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APEIRA is a journal of cultural theory born in and around a void.

Its mission is two-fold: first, to foster speculative theories and currently inexistent forms of thought concerning cultural phenomena, and second, to explore the implications and imbrications of such open speculations on and with architectural developments.

The birth of Apeira was largely prompted by the termination of Manifold Magazine, for which I served as an associate editor. Published from 2007 to 2010, Manifold emerged in opposition to the rise of so-called ‘post-theoretical’ or ‘post-critical’ architectural positions, which were symptomatic of a broader crisis regarding the role of reflective thought in contemporary undertakings. Refusing the purported irrelevance of theoretical problems not apparently tied in a direct manner to the surface of architectural practice, our project aimed to provide a new space for architecture students to engage the rich history and ecology of ideas in the liberal arts. The purpose of Manifold was
to 1) rethink and retool the critical project, which is to say the tradition of questioning dominant views and structures in order to propose more original, less acquiescent, and more incisive interpretations of reality, and 2) grapple with how architectural thought is inevitably caught up in countless intellectual struggles common to society, philosophy, and science. Through this journal, we argued that architects could not be satisfied with their presumed role as shapers of the built environment, and instead needed to step up to the plate as interlocutors in the debates, questions, and concepts that matter most for how we see and make sense of the world. At the heart of the project stood a desire to rethink the nature and role of theory in creative work: to ponder the transformations that theory can and must undergo as it moves through the present condition.

4. The *Apeira* project strives to simultaneously continue and conclude the chapter first opened by *Manifold*. Although the new journal resolutely carries forward the editorial engagements of its predecessor, it also sets its sights on a slightly different zone of inquiry, leaving behind certain concerns that were central to *Manifold*.

5. Like *Manifold*, *Apeira* will not facilitate the rapid and cursory consumption of its content.

6. *Apeira* will not, in order to reach the widest possible audience, acquiesce to the tyranny of the lowest common denominator. Nor will it shy away from the arduousness of what others typically dismiss as jargon.

7. Unlike *Manifold*, *Apeira* will not chronicle current events occurring in architectural or other cultural circles.

8. *Apeira* is not based in or associated with any school, corporation, press, non-profit group, or government entity.

9. *Apeira* is not peer-reviewed and has no advisory board.

10. *Apeira* will not request submissions under the rubric of a particular topic. In fact, none of its issues will be assigned a theme. Such pithy formulas usually serve little purpose other than to make a hodgepodge of articles, which often do not respond to or build upon one another, masquerade as a cohesive, synthetic assemblage. Furthermore, thematic catchphrases typically perpe-

11. While many questions about the new journal likely remain unanswered, I will nonetheless bring these brief points to an end.

12. With *Apeira*, I wanted to create a journal in which the silences and the things left unsaid would weigh as heavily as the content it included.
How can we characterize the relationship between a sea of technological apparatuses and the human lives that they envelop? Between, on the one hand, the life and death of culturally fabricated landscapes and, on the other hand, the life and death of bodily sensations and ideas? In the epic Rougon-Macquart series, a set of twenty novels depicting all strata of Second Empire France through various members of a fictional family tree, Émile Zola traced the outlines of such a relationship. His stories eschew both the dichotomy of container and contained, as well as the presumed split between subjects and objects. Instead, Zola wove more subtle bonds between man and machine, individuals and environment, in ways that are rife with resonances and overlapping symmetries.

In articulating his aims, Zola wrote,

I want to portray, at the outset of a century of liberty and truth, a family that cannot restrain itself in its rush to possess all the good things that progress is making available and that is derailed by its own momentum, the fatal convulsions that accompany the birth of a new world.
Its speed was uncannily smooth, like the dream of flight. firm connection with the land, the train established a "dream-like" interior. Separated from other compartments and denied mechanized schedules. Unlike traditional carriage-travel that never lost touch with local topography, the train cuts over the landscape like a bullet, in straight lines and on literal kind of fêlure.  Zola’s book opens over a quiet lunch in Paris between Roubaud, an assistant station-master, and his young wife, Severine. Roubaud finds out that Severine, as a child, had sexual relations with the president of the railway company. Enraged with jealousy, Roubaud beats Severine before resolving to murder the other man. From this preparatory scene, the focus cuts to Jacques Lantier, the novel’s hero, a locomotive engineer whose blood bears the hereditary crack or taint—of the Macquart family. The novel’s opening crisis unfolds through a series of events introducing the fêlure. Jacques’ engine, Lison, breaks a connecting-rod, this crack being a weakness, one handed down over generations of his family’s struggle to break free from its stained, battered, and modest origins.

The train can be seen as an engine of the restructuring of all levels of society in 19th century France. First, massive development of the railroads allowed what Marx described as the traditional product to be transformed, through transport to distant markets, into the commodity. People were commodities, too; driven by the train, the new economy required workers to commute in order to sell their labor at the highest price.

The early 19th century cast the train as the “annihilator of time and space.” Unlike traditional carriage-travel that never lost touch with local topography, the train cuts over the landscape like a bullet, in straight lines and on mechanized schedules. Separated from other compartments and denied firm connection with the land, the train established a “dream-like” interior. Its speed was uncannily smooth, like the dream of flight.

As in Sigmund Freud’s interpretation of dreams, this dream was carried by an undercurrent of inaccessible drives and by the threat of accident. An “accident,” in Diderot’s pre-industrial encyclopedia, was defined merely as a grammatical and philosophical concept or a sort of coincidence. With the industrial revolution came the industrial accident, the catastrophic destruction of a machine or technological system by means of its own power and regulated by an unpredictable but inevitable schedule. This violent form of accident can be described through Georges Bataille’s understanding of the erotic: that explosion or bursting of excess energy which in daily life civilized man diligently wields through his work and technology. Although this organized energy makes us human, its explosion—in the erotic encounters with death and fertility—thrusts us into contact with our human limits. Throughout the 19th century, the train crash embodied the most spectacular example of such an explosion. Such accidents demonstrate that the greater the precision, efficiency and control with which this human power is harnessed, the more monstrous the result when the system breaks down.

The train, always carrying the threat of disaster, acts as a site, symbol, and engine of passions in La Bête Humaine. Zola’s novel is set within the trains and the spaces and territories they found, animated by a cast of characters whose lives are organized by the railway company. A complex soap-opera of desires and jealousies, the plot warrants here a synopsis that will help elucidate the nature and significance of the central motif of the fêlure. Zola’s novel is set within the trains and the spaces and territories they found, animated by a cast of characters whose lives are organized by the railway company. A complex soap-opera of desires and jealousies, the plot warrants here a synopsis that will help elucidate the nature and significance of the central motif of the fêlure.
Through the window of the lighted train as it rushes by, he glimpses Roubaud and Severine murdering the president. But he does not testify against Severine, as the sight of her as a murderer instills in him a desperate belief that he could find a true love with her, through which he could be freed of his fêlure. The shared knowledge of the murder forms a secret pact between Jacques and Severine, leading them into a passionate affair.

Significantly, it is the fêlure which set the plot in motion, rather than the violent opening scene between Roubaud and his wife. The fêlure causes Jacques to witness the crime and thereby to fall in love with Severine. This, in turn, precipitates both Flore’s jealous rage and Severine’s increasing insistence on the need for Jacques to kill Roubaud. The worlds of these two women—Severine, with the railway employees and society in Paris and Le Havre, and Flore with her isolated family—are thrust together when Lison is snowed in for many hours near the switching station. This is when Flore first confirms that her Jacques loves another. In the storm, Lison, who had always been Jacques’ sole mistress before Severine, suffers a parallel wound, a kind of fêlure or hidden mechanical weakness known only by Jacques through a subliminal empathy. Heartbroken, Flore plots to derail Lison, resulting in a catastrophic accident with much loss of life. Miraculously, Jacques and Severine both survive, and Flore commits suicide by walking into the next oncoming train. While Severine nurses Jacques back to health, he resolves to kill Roubaud. But Jacques’ fêlure overpowers him, and in a fit of lust he kills Severine instead. Cabuche, a simple, beast-like man who had meanwhile fallen in love with Severine—constituting the novel’s only purely unrequited and therefore non-violent love—unwittingly enters the scene of the crime. He is found covered in her blood, cradling her dead body. Roubaud and Cabuche are wrongly convicted for her murder, despite Cabuche’s innocent testimony and Roubaud’s insistent confession that he murdered the president, but not Severine. In the afterglow of the orgasmic murder of the object of his desire, Jacques believes that his fêlure has been dispelled. But he soon realizes that it remains, his animal instincts destined to explode again.

Jacques, his assistant fireman Pecqueux, and Lison had always formed a blissful and devoted trio. But, with the introduction of Severine, a fêlure-like gap grows between them until, driving a new engine, Pecqueux angrily provokes Jacques by piling dangerous amounts of coal into the fire. The argument comes to blows, and when Jacques inevitably falls he pulls Pecqueux with him. The two men are severed by the train; their bodies are later found headless and footless, still holding each other in a murderous embrace. Fueled by the men’s rage and the massive pile of coal, the train—now a blind and deaf beast without her masters—accelerates into the night at a suicidal pace, indifferently bearing masses of soldiers on their way to the Franco-Prussian war, “stupid with exhaustion, drunk, singing,” to their certain death.

The novel’s trains are driven by a powerful life-force. As beasts, they are docile and hard-working, but never without the underlying threat of fatal accident or the allure of sexual desire. Lison is characterized as Jacques’ mistress but also the site of his masturbation. Flore says to him, “Do you love only your engine? They say that, you know. They say you are always rubbing and polishing it, as if you had no caresses for anything else.” Indeed, as Lison’s engineer he has intimate knowledge of her workings. He is the only one who how to handle her needs. He says her only fault is that, “like a beautiful woman, [she] needed to be greased too often.” In the hazardous snowstorm, Jacques climbs under Lison’s belly in an intimate dance between man and machine:

It was a perilous proceeding, his feet slipped on the narrow iron footspace that was wet with snow; he was blinded, and the wind threatened to sweep him away like a straw. His Lison, with its master crawling along its flank, continued its panting course through the night, in the middle of the immensity of white through which it plowed. It shook him, carried him away. Reaching the front end of the locomotive, he crouched before the right cylinder grease-cup, holding with his left hand to the bar, and managed with great difficulty to fill it. Then he had to go around, like an insect, to grease the left cylinder. When he returned, exhausted, he was all pale, for he had felt death pass by him.

