epistemological effort; it is a moral one.

At the most obvious level, the mental discipline that Kant insists on entails the refusal to include consideration of practical “use” in aesthetic judgments. Clearly this is a rudimentary limitation of meaning. Now, the way Kant “fixes” meaning does involve a certain sleight of hand. De Man is not wrong to notice tensions in his thought. Kant’s reference to the starry vault of the heavens and to the ocean seems to blaze a trail for both Impressionism and Logical Positivism in its insistence on the surface materiality of vision, on its *literal* rendering of “mere” sensual experience, “just as we see it” (110). But at the core of this seemingly passive rendition of experience is an abstraction. The presentation (*Darstellung*) is *not* passive, as is ostensibly the representation (*Vorstellung*). It actively moves from the intuition, which entails the synthesis of the manifold, to a formal construct that adumbrates a “destiny” by means of subjective purposiveness. For Kant, *Darstellung* functions as a means of developing his own latent theory of mimesis, one that functions at the structural level of the imagination to unite material and ideal in one mental activity, to imbue materiality with meaning but at the same time to limit that meaning. He risks, however, reducing his *a priori* synthesis to the very tautology he had sought to avoid.

Alison Ross notes Kant’s “sleight of hand” regarding the contingency of nature. She writes: “Nature’s contingency for our reason not only frees it from our interests but also makes its confirmation of these interests *significant*” (36, emphasis original). Again and again Kant’s argument is circular. Ross emphasizes

that the independence of beauty is supposed to underwrite moral ideas by means of its analogical function, but these moral ideas instead come to shape nature's forms beforehand for judgment. Kant's transcendental critique risks becoming a rationalist system with aesthetics no longer separate to make possible a meaningful connection between reason and necessity. This separation is what allows meaning. However, even if Kant's aesthetic does risk collapsing the levels of material and ideal, it nevertheless remains the deictic function of *Schein* (appearance) that enables the "negative space" in which our attention can be bound to the object without conflating the levels of mind and nature. Appearance itself becomes a sort of abstraction within a discipline of chaste vision. But attention supplies the vivifying *touch* that allows mimesis to work. It is the job of the artist's craft, *technē*, to heighten the deictic function of his or her materials to direct an audience's attention to the meaningfulness of the work.

Here I should point out two things. First, I do not deny that any entity *can* signify anything; language is multivalent, and significations can and do proliferate. That is not the issue. Second, I do not argue that *any* visual appearance passively points to anything. I am talking about "presentation" within an aesthetic context. Presentation (*Darstellung*) offers a valuable basis for a concept of sensuous knowledge, because it provides a way of imagining the union of sense and spirit without conflating them. Through directing our attention, the presentation makes possible that recognition of form which enables a material object to be internalized as an image. An image, understood in this formative sense, is basic to a concept of poetry as sensuous knowledge, because it shapes the object for psychic use even as it makes it available in the first place. This is still circular, but it is how we can make use of the circularity endemic to modern thought. The presentation is not a literal image (a representation, *Vorstellung*, in Kant's terms) of an external, physical object. Rather, it is an imaginative internal object, the object as it has been *bound*, internalized in an act of recognition. The form-making activity of the poem guides the reader through a mimetic process of loss of a material object and the renewal of that object as an inward object or symbol.

What is important for the sublime is this feeling of loss. I have spoken of how the presentation in its tendency toward invisibility and inwardness facilitates a focus on relation. By means of the mimetic function of analogy, it "trains" the mind to seek meaning in its experience. Kant defines the sublime for us in §29: "[the sublime] is an object (of nature) *the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature regarded as a presentation of ideas*" (*Critique* 108, emphasis original). This preference for the unreachable and the invisible places the locus of aesthetic experience in the mind of the viewer/auditor/reader, not in the object. But it is an experience that encourages reflectiveness on the relationship between them. The sublime "consists merely in the *relation* by which the sensible in the representation of nature is judged available for a possible supersensible use" (*Critique* 107, emphasis original). This means that in aesthetic experience we think in terms of analogies. We imagine connections between things. In a sense we are always thinking about the future *in* the present, imagining how things would go

together, mentally putting ourselves into intimate relationships with things. This relationship has no limitation insofar as it is merely fantasized. But once there is an element of contact with an object, the need for limitation arises. Limitation entails the loss of other possibilities. But limitation is also an important element of respect for reality. It is the recognition of the importance of bounds.

Analogy works to cross boundaries and overcomes the gap between perceiving mind and material nature by giving the subject a feeling of connection to the object. The “presentation” in itself is invisible. Invisibility is an inevitable condition of imagery in a dualist system upon which is based a moral claim about reality. Kant acknowledges that “ideas cannot be presented” (*Critique* 108), that is, can have no sensuous equivalent. However, in the experience of the sublime, the mind attempts precisely to formulate a representation of nature, though it inevitably fails. Nevertheless, through that very effort, the mind is raised to exaltation despite its failure. This is how we can *feel* our destiny as free, rational creatures:

This effort—and the feeling of the unattainability of the idea by means of the imagination—is itself a presentation of the subjective purposiveness of our mind in the employment of the imagination for its supersensible destination and forces us, subjectively, to *think* nature itself in its totality as a presentation of something supersensible without being able *objectively* to arrive at this presentation. (*Critique* 108, emphasis original)

Our limitations become a metaphor for our destiny. What Kant is saying here is that our very inability to think through to reality so as to see its inner workings, coupled with our effort to do precisely that, is a metaphor for who we are, for our “destiny.”

Kirk Pillow maintains that in discussing the sublime, Kant adumbrates a latent theory of metaphor by means of his concept of “aesthetical ideas” (6). Pillow argues that “we interpret aesthetic ideas, and hence ascribe meanings to works of art, by means of a judgment of sublimity” (4). He views the indeterminacy of the sublime as achieving a *felt* sense of a whole (1) that gives privileged insight into the “affine relations of the manifold.” Metaphor does not make declarative claims about the world; it is Agamben’s “impure” knowledge. It suggests by association. Paul Ricoeur explains metaphor’s ordering function as follows: its pleasure resides in the understanding that follows surprise (33). According to Ricoeur, metaphor works by catachresis, forcibly yoking together meanings due to the inherent paucity of language (53). He refers to the “singularizing function of language” (Ricoeur 71). Language *points to* something to make it exist. *Deixis* is an activating function of language. The upshot is that we are actively engaged in constructing reality, but that reality is always known in its relation to us as a metaphor. We get contact with reality by intensely focusing our attention on our metaphoric connection with it. In a way, this is an infinitely recursive process, like a hall of mirrors, hence the need for a limitation to meaning. But when we have contact, we have the feeling of being part of a whole. This is the “unity of the faculties,” the *Lebensgefühl* (feeling of life) Kant discusses.

What this re-vision of formalism means for “sensuous knowledge” is that feeling is affirmed as essential for contact with an object. Such feeling is under discipline, however, and is a matter of *work*. No formalism escapes the pressure of the empirical. Ferguson accuses deconstructionism of being a “crypto-empiricism” in its zeal to discover techniques for developing an infinity of materiality. Feeling is part of limiting meaning within sensuous knowledge by helping to slow us down and give our attention to the object. This involves an act of mourning and creates what Tamar Japaridze calls the “felt time” of the sublime. Sensuous knowledge involves relationship with an object but always with the recognition that it is separate from us and subject to loss. Materiality is a powerful basis for pleasure, but it provides no escape from mortality. Sensuous knowledge heightens our awareness of our beauty and fragility as phenomenal creatures who briefly enter, and then depart from, time.

Historically, the idea that matter and mind are inherently connected, and that content is secondary, has opened possibilities for movements or doctrines such as symbolism and deconstructionism that seek a method for the endless production of meaning. A symbolic mode of thinking guarantees fecundity of meaning. With respect to literary symbolism, however, it soon became apparent that this prolific output of meaning was itself a problem. Ralph Waldo Emerson gives the essential expression of the power of symbolism when in his essay “The Poet” he celebrates “the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact” (221–2). In *Symbolism and American Literature*, Charles Feidelson points out that symbolism in modern literature manifested a “large-scale shift of categories through which ‘the meaning of meaning’ becomes the generative question of literature and philosophy” (214). But Feidelson further comments that symbolism proved so successful at producing meaning that American symbolist writers of the nineteenth century were haunted with anxiety that perhaps this grand profusion of meaning would in the end be reduced to utter meaninglessness. As he puts it, the problem became “the possibility of the meaninglessness of meaning” (74). If something can mean everything, then it really means nothing at all. The essential problem for modern writers became not how to *produce* meaning but how to *limit* it.