“Dirty bitch!” he muttered.

Death and eroticism are always intertwined in this anthropomorphized machine. Lison’s death is described through an anatomical look into her interior:

Lison, turned on her back, her guts ripped open, was losing steam through all her broken tubes, in rumbling jets like the furious panting of a giant. Endless, thick clouds of steam rolled in whirlwinds along the ground; and from the firebox live coals fell, red, like the blood of the engine’s bowels, adding their thick black smoke... Wheels in air, like a
horse ripped open by the horns of a bull, Lison displayed her twisted pistons, broken cylinders, crushed valves and eccentrics, a horrible wound yawning wide in the open air, through which the soul continued to escape with hopeless, raging turmoil.9

But as much as the train is characterized here in a feminized interiority, from the exterior it is associated equally vividly with phallic virility. Flore describes her relationship with an old beau as “that tunnel. Two and a half kilometers to run through in the dark, and a chance of being cut in two if you don’t keep your eye peeled. You should hear those trains rumbling in there!”10 And when, still a virgin, she commits suicide by walking into a train, “the monster’s breath blew on her, hot and damp, in the deafening rumble of thunder,” before splitting her on contact.11

The train is not only depicted as a sexualized body or body part, but as desire itself. Throughout the novel, the shuddering reverberations of the train in motion stand in for orgasm and the shudder of death. Further, its hypnotic vibrations propel the desire carrying the characters towards both. When Jacques and Severine first make love in a railway tool-shed, a filmic montage of the train entering the station stands in for the couple at the crucial moment:

When he arrived . . . she was carried away by her unhoped-for joy of holding him, feeling an irresistible desire to be his, without thought. The rain beat on the roof shed, the last train from Paris, entering the station, passed, rumbling and shaking the ground.

When Jacques rose, he listened in surprise to the thunder of the rain. Where was he?12

And the train rumbles by again when, in an act parallel to this first possession, Jacques finally consummates his desire to fully possess his lover. “He struck, and the knife nailed the question in her throat. As he struck . . . the Paris express passed, so violent, so rapid, that the floor trembled. And she was dead, struck down in the tempest.”13

Interpreting contemporary biological theories, Zola saw blood as the passion-ate life-force communicating lust and rage between man’s body and intellect. These passions become visible through Severine’s feminine blush, Roubaud’s red and swollen face, or Jacques’ blood being “on fire” with lust, the veins on his temples threatening to burst. Although not every blush leads to action it is clear that the blood will eventually explode, the redness overflowing. The trains, likewise, have their own blood in the red fire of the engine, which serves as its heart. The engine’s spark links the individual engine’s life with the telegraphic communication of the larger body of France along the spine of her railway lines. These electrical signals are, in turn, related to human nervous impulses. Such images of the inner, communicative force of life are often collapsed in a single scene or moment. For example, in a wave of desire, Jacques felt “an insupportable wave of heat [creeping] up his spine, as though the mattress under him had changed to live coals. He felt a prickling, like red-hot needle-points, on the back of his neck.”14

This analogy is, in itself, common enough: 19th century scientists and writ-
ers were obsessed with the idea that man’s inner, communicative force of life was the same as that of his technology or society. For example, in 1887, while Zola was writing La Bête Humaine, Emil du Bois-Reymond wrote,

Now, do you see the soul in the brain as the only sensitive, conscious region of the body, and the whole rest of the body as an inanimate machine in its hand? Just so the life of the great nation of France, otherwise centralized to the point of desolation, pulses only in Paris. But France is not the right analog; France is still waiting for a Werner Siemens to cover it with a telegraph net. For just as the central station of the electric telegraph in the Post Office in Königsstrasse is in communication with the outermost borders of the monarchy through its gigantic web of copper wire, just so the soul in its office, the brain, endlessly receives dispatches from the outermost limits of its empire through its telegraph wires, the nerves, and sends out its orders in all directions to its civil servants, the muscles.15

Although Zola uses this same analogy, prevalent in the 19th century, between nervous impulses and the web established through telegraph wires and train lines, what separates Zola is a fluidity in description that allows for a collapse in time and scale, of beings with each other and their environ-
ment. His description focuses on bodily details ranging from the microscopic (transmission of nervous impulses or the fêlure in the flow of blood), to the telescopic (views of France being organized by the sprawling body of the railway line). These different scales are often collapsed in the same sentence.
or image. Moreover, the zooming also acts in time. Jacques’ individual struggle always refers to the longer lifespan of the fêlure as it passes through generations, and as such, even implicates the almost geological temporality of evolution. Unlike du Bois-Reymond’s fairly static mapping of one body onto another and of a simplified communication and control extending from the brain to the body, Zola’s universe resonates, from the small to large, animate and inanimate, with dangerously enabling and infecting passions. He was influenced by George Henry Lewes, who in The Physical Basis of Mind of 1877 wrote, “It is the man, and not the brain, that thinks: it is the organism as a whole, and not one organ, that feels and acts.” Even beyond this, Zola’s universe is one in which not only the organism of man, but also his technological and natural environment, speaks. Passions, then, do not emerge from man’s isolated mind or body, but from the web of relations extending beyond his skin and, through the hereditary fêlure, also from beyond his present time. For example, the cash and watch that Roubaud stole from the dead president’s body is hidden under the floor-boards, but make their presence known: “he even avoided putting his foot down on that board in walking across the room, for to do so gave him a disagreeable sensation, a sort of electric shock that made his legs quiver.” Cézanne, sharing this interest in depicting a living, communicative world, wrote to Zola in 1878 about another Rougon-Macquart novel,

It seems to me that it’s a picture painted more softly than in the earlier one, but that the temperament or creative force is still the same. And then, if it isn’t heresy to say so, the development of the heroes’ passion is built up very carefully. Another observation I’ve made that also seems right to me is that the settings, by their description, become imbued with the same passion that moves the characters, and thus make a unified whole. They seem to become animate and a part of the sufferings of the living creatures.

Zola’s dramatic shifts in scale allow this empathy with the individual dramas of human and technological characters to be transposed onto larger human themes. According to Irving Howe,

We are swept along, as we are meant to be, by the surge of men in revolt; we are with them, the starving and the hunted, and the language heaves and breaks, sweeping across us with torrents of rhetoric. Yet, as we read into the depths of the book, we grow aware that there is

another Zola, one who draws back a little, seeing the whole tragedy as part of an eternal struggle of struggle and decision. This Zola, as if writing from some timeless perch, is finally dispassionate.

While Zola’s wide-angle lens, depicting trainloads of people—and indeed, the whole nation of France—rolling inevitably towards a fatal catastrophe may seem “dispassionate,” the fêlure demonstrates that this indifferent momentum is, to the contrary, precisely that of passion and desire. The fêlure is Zola’s creative adaptation of contemporary genetic theories. It is a hereditary “crack,” the tainted blood causing pathological desires to recur through a family tree. Although intelligence, morality and strength of will temper Jacques’ murderous instincts, the fêlure remains, invisibly growing and inevitably erupting in catastrophe. Lison also has a fêlure, although hers, like Gervaise’s bad leg in L’Assommoir, is acquired in a violent encounter:

There was a dent on the cylinder-box, and the piston seemed slightly bent, but that was all the apparent harm, and the engineer had at first been reassured. But there might be serious internal injuries, for there is nothing more delicate than a complicated valve mechanism, where the beating heart, the living soul, of the locomotive resides. be shook his head for, knowing his locomotive inside out, he had felt it different, changed.

The fêlure’s undeniable force makes it more than a characteristic; it is itself the main character of the Rougon-Macquart series. For Jacques Lantier,

The family was scarcely whole, many of them were cracked. He himself felt that hereditary taint quite plainly, sometimes. It was not that he was in bad health, for apprehension and shame of his attacks were all that had made him thin in the past; it was rather sudden losses of equilibrium in his whole being, like breaks and holes through which is “me” escaped, in the midst of a cloud of smoke that distorted everything. He no longer was his own, he obeyed his muscles, like a mad beast.

The fêlure is a crack but also a connector. It opens chasms between characters, both animate and inanimate, but also welds them together in subliminal pact. Through heredity it transcends the distance between death and birth, passing on characteristics through separate but intimately joined members.
of a family tree. Gilles Deleuze writes that Zola's *fêlure* is not a carrier of heredity; it is heredity, living and moving through human and mechanical bodies, transmitting nothing but itself.\(^{22}\) Described in this way, the *fêlure* becomes a viral-like connector between beings, an element that enables, but also infects. The *fêlure* is what facilitates Zola's collapse of scale, bridging between the microscopic, the individual, and the grand scale of landscape and nation. Michel Serres reads the *fêlure* as a steam engine, another kind of universal connecting force: a mechanism to build heat and pressure driving the plot's narrative movement.\(^{23}\) Zola writes,

> I want my work itself to be like the voyage of a major train, leaving from the head of the line and progressing towards the final stage, yet slowing and stopping at each station, that is to say, each chapter.\(^{24}\)

The *fêlure* forms a thick web of desire and commonalities, connecting, alienating, and motivating beings with each other and their environment. A similar sort of universal force can be found in Heimholtz' 1854 study, "Interaction of Natural Forces," in which he developed the Law of Conservation of Force as a unifying principle between mechanics, heat, light, electricity, and magnetism. This law, arguing that these diverse phenomena are driven by the same principle, was immediately applied by Heimholtz himself to research on animal digestion, heat and motion. He wrote that "the animal body . . . does not differ from the steam engine as regards the manner in which it obtains heat and force, but . . . in the manner in which the force gained is to be made use of."\(^{25}\)