To review briefly before moving on, Kant’s aesthetic philosophy attempts to stabilize the meaning generated by contact between subject and object. This is the role of presentation: to generate and at the same time limit meaning. Circularity itself is infinitely productive; what limits such production is the *binding* of subject to object. Binding involves *deixis*, pointing our attention toward relationship. Meaning is held stable by the relationship between subject and object. Presentation constructs a metaphoric internal image with which a subject can be in relationship in place of an unknowable external object. What stabilizes meaning, what limits it, is the nature of the binding that the poem expresses. That nature is revealed through the invisible image of the presentation, often by means of a certain tension in the poem, as manifested by its treatment of an abstraction. That

this should be so is explained by the circular nature of knowledge, in which the abstraction facilitates mimetic recognition, grounded in the material, thereby setting in play the faculties of the imagination and the understanding, yet at the same time in its invisibility making itself available for psychic incorporation in an act of identification.

This theoretical discussion has profound implications for how we approach contemporary lyric poems insofar as they represent “sensuous knowledge.” I propose to look at a distinctly contemporary mode of imagery: that of the child’s material body, in particular the parent-poet’s observation of and celebration of his or her own child’s body. This image is doubly appropriate, for it reflects both the modern emphasis on materiality and the status of objects, and the modern need to limit meaning. The philosopher Charles Taylor has argued in *Sources of the Self* that in modernity arguments must be couched in *ad hominem* terms as personal stories, and that therefore material life is characterized by the “affirmation of the ordinary.” Children fit that worldview intimately, as they are a part of daily life under its most material aspects. As a theme, they support the modernist injunction to “make it new,” quite literally. They are a renewal of the parent even as they are a reminder of physical decline. And they point to supplies within the corporeal body of erotic energy, to which the parent-poet has immediate access. Furthermore, because they invoke the incest taboo, images of the child’s body supply an immediate, obvious motivation for limiting meaning.

We should note that the idea of presentation is directly connected to lyric subjectivity. Lyric is frequently seen as non-narrative and therefore, as Daniel Albright puts it, “nonreferential” (viii). He says it is a *mode*, not really a genre at all (Albright ix). But in this mode, everything strives toward the condition of an image (34). The key to lyric subjectivity is transformation. This is how lyric can be intimate—a song—but not personal. Albright doesn’t offer a theory of meaning other than to say that lyric aims for transparency—perhaps we could say “direct presentation.” But he does caution that if lyric gets too far from the “real world,” it collapses; that is, it becomes conflated with death (Albright 160). It is essential to keep the levels of meaning separate.

In American poetry the free-verse tradition stemming from Whitman and extending through the American modernism of Pound and W.C. Williams emphasizes nominalism. In *The Situation of Poetry*, Robert Pinsky writes that poetry in the second half of the twentieth-century—the “late modernist period”—is characterized by a nominalist approach to experience, a belief that “reality inheres in particulars, not abstractions” (5). The contemporary American poets treated here—Gary Snyder, Sharon Olds and Rita Dove—write in this free-verse tradition, with a spoken voice marked by openness and sincerity, and an emphasis on daily experience in (middle-class) family life. The general activities that the three poems address are in themselves ordinary: bathing and reading. In each case, the poets approach the activity specifically as material and corporeal, even erotic, while at the same time attempting to deflect any discomfort connected to their proximity to the child’s body.

These poems' presentation is not so much the visual image of the child's body, but rather the manifestation of energy the poets produce by way of relationship with their source material, their children. The three poems under discussion here make clear how the child's body is an exemplary image for poets after the high modernist movement, when the poem became very much a linguistic *object*. The child's body provides a way of combining a personal story with a visual artifact to convey the authority of the poet's vision into material reality. At the same time, these poems reveal a potential problem with using the child's material body to establish that claim to authority. There is the temptation to settle into an abstraction and make the child's body a means to an end. That is, it becomes a shortcut to authority by way of "affirmation." Instead of setting the abstraction into motion as a lived experience, the poets come to rely on the abstraction as a *representation* of their authority rather than a *presentation* that manifests their insight. The image of the child becomes a shortcut rather than an entry into the poem's deeper meaning.

The poem thus asserts a transparent, sincere vision of reality without doing the work of critically probing for the supersensible "ground" of meaning—even though each of these poems self-consciously addresses the theme of material knowledge. The work required would involve acknowledging the child's separateness from oneself but at the same time incorporating that loss as an internal object through an act of recognition of one's own investment in the other even as the other eludes one's grasp. Then one would see the child anew through one's own childlike vulnerability. And that is how "matter" takes on life. The process is inevitably circular, but this goes beyond the standard trope of the "cycle of life" to engage the profounder feelings of mortality that make affirmation legitimate and meaningful.

Gary Snyder can be readily associated with the concept of sensuous knowledge by way of his acclaimed commitment to "deep ecology," the belief that human beings must be viewed in the context of the natural environment, to which they are in many ways secondary. "The Bath," published in 1972 in his *Turtle Island* volume, is a good example of a poem that attempts to merge the human body with nature. In "The Bath," Snyder attempts to immerse us in a corporeal experience as if that were an unmediated version of sensuous knowledge. Even here, however, Snyder must deflect our attention from human concerns that obtrude. Snyder describes mother, father and son in a sauna as a naked mass unified by the overarching call and response of the poem: "*is this our body?*," "*this is our body.*" The immersive experience is conveyed through voice, but then the voice comes to *be* that experience, and it subsumes others' voices within itself.

"The Bath" is frankly celebratory of the erotic body. Snyder hints at the disturbing aspects of an adult touching a child by describing "the soapy hand feeling / through and around the globes and curves of his body / up in the crotch" (ll 12–14). But he deflects connotations of incest by using a facsimile of baby talk: employing noun compounds—"his eye-sting fear—" (l 11), "washing-tickling" (l 15)—and the intensifier "all" as in "I squat all naked too" (l 19). To continue

to give his language a childlike quality Snyder uses the progressive form of verbs throughout: laughing, jumping, flinging, washing, and on and on. This is an effort to use language mimetically to affirm the body especially in its material and sexual aspects, which Snyder broaches unabashedly: “washing-tickling out the scrotum, little anus, / his penis curving up and getting hard / as I pull back skin and try to wash it” (ll 15–17). But it also commits him to a mimetic fallacy: the idea that if he talks like a child, he will literally embody childlike innocence.

The risk is that, by taking matter literally, Snyder will fall into sentimentalism and cliché, and he does. In addition to baby talk, he uses schoolboy language, like “the body of my lady” (l 33). The vulva is a “grail”; it’s the “gates of Awe,” is “awesome.” The poem ends with “hugging babies, kissing bellies” (l 89) after “murmuring gossip of the grasses, / talking firewood” (ll 68–9). Such language attempts to limit the poem’s meaning by directing it toward “affirmation.” However, Snyder resorts not just to the sentimental but to the abject, for in his effort to merge bodies, he becomes not just linguistically but physically infantilized. He says: “The sucking milk from this our body sends through / jolts of light; the son, the father, sharing mother’s joy” (ll 46–8). He sucks at his wife’s breast along with his young son; the nipple “fits / our mouth” (ll 44–5). The “jolts of light”—an Emersonian river of electricity—come from *his* breast now as he/she nurses the baby. The poem’s affirmation stems from the abject ambiguities of the primitive activity of sucking. The production of energy thematized is also rudimentary: “go in the house — stand steaming by the center fire” (l 83). The abject and sentimental strategy of attempting to present the erotic body directly as an affirmation of the material literally produces steam at the hearth, in the *oikos*, so the poem’s *economy* becomes a set of rather reductive transfers between image and ideal.

Some amplification occurs where Snyder invokes his forebears: Whitman, Pound and W.C. Williams. An invocation of Whitman and Thoreau in the grasses and the firewood constitutes an effort to establish credibility and assert the claim that despite the baby talk, the poem holds serious aspirations of liberating the body from social restrictions. Their voices enter his work formally in his free verse and thematically in his insistence on affirmation, even when it involves assertions not just about others’ bodies but about their state of mind. In order to do that, Snyder turns to abstraction, even where he most wants to affirm the material. He introduces “joy” as an abstraction. Snyder assures us that the familial sucking at the woman’s breast is “sharing mother’s joy” (ll 47–8). He warrants the familial eroticism by assuring us of the *woman’s* acquiescent subjectivity:

These boys who love their mother
 who loves men, who passes on
 her sons to other women[.] (ll 72–4)

Snyder essentially suppresses the sublime as *felt* time, rejecting mourning in favor of a universal and naturalized heterosexuality that erases individuality and promotes instead a generic subjectivity, reduced to erotic materiality. He ends up presenting not the voice of his wife, who remains silent in the poem, but the

voice of William Carlos Williams, who in “To Daphne and Virginia” is a man who “loves them, / loves all women” (ll 47–8).