Yet in Zola, the precise "manner in which the force gained is to be made use of" differs from the biological theories of du Bois-Reymond and other contemporaries. Although the French novelist uses the same analogy between the human and societal body as 19th century structural-functionalist biology and sociology, for him the body is not one of health and cooperative communication, but one of cancerous disequilibrium. When we recall the deft montage of the train's noisy shudder for human orgasms and death, and the train's role as a machine which propels the momentum of human characters to carry out their murderous and lustful desires, this shared manner for "obtaining heat and force" recalls Freud's drives of sex and death. The death-drive is that which accesses energy through the dissipation of energy, such as the explosive wastage of Bataille's excess. It facilitates life through the encounter with death, bringing the organization of life into the realm of decay, chaos, and putrefaction. By connecting the world, Zola's *fêlure* welds birth and death, growth and decay, animate and inanimate, good and evil, health and infection, in a way that lets bodies convey hope but also the premonition of disaster. Louis Ulbach has called Zola the "connoisseur of putrefaction," and Zola himself wrote that

> The social cycle is identical with the life-cycle: in society as in the human body, there is a solidarity linking the various organs with each other in such a way that if one organ putrefies, the rot spreads to the other organs and results in a very complicated disease.\(^{26}\)

And, in describing the effect of the president's murder on the body of France,

> The alleged crime of a little assistant station-master, a nasty, low story, traveled up through the complicated machinery, undermining the great machine that was the railroad, even to its management. The shock went even higher, into the ministry, threatening the State itself in the political unrest of the moment: a critical hour for the great social body whose decomposition was hastened by the slightest fever.\(^{27}\)

The *fêlure* communicates, through life, the need for death. It drives Jacques not towards healthy reproduction but the drive to kill and be killed. More to the point, it proposes that the processes of wholesome sexual reproduction and unwholesome degenerative death are in fact not so easily distinguished. The life-giving, *fêlure*-carrying blood that communicates life within a body is the same blood that fuels the violence of murder. In the rosy afterglow of making love to Severine for the first time, Jacques ruminates,

> He was sure now that he had been cured of fearful hereditary ill; for since he possessed her, he had not been troubled by the thought of murder. Did physical possession satisfy the need for death, then? Did to possess and to kill equal each other in the dark depths of the human beast?\(^{28}\)

Jacques, acutely aware of his struggle with the *fêlure*, is the only one who sees its horrific truth. As the train's engineer, the man with the most intimate knowledge of this technological system, Jacques could intuitively feel the workings of its mechanism and sense the *fêlure* within Lison. It is no
coincidence that he is also the one who, like a prophet, receives the initial illuminated vision, setting the plot in action. This vision is of the true identity of the president’s murderers, a truth which the machine of the Second Empire covers up to avoid a tainted reputation. He is also the only one who foresees the trains’ inevitable accidents, from the blockage in the snowstorm, the premonition of Lison’s fêlure, and the derailment caused by Flore’s jealousy—to the novel’s final crisis, with his panic at the suicidal amounts of coal Pecqueux shovels into the engine. Jacques’ awareness is possible because the fêlure stills in him beast-like, murderous desires without transforming him simply into a beast. To the contrary, Jacques is the most deeply ethical character in the novel, disturbed and horrified by his impulses even while they propel his actions. Similarly, Jacques never blames Lison for the effects of her fêlure, as he realizes it infects her without emerging from her being. Jacques’ awareness that the fêlure implicated him and his technological object, Lison, without residing in—or fusing with—either, reveals the subtleties of Zola’s critique of technology. Martin Heidegger understood that the essence of technology does not lie in the technological object but in technology’s organizing principle, its way of relentlessly constituting things of the world as objects of desire and possession. La Bête Humaine similarly depicts a world driven by the momentum of desire and the contradictions introduced by the fêlure. This desire generates an erotic energy so efficiently possessed and organized towards acceleration that it is destined to explode with ever more monstrous results:

Now every telegraph instrument along the line clicked, every heart beat, with the news of a phantom train that had just gone through Sotteville and Rouen. Everyone trembled. An express, ahead on the same line, would surely be caught up with. Like a boar through the woods, the train sped on without regard for red lights or cracker signals. At Oissel, it narrowly missed striking a shunting engine. Point-de-l’Arche was terror-struck, for its speed did not seem diminished. Disappearing again it sped, and roared into the black night, no one knew where, ahead. And what did they matter, the victims crushed on the road by the locomotive? Was it not going into the future, through the blackness, a blind, deaf, beast unleashed with death, it sped on, and on, loaded with cannon fodder, with soldiers stupid with exhaustion, drunk, singing.29

Through the notion of fêlure, Zola’s critique of progress conjures the flaw integral to technological wizardry without placing the blame on technol-
the triumph of right. I repeat with the most vehement conviction: truth is on the march, and nothing will stop it. Today is only the beginning, for it is only today that the positions have become clear: on one side, those who are guilty, who do not want the light to shine forth, on the other, those who seek justice and who will give their lives to attain it. I said it before and I repeat it now: when truth is buried underground, it grows and it builds up so much force that the day it explodes it blasts everything with it. We shall see whether we have been setting ourselves up for the most resounding of disasters, yet to come. 60

4. Ibid., 78.
7. Ibid., 159.
8. Ibid., 199-200.
9. Ibid., 306.
10. Ibid., 56.
11. Ibid., 319.
12. Ibid., 185.
13. Ibid., 345-6.
16. Ibid., 8.
Artistic production, long recognized as the site of counter-culture and the avant-garde, exists on the fringes of the ‘other.’ Whose ‘other’ this is, though, is a matter of some importance and much neglect. Despite Simone de Beauvoir’s theorization of a gendered Other, conceptualization of the notion has remained largely internal to the perspective of the privileged white male. Indeed, women and racial minorities existed for centuries in a realm so Other as to be completely disregarded from consideration.1 It is, however, precisely this position as the other Other which would lead women artists of the late twentieth century to produce revolutionary work. At a time when theory reigned supreme and the object had been reduced to an alibi for linguistically motivated conceptual operations, women exploring their social position and relation to the objective world would serve as a catalyst for change. Their work not only liberated subsequent generations of female artists and architects but also redirected the arc of the artistic and theoretical canon itself.

The mind-body, or thought-object, duality has enjoyed an incomparably long and complex trajectory through the matrix of cultural history. From the Kantian schema to Derridean notions of *differance*, the gaps between thought, word, and physical entity are particularly fascinating to practitioners of art and architecture, who operate from a unique position in the interstices. In the era of postmodernism and deconstructivism, faced with destabilizing semiotics and Marxist notions of the object as a loaded capitalist entity, art-
ists and architects sought inspiration and conceptual solidity not in shapes but in text and theory. More or less unconsciously, they retreated to the safety of incorporeality. Object-thought relations had proven so tenuous, slippery, and unstable that it was only safe to operate on objects at a clinical and cerebral distance. Thus the object was recast as an artifact, alibi, or outcome of a process, but never an end in itself. This retreat from objectivity is particularly evident in the work of conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, whose "One and Three Chairs" (1965), for example, presents the object as a mere facet of a much larger network—a dumb referent to the wider conceptual web—as well as that of architect Peter Eisenman, whose formal studies are in the end more process diagrams than buildings (the diagram, of course, being the visual entity closest to text). The object was stripped of importance and de-personalized; the reading of theoretical tracts became compulsory for understanding the artistic intentions of most works.

Due to their particular relation to the objective world, women of this artistic milieu were trapped in a conflicted position. According to the historical canon (and hence the cultural background with which these women were indoctrinated), objects—often produced and owned by an alien force—represented temptations and threats correlated with the female sex, or the woman herself was defined as an object: Eve and the forbidden fruit, Pandora and the box, or Helen and ‘the face that launched a thousand ships’... The examples are countless and unfailingly homogenous. Time and again, women have been portrayed in generally pejorative association with the world of objecthood, one entirely complicit with their simultaneous exclusion from the realm of subjecthood. This positioning by history, however, meant that women artists of the late twentieth century could not de-personalize or devalue the object in the same manner as their male contemporaries. Forced to grapple with objects in an intimate, visceral fashion while most men fled to the refuge of theory, female artists of the late twentieth century produced work that overthrew the contemporary conceptual and semiotic hegemony. Many proved incapable of entirely separating object from self, a fact that rendered their art all the more charged and catalytic.

Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Louise Nevelson, and Cindy Sherman produced many of the most potent examples of this artistic revolution. The form of Bourgeois’ sculptures is highly corporeal and strangely familiar, yet alien in its inexplicability (Fig. 1). Semiotic analysis breaks down at their grossly hybrid masses. Similarly, Eva Hesse’s work is suggestive of known objects,
but defies simple rationalization (Fig. 2). Both artists undermine theoretical supremacy through the forced failure of semiotic and conceptual clarity. The viewer is placed in the (woman) artist’s shoes, facing the object as a foreign, yet highly charged and intimate, entity.

Nevelson’s work explores a different facet of women’s relation to objects. Her found object collages emphasize the glut of physicality owned by unknown forces distinct from the artist. Working with cast-offs of a realm to which she was denied equal participation, Nevelson created sculptures—such as “Sky Cathedral” (1982)—which hauntingly recall the quotidian and are as a whole inconceivable outside of objective existence (Fig. 3). Here too, semiotic analysis is defied, while objective primacy is emphasized. Sherman, for her part, directly explores the problem of woman-as-object, displaying herself as the physical entity to be studied. Even so, her photographs always leave something unexplained, a question hanging in the air, unanswered by theory. These works are intimate, emotional, and intuitive: the utter opposite of the clinical hyper-explication of Kosuth and Eisenman. Their inconceivability as a clear concept or systematic process fractures the ostensible solidity of theory and its primacy in the late twentieth century. The text no longer reigns supreme. Linguistic operations, which so cleanly relegate the object to the status of referent, have no power over the unidentifiable entities produced by these women.