“Joy” for Snyder becomes an abstraction that gestures toward yet resists the sublime by preventing feelings such as jealousy or embarrassment or above all loss from ever truly entering into the poem. The mother won’t really lose her sons, according to the man, because they are part of equivalence, part of the poem’s general economy of one-to-one exchanges between image and ideal. Clearly binding is a theme that occupies Snyder, as indicated by the overt assertion of mutual harmony between mother, sons, and future daughters-in-law, but the poem’s real operation is between the poet and his forebears. Consider Williams’s coy and flirtatious—and anguished—reflections on his feelings toward his daughters-in-law, where emotion and the felt experience of time become the poem’s presentation, captured in the inglorious image of the “heavy goose / who waddles, slopping / noisily in the mud of / his pool” (250). Williams expresses feeling through material imagery. Snyder’s poem instead directs us outside itself by means of the very language that Snyder uses to try to keep us inside it. Circularity is in play here, but it is generated not by joy, but by feelings of rivalry and loss that it tries to suppress, feelings displaced onto the woman, who then no longer seems to fit in this highly masculine ecology.

Simply put, less seems to be at stake for Snyder than for a modernist forebear such as Williams. Snyder is overtly attempting to make claims about sensuous knowledge, but the circularity he establishes is more a circumscribed emotional circuit than the “unification of the faculties” that the aesthetic in Kant’s usage is meant to affirm. The material body of the boy is supposed to warrant the mother’s “joy.” But joy merges into a comfortable relationship with Snyder’s forebears, and the tension that would authorize insight into the price of joy—and therefore give us a *felt* sense of time—relaxes into a certain sentimentality about the body, however flagrant its fleshliness. The body seems less a contested ground for the aesthetic than a permissible and even casual topic for discussion.

Sharon Olds is well known for what might be called a mode of sensuous knowledge in her frank, often stylized, depictions of sexual bodies, including, and especially, those of her children. Like Snyder, she places sincerity of voice ahead of concern with formal elements of poetry. The poems of these two poets seem “confessional,” aiming for a transparency, even a literal rendering of personal experience. In *The Dead and the Living* (1984), her second volume of poetry, Olds reveals a fascination with her children’s bodies and with puberty. Olds celebrates her son’s aggression while she demonstrates a preoccupation with her daughter that suggests woman as sacrificial victim. If the abject is that condition which ensues from contact with the boundaries of the body, then it seems that in an almost counter-phobic way Olds bellies up to the abject in order to obliterate it by embracing it. By sheer force of insistence, she seems to say, she can turn sensual or erotic knowledge into a form of innocence.

Olds’s poetics centers very much on images. But whereas Kant imposes upon us a “chaste” vision to prevent abjection—or as he would term it, sublime

unrest, with the unruly ocean surpassing its borders and swallowing all—Olds dares boundaries, forcing her images to the point of distortion. Ironically, what she overtly offers as “sensuous knowledge,” rooted in the body and in sensory experience, is tacitly replaced by a more quiescent and passive, though strangely controlling, form of knowledge based on replication. Kant’s analogical, “as-if” aesthetic experience becomes in Olds, as in Snyder, quite literal.

Olds begins “For my Daughter” by taking an authoritative stance toward her daughter (65). Like Snyder, she thematizes rivalry by denying it. Olds speaks to her daughter directly, saying “that night will come,” referring to the girl’s first sexual experience, which she presents as inescapably and violently heterosexual:

That night will come. Somewhere someone will be
entering you, his body riding
under your white body, dividing
your blood from your skin[.] (ll 1–4)

Olds attempts to deflect the suggestions of rape here by contorting the action so that the implied malevolence takes on a cartoonish quality, one she nevertheless insists on:

The center of your body
will tear open, as a woman will rip the
seam of her skirt so she can run. It will happen[.] (ll 9–11)

Here we have catachresis, the violent yoking of opposites that for Agamben provides the basis for the “impure” knowledge of metaphor. Certainly it is circular: the action is violent, but the woman somehow called it to her (“so she can run”), and the run/happen rhyme suggests desire by invoking rhythm. But the proliferation of similes remains quite literal, because the overall theme of the poem is passivity.

There is a yearning quality to Olds’s close, imagined observations of her daughter in an act of sex:

your dark, liquid
eyes open or closed, the slipping
silken hair of your head fine
as water poured at night, the delicate
threads between your legs curled
like stitches broken. (ll 4–9)

It seems that Olds sincerely wishes for sex to be good for her daughter, even as she cannot actually imagine sex as anything other than grotesque. To save her daughter, she turns her into water, like a god turning a nymph into a tree or a star. In order to protect her daughter, Olds removes her reality. She turns her into water, or into any generic heroine of the bodice-ripping sort—and mom remains in control.

In this poem, repetition enforces the established order by conflating the future tense with a generic indeterminate present. The phrase “a woman will rip”

implies that women regularly do rip, both transitively and intransitively. But the abrupt shift to “it will happen” imposes Olds’s authority on both daughter and reader. This prophecy then circles back into the present tense, actualizing the prophecy, which now becomes the girl’s—and our—destiny:

and when it happens I will be right here
 in bed with your father, as when you learned to read
 you would go off and read in your room
 as I read in mine, versions of the story
 that changes in the telling, the story of the river. (ll 12–16)

The body itself disappears except as an old tale amid many equivalent tales. Sex becomes a vendible fiction, a “story,” each instance only one more copy of a mass-produced fantasy. Olds’s “sensuous knowledge” then provides no alternative to the unreality of capitalism that Graff criticizes, but a form of advertising for that unreality.

The “feeling of life” that Kant views as essential to the aesthetic is missing because we, like Olds’s daughter, are passive recipients of virile forces that are not so much generated within the poem through tension with an other as recycled. *Deixis* appears in the poem in “right here,” establishing the poem as an appositive, the equivalent of “in bed with your father,” itself the equivalent of “the story of the river.” Early reviewers of Olds’s books commented on the flattening effect of much of Olds’s shocking images and language. Linda Gregerson wrote of *The Dead and the Living*:

Olds is an eloquent celebrant . . . of sexual love and its extrapolation in a mother’s erotic ties to her children. She also, perhaps inadvertently, records the radical invasiveness of erotic proprietorship: Olds takes in these poems an owner’s liberties with her son’s erections and her daughter’s immanent pubescence. (36)

We have never been virgins, only versions of a consumer vision of the body as a discardable commodity.

Ironically, with Olds as with Snyder, there does not seem to be a whole lot at stake, even given the provocative imagery. And yet the aesthetic could offer Olds a way to imagine a genuine alternative to this scenario of endless replication. The place in this story where Olds could conceivably resist a consumer vision for her daughter is toward the end, where she sets up potential rhythms and contact in the form of relationship between “I” and “you,” and possible rhyming with you/room/learned and I/mine/right. She could let the *rhythms* establish an alternative experience of corporeality and ask us within the poem to reflect on those rhythms and on how they affect our experience with the subjective others that she is establishing for us, that is, herself and her daughter. Such triangularity, with its intentionality toward others, is the basis of Stewart’s understanding of sensuous knowledge.

By directly treating her children’s sexuality, Olds is daring new ground for lyric, but she does not trust the aesthetic enough to let it work. So the cycle she reinforces is the familiar consumer logic of market forces, which are very well able

to channel and profit from pubescent sexuality. The upshot is that Olds's narrative poem, her "story," only more firmly places her daughter within a market culture in which there are "rivers," endless rivers, of images of pubescent and highly profitable feminine sexuality. The child's material body becomes a shortcut to a circular market logic in which "price" refers only to the purchase of a product, not to the labor of mourning for lost possibility.

Rita Dove also wishes both to ground meaning in the child's material body and to limit that meaning. However, the mixture of race and gender in the child's erotic body complicates that effort. Dove's fourth volume of poetry, *Grace Notes* (1989), addresses issues of racial and feminine identity, primarily as it is located in the body. Dove's poems here frequently end on a definitive note—almost an aphorism—that blends tonally into a rhetorical question. In "After reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen* for the Third Time Before Bed," Dove affirms that black mother and mixed-race daughter are healthy and normal—"in the pink" (41). The woman poet seizes man's language in quoting and reworking Maurice Sendak's well known children's literature. In an odd way, each of the three poems under discussion is both an occasional poem and a didactic poem. Each of the poets has seized a more or less ordinary moment—one admittedly wholly concerned with the corporeal and sexual body—and used it to impart a lesson about the nature of reality. And yet Dove's hearty affirmation betrays hesitancy. It falls into self-questioning: "*how* to tell her . . . ?"