While the works in question remain raw and visceral fragments of self, or gathered and assembled alien entities, their presentation to the world evidences a step towards the participation of women in the artistic and architectural discourse as authors and owners of objects, not as merely objective subjects of study. Such art paved the way for today’s powerful female practitioners in art and architecture, who present the public with work in an authorial role not so different from that of their male contemporaries. This is not to say, of course, that gender equality has been achieved in the artistic world—far from it—but rather that the notion of woman as author has gained a far wider acceptance in recent decades.²

Ironically enough, then, it was precisely women’s otherness and their unenviable position in relation to the objective world which provided them with an avenue of expression through which authorship—and disassociation from the Other and the insignificant object—might be attained. A particularly notable embodiment of this realized potential for authorship and participa-
tion in the general artistic sphere can be found in Diana Agrest, a current practicing architect and published theorist. While Agrest, in her essay “The Return of the Repressed: Nature,” displays an awareness of the close association between women and object (located here in the relation of women to nature),1 this conflation is phrased in the past tense, as a historical condition. Her built work, with its heavy forms and assured modern lines, further evidences confident authorship and largely un-self-conscious objectivity. In this case, the object is no longer a threat or evocation of self to be grappled with, nor is the woman necessarily bound to it while banished from the purportedly loftier world of concepts. Although women may still embody the Other in many regards, in the artistic sphere they have achieved a level of liberty through which they may choose to associate self and object or self and Other, but are never forced to do so by social circumstance. It is in part the raw struggle undertaken by late twentieth century women artists which made this possible.

The lesson here is not new: the Other, if we take the time to recognize it, naturally has something different to offer, and this difference may contain the possibility for theoretical, cultural, and social development. Perhaps a polarization of circumstance, similar to the one witnessed in the postmodernism of architecture' in the same way that much early art by women has since been labeled. This fact is taken here as a sign that gender is of little import in the assessment of their production—no qualifications or special addendums are necessary to appreciate the work’s value.

The more general artistic implications of late twentieth century women’s art necessarily remain hypothetical and unproven (as all assumptions of cultural causes-and-effects must), but one could to some degree trace the re-corporealization and re-assertion of objective primary witnessed in today’s practice back to this work. The complexification of objectivity by these artists, coupled with their effective rescue of the object from the dungeon of the referent, may have contributed to our recently renewed interest in formal mystery, intimacy, and inexplicability.2 The highly sculptural, unheimlich, yet geometrically and semiotically ineffable work of architectural firms such as Morphosis and Gehry Partners LLP might be read as a similar re-assessment and validation of the object, in support of the backlash against purely linguistic and semantic postmodernism.3 While such contemporary trends cannot be ascribed a direct line of descent, they certainly owe much to the object studies of female artists who made the first steps towards the liberation of women from the object and object from its semiotic prison.

The lesson here is not new: the Other, if we take the time to recognize it, naturally has something different to offer, and this difference may contain the possibility for theoretical, cultural, and social development. Perhaps a polarization of circumstance, similar to the one witnessed in the postmodern moment, is necessary to expose the potential of the Other. While women continue to fight for equal participation in art and architecture, having at the very least achieved recognition as independent subjective authors of their work, we might wonder what other Others still hover at the fringes of our social perspective, waiting for the chance to participate in the contemporary discourse.

1 Even in 1967, when Foucault conceptualized a spatial version of ‘othersness,’ he did so from the perspective of a typical Western man. As Mary McLeod has noted, his categorization of houses as purely “places of rest” would be contested by any stay-at-home mother or housewife. Foucault’s view is indicative of a myopic perspective on the matter, as well as the utter exclusion of women not only from theoretical but also spatial considerations. Mary McLeod, “‘Other’ Spaces and ‘Others,’” in The Sex of Architecture, ed. Diana Agrest et al. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 20.

2 The stereotypical conception of women in the late twentieth century showed little improvement over the literary and historical one in this regard. Post-war notions of women as commodity consumers (of products designed and authored by men) still reign.

3 Of course, a number of men also either resisted the impulse to seek safety in theory or explored similarly object-based studies. Their absence from this paper is not intended as exclusion or disregard; it is merely in the service of a focused study on women of the time.

4 This hypothesis stems from the widespread appreciation today of work by women such as Elizabeth Diller and Zaha Hadid (who managed to finally break the ‘star-chitect’ gender barrier.) None of the projects produced by the former are known as ‘women’s architecture’ or ‘female architecture’ in the same way that much early art by women has since been labeled. This fact is taken here as a sign that gender is of little import in the assessment of their production—no qualifications or special addendums are necessary to appreciate the work’s value.


6 One might protest that the male contemporaries of the women discussed produced similar and even equivalent works, and in the service of focus this claim cannot be fully refuted here. Perhaps one example might suffice: Robert Rauschenberg’s ‘Assemblages,’ which might be taken in comparison to Nevelson’s work, are certainly about objectivity, but lack the incomprehensibility of her forms. Rather, they are about the bizarre semiotic implications of collage, effectively engaging theory rather than undermining it. This holds true for most such examples; it is the suggestive yet incomprehensible forms produced by the women in question which makes their work so revolutionary and unique.

7 These are merely two examples of large firms with both male and female principles: sensuous form and interest in the object is no longer termed ‘feminine,’ and women are no longer expected to produce only work in the language of the former (see Agrest’s muscular, stolid forms).
History is the accessible past, whether that past is recorded in writing, memories, songs, soil, or landscapes; laid down by humans or not. Theory is an explanation of phenomena, a scheme of relations between parts of a system. Understanding requires explanation or cognition of some sort. In other words, understanding requires theory even if such a theory is as simple as knowing that a is typically followed by b or that one foot follows the other. All non-instinctual understanding is formed by theory of some type. All useful theory is built upon or related to serial experience, either personal or non-personal, conceptual or empirical. It is history that makes these experiences available to theory which informs the understanding. This being the case, a necessary, co-determinant relationship between history and theory informs all understanding (as separate from instinct or unexamined stimulus and response) and is indispensable to human activity as we know it. History, theory, and understanding all need each other in correlation. Accordingly, most activities require an understanding that coherently corresponds to that activity. We disregard at our own peril any single part of this interdependent triad and especially run risks when performing actions that lack a soundly corresponding theory, or when theories lack a demonstrable history of soundly corresponding actions. This is why the history/theory matrix is indispensable not only to architecture but to human civilization as we know it.

THE THREADS OF OBJECTIVITY: A Touchstone of Architectural Theory
David Getzin
Having built its central argument on these initial observations and conclusions, this essay must now address how it is possible for theory and buildings to arise from sound, reasonable thought (such as that of Immanuel Kant or Edmund Burke) and remain inwardly coherent, yet nonetheless fail to correspond to the demands of the shared experience of architecture. We are especially referring here to architectural explorations inspired by the sublime. Driven by a forced and naïve pursuit to antagonize and alienate their inhabitants, such works constitute a conscious effort on the part of their designers to recreate the kinds of effects unwittingly produced by the modern metropolis, such as those first conceptualized by Georg Simmel in “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” While originally related to poetic composition and rooted in the philosophical discussions of Longinus, Burke, and Kant, the sublime has since attracted a large following in architecture. Burke originally framed the sublime as an antipode to the beautiful. According to many 20th century architects’ rejection of the standard quest for beauty. The ongoing embrace of the sublime is due not only to a perseverance of the romantic attitude with which it is associated, but perhaps also, paradoxically, to the fact that the sublime is more permissible than the beautiful within a concurrent anti-romantic attitude of Sachlichkeit, or “matter-of-factness.” Such an attitude can be interpreted to have emerged from a strong reaction to historical trauma, which delegitimized an interest in beauty by casting it as a superfluous and naïve concern. Following Burke’s understanding of the sublime as arising from consciousness under some degree of fear and awe, the sublime was needed. If such a theory of sublime affect actually corresponds to experience, and the sublime is invoked by a Negativdarstellung (a “negative representation,” negative here in the sense of negative space, rather than as value judgment), then we obtain a public space whose social experience is rooted in what Burke called the constant companion of terror. Such a goal of institutionalizing terror within the literal structures of life hardly seems the pursuit of a just society. Further complicating the social aspect of the sublime in architecture is Kant’s description of aesthetic taste as a sensus communis which could be widely shared but commonly isn’t. Even if such sublime affect were to strike those prepared to receive it, architecture is embedded in everyday experience. Whereas the contemplation of beauty can be effectively repeated day-to-day (one never tires of sunsets), the special terror of the sublime would doub-
less wear one numb to the affect. In the least, the necessary transformation of a sublime experience over time through repetition should be examined in actual cases. One successful correspondence of this theory lies in repeated academic contemplation of or touristic visits to buildings where the possibly sublime affect would not be worn smooth or be effaced by repetition. Again, this small success privileges the few over the many. Those who are not moved by the sublime properties of a given structure, either through contingent inability or a blasé temperament, are thus likely to reject even the idea of artistic affect when it is presented in other contexts. I believe that the dismissive attitude of the general public towards art, and especially 20th century art, fits this pattern. Even in success, an applied theory of the sublime in architecture contains its own failure, and its correspondence is a fideity to the antagonism of the populace.

Differing somewhat from typical discussions of urban affect, Georg Simmel’s essay on the “Metropolis and Mental Life” is not so much about how the stimuli of modern cities creates a blasé attitude, but rather uses this to explain phenomena of hyper-individuated subjectivities as reactions to such a base condition. Simmel’s argument and described conditions are both the starting point for my assertion of the need to map threads of objectivity as well as a clarification of obstacles, such as radical subjectivity or alienation, which must be acknowledged by such theories. The exaggerated individualism that Simmel describes is a reaction to a kind of alienation from a hyper-stimulating environment. While Simmel depicts this alienation as a result of a “hypertrophy of objective culture,” I argue that a critical distinction must be made between types of objectivities, namely those which can correspond to individuals, and objectivities that can correspond to their own coherent theories at the expense of individuals—such as the sublime, rigidly Euclidean geometry, or idealized Platonic form.