Dove's poem immediately and baldly addresses the question of the body: "My daughter spreads her legs / to find her vagina" (ll 1–2). The poem is about physical self-exploration and the affirmation of feminine anatomy. On the thematic level, the mother-poet wants, unobjectionably, for her daughter to feel good about her body, to view it in positive terms. But Dove, like Snyder and Olds, needs to avoid the incest taboo. For Snyder and Olds, that avoidance takes the shape of pointed observations that the children at issue will enter heterosexual relationships outside the family bonds. Dove continues, far more self-consciously than Snyder and more tentatively than Olds:

hairless, this mistaken
 bit of nomenclature
 is what a stranger cannot touch
 without her yelling. (ll 3–6)

Dove sets perplexity into motion, some of which she controls, and some of which she does not. The first point of perplexity is Dove's deictic insistence on "this mistaken / bit of nomenclature." Which "bit" is the mistake? Dove seems to be asserting that the vagina is not exclusively for the benefit of the penis as implied by the term "sheath," and this is a lesson she wishes to impart to her daughter.

Dove continues the scene by admitting her adult body into it:

She demands
 to see mine and momentarily

we're a lopsided star
 among the spilled toys,
 my prodigious scallops
 exposed to her neat cameo. (ll 6–11)

The “spilled toys” and the “lopsided star” bespeak some instability to the scene even as Dove assures us of its normality. The poem begins to balance unsteadily on the seesaw of identity and difference as Dove introduces the abstraction “innocence,” which tries to reinforce the poem’s identity claims even as it destabilizes them:

And yet the same glazed
 tunnel, layered sequences.
 She is three; that makes this
 innocent. *We're pink!*
 she shrieks, and bounds off. (ll 12–16)

Despite the poem’s apparent transparency—*everything* open to the eye—its anchoring statement is: “She is three; that makes this / innocent.” The turn to abstraction underscores the potentially taboo nature of the encounter; also, the child’s “bound[ing] off” suggests that the action Dove describes borders on what is *out* of bounds. The abstraction here is meant to limit meaning, even as Dove wants to undermine one aspect of traditional meaning, that of feminine dependence. So while Dove clearly wants to limit meaning, and the abstraction functions to do that, the insistence on “bounds” suggests some ambivalence about the poem’s theme and some instability to the structure.

This ambivalence then circles back to affect the poem’s account of meaning. Dove concludes:

Every month she wants
 to know where it hurts
 and what the wrinkled string means
 between my legs. *This is good blood*
 I say, but that’s wrong, too.
 How to tell her that it’s what makes us—
 black mother, cream child.
 That we’re in the pink
 and the pink’s in us. (ll 17–25)

Dove evidently means to affirm ordinary recurrence by referring to the menstrual cycle and how “*this is good blood*,” but she catches herself: “but that’s wrong, too.” The blood isn’t entirely good if cramps cause her pain. And blood on the body is presumably not ever “good.” But there are other questions. What does it mean to say that body parts are “misnamed”? Might a stranger really molest her? If something about the body is wrong to begin with, how could any touch ever be classified as good or bad? Is “this / innocent”? The poem oscillates around unresolved meaning.

To try to resolve the perplexity she has set in motion, Dove invokes the children's book she and her daughter have been reading, Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*. The book starts with a boy, Mickey, waking up in his bed at night having heard noises. He then falls naked through the house, down into the night kitchen, where enormous, smiling chefs conduct the night activities. The noises Mickey heard might have come from his parents, engaged in making another "Mickey cake," or perhaps a Bobby or Susie cake. It is, however, three huge, white, male chefs who are doing the baking. Masculine activity is essential to the night kitchen; Mickey accepts his place in the world by asserting the contributions of his body, his work, to the productive activity of the night kitchen. He provides the milk for the cake. Whether that is feminine milk, or masculine semen, or generic creativity, it is Mickey's, and it is essential to making the cake. A central theme of Sendak's story is the affirmation of the boy's body.

By quoting Sendak, Dove situates her voice not so much in poetry *per se* as in contemporary children's literature. She steps out from the veil of art, thereby putting extra weight on the imperative against the incest taboo. Part of the function of the Sendak book is to emphasize the theme of "innocence" in Dove's poem; at the same time that increases the pressure on verisimilitude in Dove's poem. This means Dove has a harder time asserting a parallel feminine night kitchen for her daughter. "We're in the pink" implies health; menstruation is healthy and not a disability or illness. But pink is a mixture of red and white, of red blood and white tampon string, and the wrinkled string is what makes "black mother, cream child." Or is it?