The difficulty lies in discovering these objectivities, or areas of intersubjective correspondence. As architecture must begin with the objectively physical (a building must stand up, provide for basic needs, etc.), paths of connection from this base through the superstructure of human feeling and judgment should be mapped and seen to harmonize with each other and the respective start and endpoints. The space between objective and subjective is not bivalent but multivalent. Although the intersubjective is not always objective, and therefore contains a necessary amount of vagueness, the former contains significant and traceable regularities. Any given group of individuals will share subjectivity and subjective values to at least some degree. A casual schematic of such intersubjective threading is proposed by this essay’s accompanying illustration (Fig. 1). In the conclusion of Simmel’s article, a similar structure of root and bundled thread is cryptically hinted at as he strangely qualifies his acceptance of eccentric individualism:

Regardless of whether we are sympathetic or antipathetic with their individual expressions, they transcend the sphere in which a judge-like attitude on our part is appropriate. To the extent that such forces have been integrated, with the fleeting existence of a single cell, into the root as well as the crown of the totality of historical life to which we belong, it is our task not to complain or to condone but only to understand.

Simmel accepts the extreme individualities in so far as they are integrated into the trunk of society’s thread. He does not mention branches, but describes integration from the root to the crown. This is the trunk, the area where threads which spread out in roots and branches come together in the capillary passages of xylem and phloem. It is in proposing the mapping out of such a system that I hope to further any applicable theories which would discover not only how building corresponds to human feeling and how the converse also holds, but also how our personal feelings in many areas correspond to those of our fellow humans, in sum-total revealing to us ever deeper ways in which we are intimates of the world we inhabit.

Many people have spoken of democratic architecture, but few have proposed a framework to hang it on. Within this new process of theory that I am suggesting, the architect takes on the role of conduit or facilitator. As Richard Neutra and Christopher Alexander have already done, finding a common language of feeling and desire among the clients or occupants within a sensitive and adaptive design process is critical if the singular result of the building is to have maximum fidelity to the feelings of a group of people. Responsible architecture is politics as much as it is art or craft. Much in science and art remains invisible until the means of measuring or explaining are found. Isomorphism between threads of objectivity amongst ourselves, the physical world we inhabit, and the built objects we modify it with does exist. We must merely allow ourselves to discover this correspondence.
1. Consider museums of natural history, which often read information from pre-human times, or the oral histories of cultures that do not use writing to transmit knowledge across generations. The history of a personal life when not in biography or other externally recorded form is what we typically call memory. I realize that my definitions of history and theory are fairly broad, but I feel that they are solid.

2. Think of how late medieval cathedrals collapsed without proper theories of engineering, or how perfectly logically planned theories of political struggle (say, Benjamin’s anti-fascist politicization of art) have collapsed into irrelevance when the mode of struggle was not checked for corresponding, successful results in the realm of the engaged politics.

3. I am aware of the controversies and disagreements within the vicissitudes of quantum and theoretical physics (Higgs Boson, etc.). As far as architecture’s physical embodiment is concerned, however, there is no disagreement with the canon of physics involved at the scale of human habitation, such as the dynamics of heat transfer: \( Q/t = kA(T_{hot} - T_{cold})/d \). In other words, there is no longer any serious debate on such physics of building. This is the “total agreement” I refer to.


5. For one example of the influence of ideas about the sublime outside of architecture, please see Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism, Post-contemporary interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

6. “When painters have attempted to give us clear representations of these very fanciful and terrible ideas, they have I think almost always failed.” Quoted from Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 107.

7. Ibid., 109.


9. Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life.”

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

The delta that spans out, as objective fades from the intersubjective to the subjective, represents a spectrum of increasingly diverging viewpoints. A single thread on this chart would represent one individual. For example, our bodies all behave uniformly in respect to physical laws, are slightly divergent regarding dietary needs, and are quite diverse in musical preference.

Thread's difference as (x), rising towards a superstructure of personal aesthetics (n) between possible opinions (from a to b and back again). Imagine the a–b spectrum spun as a circle to diagram an infinite number of opposing opinion relations.
This essay considers the concept of transparency as it relates to the representational means mobilized by two distinct, yet surprisingly interrelated, artistic media in late nineteenth-century Paris: architecture and literature. It argues that new construction methods in architecture that were developed in order to allow for a greater degree of spatial openness in the urban environment also provided novelists with a physical and historical setting that reinforced the ostensibly transparent, ekphrastic mode of description associated with the Naturalist strain of literary Realism. Émile Zola (1840-1902) is taken here as exemplary of this development. The transparency of these artistic practices cannot be taken at face value, however, for they were everywhere mediated by the strategic manipulation of the “transparent” structure, be it architectural or literary.
In May of 1882, amidst research for his forthcoming novel, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), the novelist Émile Zola wrote to his close friend, the architect Frantz Jourdain, asking him to describe the archetypal mid-century Parisian department store. Zola's novel, the eleventh in his widely read Rougon-Macquart series, was to be set within the phantasmagoria of the Second Empire grand magasin, and he required an historically and architecturally accurate image of the environment in which his characters would live, work, and socialize. For the writer, such historical and visual precision was a necessity: like the other novels in his twenty-volume cycle, a collection that carried the subtitle, “a natural and social history of a family during the Second Empire,” *Au Bonheur des Dames* aimed at offering a transparent and unmediated portrayal of the political, social, and psychological volatility that accompanied the swift modernization of Paris under the regime of Napoleon III.

Upon receiving Zola’s request, Jourdain, who would design La Samaritaine store some twenty years later, enthusiastically responded with a dazzling vision of consumerist pageantry in polychrome.1 Radically different from the small boutiques and arcades of the preceding half-century, the grands magasins would serve as the magnificent bazaars for contemporary urban life. Designed primarily for the attraction and containment of the crowd, they would have no precedent, modern or ancient. Instead, they would inaugurate a completely new architectural idiom, expressive of the rapidly changing pace of Parisian society. In construction, these ends would be accomplished through the extensive use of iron. With a structural efficiency that outperformed stone, the use of this material would permit a rational plan composed of fewer, slenderer supports, allowing an openness and transparency in space, light, and air.

Likely describing Paul Sédille’s *Au Printemps* store (Fig. 1), then being erected on the Boulevard Haussmann, Jourdain continued: the architecture should cater to all income levels, high and low. Stylistic sophistication should be avoided, as it was not only unappreciated by the general public but also antithetical to the utilitarian and commercial aims of this new building type. Instead, the building should be simple in composition and enlivened by the reasoned use of ornament, which would augment its functional legibility and architectural character. Furthermore, the embellishments and glazing of its grand central atrium should be brilliantly colored, offering relief from the gray Parisian skies.
Though impressed by the magnificence of his description, Zola found the architect’s vision inappropriate for his literary needs. In his response, dated 18 May 1882, he wrote to Jourdain:

I’d like to thank you, dear sir, but at the risk of displeasing you . . . your beautiful dream of a great modern bazaar does not fully apply to my store. My novel takes place before 1870 [before the fall of the Second Empire], and I cannot make such an anachronism without stirring criticism. Ah! What a beautiful setting I could create with your bazaar if I wasn’t bound by my scruples as an historian.

Zola’s self-proclaimed status as an historian exposed a deeper cultural condition among literary figures in mid- and late-nineteenth century Paris. In *The Historical Novel* (1937), György Lukács chronicled the development of the French “history novel” genre and the literary schools that adopted it, paying particular attention to the Realism of Honoré de Balzac and the Naturalism of Zola. Pointing to its rise in the years following the Napoleonic wars and reaching its height after the establishment of the Second Empire by Napoleon III, he attributed these novelists’ obsession with creating accurate historical documentation through literature to the temporally collapsed societal conditions that adjoined the formation of an industrialized modern society. In his seminal essay, “Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (1939), Walter Benjamin too remarked on this situation, linking the century’s new means of industrial production and class organization with an altered temporal consciousness. “What emerges,” he wrote, “. . . is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated—which includes, however, the recent past.” For these critics, the French novelists’ focus on recent historical events—the rise of the department store in Second Empire Paris—was meant to distance oneself from all that is antiquated—which includes, however, the recent past. For these critics, the French novelists’ focus on recent historical events—the rise of the department store in Second Empire Paris—as portrayed in Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames*, for example—was meant to ignite a critical temporal reawakening in their readers amidst the dehumanizing societal changes sweeping the capital city.

If Realism and Naturalism shared this common goal, their literary methods varied greatly. In contrasting the two styles, Lukács suggested that while the Realist writer narrated a story from the standpoint of a critical and controlling participant, thereby continuing the Western tradition of the epic, the Naturalist merely described it. Pointing to Zola in particular, he wrote that, “[d]escription . . . becomes the dominant mode of composition in a period in which, for social reasons, the sense of what is primary in epic construction has been lost . . . The poetic level of life decays—and literature intensifies the decay.” The Naturalist novel, according to Lukács, proved uncritical historical documentation; its compositional structure existed as language minus rhetorical criticality. Zola himself offered grounds for such an understanding, frequently calling his novels *serres*, or greenhouses, offering the everyday realities of the world to his reader’s view. The ethnographic research that he conducted prior to writing, which for *Au Bonheur des Dames* included detailed accounts of the staffing, organizational structure, and sales figures of Au Bon Marché and Les Grands Magasins du Louvre, further suggested that he understood his role as a mere recorder of facts. His texts and storylines were to be completely transparent—syntax devoid of semantic narrative—clearly and crisply exposing the activities and events occurring behind them. For Lukács, it was precisely this unmediated and transparent literary structure that proved so troubling.

Though it accepts Lukács’ positioning of Zola within the camp of late nineteenth-century writers who assumed a scientific, “observatory” position in recounting the recent past, this essay would like to suggest that it was, in fact, the highly detailed architectural environments forming the physical backdrop for his novels that functioned as the critical mediating device delineating the relationship between humans, society, and time itself. For, as literary critic and historian Philippe Hamon has suggested, in Naturalist literature architecture rarely functioned as a purely descriptive, neutral setting. Instead, it played an active role in conditioning, structuring, and mobilizing the novel’s characters, events, and storyline. Understood as such, Naturalism’s ekphrastic representation of architecture operated as the *fundamental* literary vehicle dictating, driving, and mediating the novel’s narrative.

Using *Au Bonheur des Dames* as a case study, this essay seeks to unpack the means by which Zola employed the built environment as an especially potent spatio-temporal narrative vehicle to navigate both his novel’s plot and his readers’ historical consciousness. In turn, it hopes to come to a broader understanding of the tense relationship between the apparently transparent form of Naturalist literature and the spatial openness and visually unmediated nature of the architecture and urbanism of late nineteenth-century Paris. This investigation is composed of three interrelated components. First, it examines how the iron skeletal frame in late nineteenth-century French building construction enabled an ephemeral “architecture of environment”
particularly suited to the aesthetic, social, and representational aims of the Naturalist text. How did the literary instrumentalization of this type of space actively serve to construct Zola’s characters? Next, it explores the structural functions that architectural elements—noting specifically the grand central stair of the grands magasins—assumed in establishing the novel’s portrayal of “reality.” How did the novel paradoxically employ architecture—an art form inherently resistant to mimesis—as a seemingly transparent representational interchange between fiction and reality? Finally, it analyzes the roles that temporality played in the development of its literary structure. How did the colored glazing of atrium skylights and the dreamlike character of the shop windows in Zola’s ekphrastic depiction of the grand magasin come to manipulate the perception of historical time in his text?

As a large, centrally located retailing center offering mass quantities of dry goods consolidated under one roof, the Parisian grand magasin emerged as a legitimate building type during the rapidly industrializing climate of Napoleon III’s Second Empire. With a growing capitalist and commercial spirit—due, in no small part, to the loosening of tax, trade, and manufacturing regulations, the increase in income among the bourgeoisie, and the developments in mass transportation systems—traditional specialty stores began expanding both physically and programmatically, thus offering a greater variety of products to a growing consumer class. Arguably the first of such institutions was Aristide Boucicault’s Au Bon Marché (Fig. 2), established on the Left Bank’s rue de Sèvres in 1852. As Hrant Pasdermadjian has noted, his store proved characteristically distinct from the predominant boutique shops in four essential ways. First, instead of selling a small quantity of specialty goods at a high markup, the store made its profit by selling a variety of merchandise with a minimal price increase per item. By promoting the large-scale sale of goods, this model introduced a market economy founded on the purchasing habits of the bourgeois masses. Second, it abolished the practice of retail bargaining by fixing merchandise prices, thus allowing products to be placed on open display with clearly marked prices for public consumption. Third, it permitted free entrance into the store with no obligation to purchase goods, thereby rendering the store a spatial and figural extension of the street itself. And lastly, it introduced the revolutionary concept of...
product returns, which offered customers the ability to have their money refunded if they were unhappy with their purchase. Taken together, these features of Boucicault’s grand magasin redefined modern European retail on both economic and spatial terms. In his system, consumers no longer relied on a salesperson to experience his or her potential purchase. Goods that were once kept behind a counter were now displayed across space, free for their direct, unmediated handling by the bourgeois masses at large.

And these masses certainly were large, with figures claiming upwards of 10,000 potential people visiting the store on a busy day by the 1880s.11 As noted in Jourdain’s description to Zola, this business model required an enormous structure, the size and arrangement of which could accommodate the extraordinary crowds that such an institution attracted. To satisfy this demand, the architecture of the grands magasins required well-lit, flexible floor plans that offered freedom in circulation and department organization. Like Paris’s newly constructed Halles Centrales (1851-1857) designed by Victor Baltard or the numerous railway stations being built throughout the continent at the time, such social and architectural developments were inseparable from the advancements in iron construction during the course of the nineteenth century.12

In contrast to the limited capabilities of stone, iron skeletal construction permitted a light, multi-story structure, the horizontal floor plates of which were unencumbered by bearing walls or thick masonry piers (Fig. 3). As Meredith Clausen has remarked, this was of particular importance for the grands magasins, since their location in the city core, where customer potential was greatest but land values highest, required a maximum efficiency in floor space.13 This spatial opening certainly proved economically beneficial on terms beyond those regarding property value, though. With the elimination of the massive supports associated with masonry construction, an unprecedented number of goods could be displayed within the customers’ visual field, enabling, according to Roland Barthes, the collapse of corporeal sensation and spatial intelligibility in the urban environment of nineteenth-century Paris.14 The skeletal frame, therefore, promised a structure strong enough to support the loads associated with the merchandise and crowds yet thin and open enough for the light from the store’s atriums to penetrate the depth of the building, thereby offering a spatial expanse fit for the phantasmagorical culture of spectacle at hand (Fig. 4).
Figure 4
Au Bon Marché (1869-1877), Paris;
Atrium Section
Begun by Alexandre Laplanche
Completed by Louis-Auguste Boileau
and Gustave Eiffel
Most importantly, the employment of iron skeletal construction in large-scale architectural commissions permitted an unprecedented flexibility in human circulation. At Au Bon Marché, for example, Boucicault commissioned Louis-Auguste Boileu and Gustave Eiffel—two renowned pioneers of the material—to design the store’s final extension. Covering 52,800 square meters upon its completion in 1887, their use of iron enabled a seemingly infinite horizontal and vertical expanse in which boundless quantities of goods could be placed on view and through which vast crowds could move with ease (Fig. 5).15 Within this framework, however, circulation systems, departments, and displays could be changed at will; spatially, very little remained stable or permanent. Like Baltard’s Halles centrales, therefore, this new architecture proved one of pure syntactical arrangement empty of any controlled semantic value.

These changes in the built environment hardly went unnoticed by Paris’s literary community. Writing earlier in the century on the vanquished narrative capacity of architecture, for example, Victor Hugo remarked that, “We no longer have the genius of that age. Industry has replaced art.”16 That age, as any reader of Hugo would know, was the medieval period—the last time when, by Hugo’s surmising, architecture in its very materiality assumed the ability to convey social and symbolic meaning independent of textual or academic doctrine. In the eighth edition of Notre Dame de Paris, published in 1832, Hugo placed such a pronouncement in historical terms, famously writing that, “Ceci tuera cela,” or “this [the book] will kill that [architecture].”17 Referring to the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, Hugo believed that architecture could longer operate as the privileged art form expressive of the values of human society; in the modern period, that duty would be assumed by the written word alone.18 “It was the total renewal of human of expression,” he wrote, “the human mind shedding one form of representation for another.”19

While Hugo believed that architecture by the nineteenth century had reached a point of no return, Zola found a kind of redemptive quality in its developments. Commenting on the Halles centrales in Le Ventre de Paris (1873), for example, the author claimed that the structure of iron and glass ushered a new and promising architecture that appropriately addressed the monumental developments in modern science and society. “It is a curious juxtaposition,” he wrote, “… that bit of [the church of Saint-Eustache] framed by this avenue of cast iron… Ceci tuera cela, iron will kill stone,
and the time is drawing near.” His laudatory remarks on the contemporary structure should not be understood on material or formal grounds alone, though. For him, this new architecture, which admittedly lacked any of the traditional semantic literariness of the medieval cathedral, promised something undeniably modern, something that Hugo’s book certainly could not: that being an immersive and highly sensual “architecture of environment,” built from the vast spatial expanses that iron construction made available.

For the author, it was the particular social conditions made possible by such spaces that rendered contemporary architecture attractive. In other words, he admired buildings of iron and glass not for their materiality or technological ingenuity specifically, but for the kinds of open spaces that they offered. This openness rendered the complex social upheavals that were sweeping the capital both visible and observable, a fact that Zola critically mobilized in crafting his Rougon-Macquart series. Drawing inspiration from Charles Darwin’s 1859 publication, *On the Origin of Species*, Zola openly believed that men and women were mere products of their environmental surroundings; therefore, structures like the Halles centrales and *grands magasins* served as ideal settings for his novels, because they permitted the formation of highly complex social and spatial environments free from any permanent or stable hierarchical system.

This proved particularly effective in his *Au Bonheur des Dames*, published in 1883 though set between the years 1863-1868. With customers no longer relying on experienced sales clerks to mediate the store’s goods, the architecture of the *grands magasins* enabled a direct relationship between individuals and the merchandise that they coveted. Within the seemingly infinite continuity of space, then, products and displays—the very objects of subjective desire in this, the age of high capitalism—could be positioned at will, free from any predetermined architectural organization. With its capacity to house such highly affective environments of subject-formation, therefore, the very space of architecture operated as a collective and literary actant, as a kind of conditioning *habitus*. The fact that the novel’s title, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, referred not to a character or situation but to the literal and figural structure provided by the store qualified its functional and narrative significance in the very composition of the novel.

In a particularly powerful passage, Zola elaborately detailed the reopening of the newly expanded store owned by Octave Mouret, the novel’s protagonist, clearly based on Au Bon Marché’s Boucicaut. Because of the extensive use of iron, “space had been gained everywhere,” thus allowing complete freedom and flexibility in circulation and departmental organization. Upon his final inspection of the store, however, Mouret decided that “his arrangement of departments was completely unacceptable. It was an absolutely logical arrangement, though, with materials on one side of the store and manufactured goods on the other: an intelligent organization that would permit customers to move about freely through the store on their own.”

Instead of maintaining his coherent arrangement, Mouret demanded a complete spatial reorganization, dispersing necessary goods throughout the building. This, in turn, would force his patrons to traverse multiple departments and floors, thus giving the illusion that the store was even busier than it was. Like the urban reconfigurations occurring at the time by Napoleon III’s prefect of the Seine, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, this socio-spatial transformation certainly rendered the bourgeois public body visible to itself, though not innocently or critically for itself. Speaking to his assistant, Monsieur Bourdoncle, about such shrewd architectural intentions, Mouret elaborated:

“First, the constant traveling of customers will scatter them all over the place, multiplying their appearance and making them lose their minds; secondly, because they have to travel from one end of the store to another—if they wish to purchase lining after having bought a dress, for example—it will seem as if there are three times more people shopping in the store; and third, they will be forced to cross through departments where they normally would not set foot, with temptations greeting them everywhere as they pass.”