The question of meaning is central to this poem, primarily as the need to limit meaning. The wrinkled string between her legs—what does it mean?, Dove asks. Crudely but logically, it would be the white penis between her legs that made black mother, cream child. But that would undermine her claim that the vagina was misnamed. It is here that Dove could push for deeper meaning, the penis as a "white string," that is, a linguistic code or artifact representing power and generative capacity. It is presumably at this higher, more conceptual level that Dove seeks to convince her daughter, and us, not to believe in "mistaken" language. But she is diverted by her daughter's body into the continued masculine realm of children's literature as represented by Sendak.

In essence, her daughter's body is a shortcut to the very constructs she wants to reject. It is Sendak who uses the aesthetic to imagine power for his protagonist. Dove wants blood to serve the same function for her daughter that milk does for Mickey. But she tries to remain on a material, physical level, whereas Sendak lets fantasy merge with metaphor. Cakes really do need liquid in order to rise, and mothers' bodies really do provide milk; but little boys can't fly airplanes made of bread dough, and they don't swim in and stand atop gigantic milk bottles. Mickey's wish is to be powerful and autonomous, and Sendak provides a visual fantasy for him. But Mickey is himself an imaginative construct.

Dove does not find a means of fulfilling that wish for her daughter. "The pink's in us" is perhaps true at some level, but because Dove has invoked a

potential molester without also addressing the triad of mother-father-child as a *three* beyond the child's *three* that putatively imposes innocence on the scenario, she leaves the imagined creep the third in the "mix." The triangulation that Stewart values in lyric poetry as creating "sensuous knowledge" leaves the daughter in Dove's poem not empowered but vulnerable. Dove does not succeed in affirming the feminine body as autonomous and powerful. She asserts the abstraction of "innocence" without finding a way of making that a *felt* reality. The flat repetition of the self-rhyme "us" and "us" demonstrates that Dove has not succeeded in differentiating the two selves past the *identity* her daughter insists upon. However, she does demonstrate why someone would want an alternative story for a girl-child, just as Olds's poem makes the need for such alternative stories abundantly clear. And she tries to make links with other forms of children's literature, expanding the potential range of "the literary" both in terms of age (children) and in terms of genre (picture books).

I have argued that structural circularity is inherent to the modern concept of aesthetics and therefore to the larger category of what we would call "modern thought." With Kant, the pleasure deriving from an act of judgment that discerns form creates the ground for transcendental knowledge—our knowledge of how we know. The aesthetic then provides a fundamental basis for anything we might know of as "critique." Alison Ross asks whether the aesthetic has not run its course in Western thought (167). Two recent directions literary studies have taken are cognitive science and a renewed interest in genre. Cognitive studies, as exemplified by Blakey Vermeule's work, embrace circularity. *Why do we care about literary characters? Because our minds evolved that way.* Genre studies, as exemplified by Rachel Cole's recent *PMLA* article on lyric, seem to reject circularity, replacing "pleasure" with a more limited claim to "satisfaction." Though I believe this circularity is inescapable, the value of the aesthetic is that it allows us to reflect on our investments in and commitments to our objects. This is what I have called "binding."

The aesthetic remains a contested concept, just as the child's body is regularly contested in the news and in public policy. I have read the three poems under discussion very closely, as closely as I read §29 of Kant's Third Critique, pointing in each case to where I thought we could further push our understanding of the role of the aesthetic in producing meaning. I think the three poets too easily rely on a notion of sincere transparency of form and fail to make full use of the possibilities available to them within the aesthetic—both as *technē* and as *epistēmē*—to challenge themselves and by way of the inherent circularity of the aesthetic to probe more deeply their relationships with their objects. The aesthetic is an important bridge to reality, though not necessarily straight or unambiguous. Any bridge through the human heart must of necessity be circuitous and somewhat dim. "Presentation" is a concept that allows us to inquire into the manner in which we bind ourselves to our objects, thereby limiting and deepening their meaning for us. In this way they become usable objects. There is no shortcut. To know objects is to grieve their separation from us, yet embrace them anyway, thereby enlarging ourselves in the process.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Scholarship on objects within a literary context include such works as Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things*, which treats materialism in late nineteenth-century American literature, and Peter Schwenger's *Tears of the Object*, which argues that material objects are imbued with a sense of melancholy by virtue of our separation from them. These works focus more on prose fiction and visual art than on poetry, but useful for this discussion is an observation such as Brown's that in modernism — with for example Henry James — consciousness itself becomes an object.

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