Undoubtedly, Mouret was able to create such an affective environment because of the flexibility that the iron skeletal frame enabled. Zola, in turn, mobilized this delirious setting, treating it as the driving force capable of forming the very personalities of his characters. Upon visiting the store after Mouret’s re-arrangement, for example, two of Zola’s secondary characters, Madame de Boves and Madame Marty, were completely transformed into unsuspecting, desiring mechanisms incapable of thinking or behaving rationally. “Oh! I am acting as a child, aren’t I?” exclaimed Madame de Boves, “If I don’t find my lace and leave, I’ll be lost like this forever!”
Nearly all of Zola’s characters were shaped by their experiences in the store, a spatial apparatus that the author frequently cited as la machine within Haussmann’s industrializing metropolis. And while the heroine of his tale, the young provincial shop-girl Denise Baudu, never fully fell prey to its materialist seduction, she often noted the psychological power that the built environment played in both subjective and social formation. “Sometimes she would become quite animated,” Zola wrote of Denise, “imagining a huge phalanstery of trade where everyone would have a fair share of profits according to merit.”25 Alluding to the early nineteenth-century utopian and highly structured communities of philosopher and literary figure Charles Fourier, Denise hoped for a complete collapse between activity and space—between the functioning of a building and its structural and spatial form. Such an idealized system, with its transparency between form and function, however, could never be actualized fully, neither in architecture nor in literature’s portrayal of it. As Anthony Vidler has noted, in Fourier’s utopian structures, “he accomplished . . . only a transparency between the account of an activity and the narrated assumed properties of a space, which is to say that no real ‘translation’ actually occurred, merely the transformation of both society and architecture into a text.”26 Even in Denise’s ideal grand magasin, then, architecture offered merely the appearance of a transparent system; for people and activities could never find a truly harmonious and un-conflicted resolution in architectural space.

In Au Bonheur des Dames, Mouret’s grand magasin, therefore, operated as the primary narrative actor capable of conditioning the personalities of Zola’s many characters. In presenting highly visual literary portrayals of environments premised on real institutions, the author employed architecture as a particularly potent imaginative interchange, permitting a seemingly real entry into the unreal, fictive events taking place within the realm of his text. This remained one of Zola’s most ingenious tactics, for none of his characters could be envisioned without their highly affected architectural settings.27 Such a literary strategy was all the more effective in his position of imagined spaces and activities in an historical frame. As mentioned previously, Zola set his tale some fifteen to twenty years in the past. While eliciting an historical awareness of the swift industrialization sweeping the city, this also permitted his socio-cultural events—the profound impact that the grands magasins had in the urban context, for example—to achieve maximum currency. His story, first published in Paris journal Gil Blas, was directed specifically to those whom such social upheavals were affecting; the architectural environments that he described certainly would have been known to his readers. Through ekphrastic portrayal, he sought to bring these spaces, and thus his characters, to life within the textual domain of the story. This mode of description was of particular importance, as noted in his essay, “De la description,” published in Le roman expérimental (1880). “We believe that man cannot be separated from his environment,” he wrote, 

he is shaped by his clothing, his house, his city, and his province. Thus, we will not claim a single phenomenon of his brain or heart without first looking for the causes and consequences in the environment. This is why we require such interminable descriptions.28

This ekphrastic portrayal of architecture, then, operated on meta-linguistic grounds, serving not as simple literary representations but instead as privileged referents, the actual forms of which existed in the real world. The literary critic and historian Claudia Brodsky has elaborated on this condition, noting that, “language must do more than move and position if it is to have additional, specifically referential force, a power exerted upon the mind that pulls it outside itself to something neither conceivable nor visible in itself, something the mind can neither think nor perceive of its own means alone.”29 In order to exceed its syntactic and semantic structural limitations, therefore, literature both inhabited and mobilized architectural space as a means of offering language phenomenological attributes, thereby rendering the invisible, non-representational quality of written language sensually perceptible and visually comprehensible. To quote Hamon, then, “[t]he questions will no longer be: How does writing cite the real? But rather: How does the real solicit writing?”30 This referential portrayal of reality—this seeming transparency between fact and fiction—ultimately proved a literary illusion, however; one mediated at every turn by Zola’s invisible hand.

To fully grasp the means by which this kind of literary interchange functioned requires a return to Zola’s nineteenth-century structure. As noted earlier, the Parisian grand magasin inaugurated a spatially immense retail structure, which for the first time consolidated a seemingly endless quantity of goods under one roof. Because the idea of ascending and descending multiple floors
to locate merchandise proved foreign to a populace accustomed to shopping in small single-service boutiques, the stores placed grand, monumental stairs (Figs. 6a-b) at their entrances, thus rendering the existence of its upper floors both immediately evident and aesthetically attractive. This was of particular importance, as the small boutiques throughout the city proved the main competitors of the nascent grands magasins—an historical fact that played a major role Au Bonheur des Dames’s plot.

Within the phantasmagoric space of the store, the stair functioned as a kind of privileged architectural element: a dually structured and structuring set piece within the fluctuating system of departments, displays, goods, customers, and urban onlookers. As an inhabitable object, the stair offered a particularly powerful vantage point from which one could observe the events unraveling on the shop room floor. In this sense, it operated as a space experientially distinct from the floors above and below, thus introducing a kind of experiential and temporal suspension within this process of spatial transition.

In Zola’s text, these temporally sensitive architectural elements, because of their social, symbolic, and phenomenological significance, operated as particularly potent inter-media shifters that enabled, through the very space of the architectural element, a kind of corporeal entry into the fictional realm of the story. This can be noted in several remarkable scenes in Au Bonheur des Dames in which Zola employed the stair as the privileged vantage point by which Mouret scanned the unruly events at his store. While the floors above and below existed as a delirious and distracting environment that refused any attempt of concentration, the stair became a space distinct from the halls themselves. It was here where Mouret acquired a focused vantage point, where “he commanded a view of the whole store.” Moreover, because the stair assumed a distinctive, yet inherently transitory quality, it allowed

Figure 6a
Au Bon Marché (1869-1887), Paris; Stair section
Began by Alexandre Laplanche; Completed by Louis-Auguste Boileau and Gustave Eiffel
Zola to shift without notice from one storyline to another within the text. At the beginning of the store’s first great sale, for example, an anxious Mouret wandered to the stair to view the condition of the halls. Monsieur Hutin, his senior manager, joined to reassure him of the sale’s inevitable success. Scrutinizing the chaos before him, Hutin pointed to a hopeful transaction below: “Do you know Madame Desforges, the governor’s girlfriend? . . . The brunette over there in the glove department, the one who’s having some gloves tried on by [Monsieur] Mignot.” At this point, Zola successfully shifted the setting to the glove department, where the story continued, seamlessly intruding on the conversation between Desforges and Mignot. “Oh! It’s absolutely perfect!” Mignot repeated to his conspicuously consuming client. “And would you like anything else with this, madam?”

Extending this kind of narrative operation, the stair’s dramatic vantage point invited a visual entry into the story, laying out a series of highly constructed and ekphrastically detailed staged tableaux. In positioning Mouret and Hutin on an elevated architectural structure observing events unfolding beyond their immediate context, Zola instituted a simulacrum of his characters’ viewpoint within the narrative space of the story. The reader, because of the illusion of an unmediated text, assumed Mouret and Hutin’s ability to visually examine the store, activating a vantage point at once spatial and textual. This unacknowledged simulation proved particularly significant for Zola, who, ostensibly maintaining an “observatory” literary position, offered the reader a visual glimpse into the story without the noticeable guidance of a narrator.

At the close of the day’s sale, a triumphant Mouret again approached the stair. “He returned to his favorite position at the top of the mezzanine staircase,” Zola wrote, “and scanning the massacre of materials spread out below him, he gave a victorious laugh . . . And so the campaign was finally won, with the profits of the small boutique owners reduced to shreds.” Thus, in a striking conflation of architectural and literary maneuverings, the space of the grand central stair—the structuring architectural device that connoted the superiority of the grand magasin over its competitors, served as the very place for the reader’s visual transfer into a narrative chronicling the same event.

These architecturally constructed theatrical viewpoints, coupled with the extensive description that brought them to life, therefore, permitted a seem-
ingly unnoticeable entry into the unraveling plot of the novel, subsequently forging a particularly spatial relationship between Zola’s reader and the text’s narrative structure. As noted earlier, however, the reader’s visual entry into the text was undoubtedly simulated, offering merely the illusion of an unmediated operation. In this sense, Zola’s literary tactics proved similar to the very capitalist spectacle that Au Bonheur des Dames outlined. For, as Jonathan Crary has noted, “spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject see, but rather on strategies in which individuals . . . inhabit time as disempowered.”44 Like Mouret’s phantasmagoric grand magasin, therefore, Zola’s offered merely transparency’s appearance. Such systems, however, could never be taken at face value, for they were everywhere mediated by the strategic manipulation of the “transparent” structure, be it architectural or literary.

* * *

Zola’s final chapter of Au Bonheur des Dames opened with the unveiling of the final iteration of Mouret’s grand magasin, completed in 1868. After having decimated the neighboring boutiques with its capitalistic might, the new store, now encompassing an entire city block, shined brilliantly amidst the gray February sky. In its great central atrium, where Mouret had organized a colossal sale to celebrate his success, streams of ivory-hued silk and ribbon elegantly waved from the iron balustrades above, “floating like gossamer against a summer sky,”45 contrasting sharply against the backdrop of the newly installed, multi-colored stained-glass skylight above. “Au Bonheur des Dames was to be reopened that Monday, on the occasion of a great white sale,” Zola wrote,

There was a bright and new expanse of polychrome architecture, decorated with gilded ornament, which heralded the din and glare of the business inside, displaying the brightest colors for all eyes to see. On the ground floor, as not to distract from the materials in the shop windows, the decorations remained somber . . . But as the stories went up, the colors became brighter and brighter . . . Finally, at the top, the entablature exploded, like the blooming of the entire edifice. Mosaics and sculptural pottery reappeared in warm colors, the zinc gutters were carved and gilded, forming statues lining the parapet representing the
Recalling his conversation with Jourdain, the novelist’s architectural description proved particularly striking. The store he visually detailed—its gilding and ornamentation, its colorful mosaics, and its brilliant skylight of stained glass—hardly matched Boucicault’s Au Bon Marché, the institution that the novel openly acknowledged as its inspiration. Instead, Zola’s grand magasin seemingly corresponded with Jourdain’s earlier account of the sumptuous grands magasins of the Third Republic, likely inspired by Sédille’s well-known Au Printemps of 1883 (Figs. 1, 7a-b), completed the same year as Zola’s Au Bonheur des Dames. The significance of this must not be taken lightly. As Zola suggested in his letter to Jourdain, he understood his role as a kind of historian, with his Rougon-Macquart novels offering an honest and unmediated portrayal of the turbulent life under the autocratic regime of the Second Empire. Yet, as he undoubtedly knew, fact and fiction, history and literature, could not so easily coalesce.

Instead of pure historical documentation, therefore, his novel operated as a kind of highly mediated temporal interchange, using the literary portrayal of architecture as its fundamental vehicle. Yet, as noted previously, this process hardly proved an innocently transparent one. Like the fantastical shop windows or the colorful stained glass skylights of his grand magasin, Zola’s anachronism, through its very architectural form, revealed that its transparent structure was one of appearance only—one with illusion and artifice firmly embedded in its very surface. Blurring the lines between the real and make-believe, thus, Zola’s supposedly transparent text, like the spectacular iron and glass architecture within which it occurred, merely relocated the moment of fiction’s discernment, revealing that their apparent openness and transparency were nothing more than the displacement of mediation itself. Within the space of the novel, therefore, the mask of the fictitious remained, with its location to be found, quite paradoxically, in the very edifice that housed it.


5. Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?” See his The Historical Novel, 215.


10. Ibid., 3-4.


14. “Hence it is the advent of a new perception, of an intellectualist mode, which these literatures and these architectures of vision mark out (born of the same century and probably from the same history): Paris and France become under Hugo’s pen and Michelet’s . . . intelligible objects, yet without—and this is what is new—losing anything of their materiality; a new category appears, that of concrete abstraction; this, moreover, is the meaning which we can give today to the word structures: a corpus of intelligible forms.” See Barthès, “The Eiffel Tower,” Rethinking Architecture: A reader in cultural theory, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 175-176.

15. Miller, The Bon Marché, 42.


22. Concerning this, Benjamin famously wrote that structures such as these established a framework in which “use value [of merchandise] recedes to the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity” Benjamin, “Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” 101.


26. T.J. Clark has written on the debates surrounding the visibility, though subjective illegibility, of Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann’s Paris in relation to the Impressionist movement. He wrote, “The disagreement can be summarized as following: A city, some said, ought to be readable and maintain a certain separation of parts; it ought to contain different functions, different quarters, different kinds of dress; sign languages which established even for the stranger—and certainly for the native—where one belonged in the city and whom one should

27. “Premièrement, ce va-et-vient continué de clientes les disperse un peu partout, les multiplie et leur fait perdre la tête; secondement, comme il faut qu’on les conduise d’un bout des magasins à l’autre, si elles dévinent par exemple la doublure après avoir acheté la robe, cet voyage en tous sens triplent pour elles la grandeur de la maison; troisièmement, elles sont forcées de traverser des rayons où elles n’auraient pas mis les pieds, des tentations les y accrochent au passage, et elles succombent.” *Au Bonheur des Dames*, 252.


29. “Parfois, elle s’animait, elle voyait l’immense bazar idéal, le phalanstère du négoce, où chacun aurait sa part exacte des bénéfices, selon ses mérites.” Ibid., 373.


36. This assertion borrows from Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the social production of space. “Transitional, symbolic, and functional, [an object like a] ‘door’ serves to bring a space, the space of a ‘room,’ say, or that of the street, to an end, and it heralds the reception to be expected in the neighboring room, or in the house or interior that awaits. The threshold or sill of an entrance is another transitional object, one which has traditionally enjoyed an almost ritual significance.” See his *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 209-210.


38. “[Il] domina encore la maison entière.” Ibid., 106.
Titus Lucretius Carus and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe stand more than eighteen centuries apart. Despite this considerable distance, both authors wrestled with the same problem: their relationship as intellectuals to nature. In each of their texts, an invisible niche of the material world is conjured up in the imagination as a way to compensate for the writer’s limited perceptual world. The ‘thing’ they were after was transparency, a condition that requires a particular attunement of the perceiver with the object being perceived. Both Lucretius and Goethe craved an immediate contact with the real constituents of the world, even though they each addressed this lack in significantly different ways.

In Lucretius’ *On the Nature of the Universe* (1st century B.C.) and Goethe’s *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790), we find two distinct axes of analysis: Lucretius assuming the vertical reductionist axis and Goethe the horizontal axis of induction and abstraction. Lucretius tried to intuit the actual ingredients of the physical world, which he identified as atoms, void, and the vector of the *clinamen*. The discovery of such primary units marked the physical and logical limit of analysis, and, with it, a temporary end to scientific inquiry. By definition, atoms cannot be divided or analyzed any further. This means that they constitute the true primitive terms of Lucretius’ logic and physics, from which all forms of human experience are deduced by means of recombination and interaction. Armed with the trope of analogy, his epic poem served as a...
heuristic device, representing the familiar composite world in terms of unfamiliar simple corpuscles. The moment Atomism reduced everything to an array of indivisible units was the moment when all forms—from microscopic constituents to larger and more complex structures—became understood as architectures, which is to say actualizations with the same capacity to be combined, shuffled and scattered. Composition then refers to the process of assembling primal material points into bodies, minds and buildings. Paradoxically, all distinct structures that make up the world are equally traversed by this ubiquitous sea of pixels, and, conversely, it is precisely their separation into particles which constructs them as whole entities.

Most importantly, Lucretius proposed that the objects we perceive are fundamentally of the same nature as the sensory surfaces that perceive them, the same in turn as the information about the former obtained through our sensory pathways. Thus Lucretius exalted sensation epistemologically, simultaneously positing it as the recipient, mirror, and data of the fabric comprising the cosmos. Reality is transmitted through the air in successive waves impinging upon our sense organs. That which Plato described as Beauty—a pure Form standing outside of its various spatiotemporal instantiations—Lucretius reduced to smoothness, which is to say a property entailing the conformity of the texture of the particles with the constitution of their perceiver. In order for me to like something, it has to agree with my nature: For everything that charms the senses must

\begin{align*}
\text{For everything that charms the senses must} \\
\text{Contain some smoothness in its primal atoms.}^5
\end{align*}

Since taste, color, sound, and heat are not to be found in the atoms themselves, but only appear as emergent properties between affecting and affected bodies (i.e. when a mixture of bodies takes place), atoms lack any mortal properties. In the proceedings of what we call life, beings are individuated through non-deterministic lines of combination. The clinamen—that which Lucretius defined as the tendency for atoms to trace erratic paths deflecting away from a straight line, and thus colliding in unpredictable ways—percolates from the microcosm to the macrocosm, as its shocks of spontaneity at the level of atoms travel further up in scale. Like in a Goldbergian machine, a succession of interconnected events transmits the atomic acts of spontaneity to more complex aggregates. I freely move and live my life with the same indetermi-

nacy possessed by the atoms that compose me, as they swerve away from their predetermined physical destinies.

On the other side of this quest for transparency, Goethe studied each individual plant as the instantiation of a singular type—the Proteus in potentia—which actualizes itself in a variety of protean plant forms under the influence of the environment. Botanical species are then nothing but different instances of actualization of the Urfpflanze, the originary plant. All diversities in the environment of the plant manifest themselves as occasional and contingent features attached to the unchangeable and eternal archetype. The form serves as a “prison for matter,” accreting material within a given structural matrix. We can thus see that the space of possibilities for Goethe is primarily articulated through structures. He described his new field of Morphology as “a science of organic forms and formative forces aimed at discovering underlying unity in the vast diversity of plants and animals.” If Goethe first famously proclaimed that “alles ist Blatt” (“all is leaf”), Henry David Thoreau later pushed the meaning of this phrase to its cosmological limits, discerning, for example, formal affinities between ice patterns and the structure of birds’ wings. In Thoreau’s synthesis, the morphogenetic power of the leaf is assigned to all creatures as a unitary and universal law of nature:

\begin{align*}
\text{No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly. The atoms have learned this law, and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. . . . The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves . . . Even ice begins with delicate crystal leaves . . . The whole tree itself is but one leaf . . . The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf.}^7
\end{align*}

And so we reach the first tension: if Goethe adhered to the Romanticist habit of thinking about form as an expression of embedded forces, for Lucretius the forces and laws derived from the form of the atoms themselves. While Goethe refuted a virtual quintessence existing outside of time and place, Lucretius insisted on the immortality of singular, actual elements. In other words, Lucretius’ notion of atoms as discrete differences distributed amongst an infinite void is unassimilable to Goethe’s idea of eternally pervasive, yet ineffably absent universals.
These two approaches called for appropriately distinct scientific postures. Since Nature does not present the *Urpflanze* by Herself, the poet or the scientist ought to reveal it through his or her art. Goethe—employing his idiosyncratic empiricism—gathered particulars in order to fuse them into the unanalyzable totality of the organism. He therefore endowed the artist with an ethical, almost cosmological task, as if Nature were calling upon the artist to unveil its true forms. Lucretius, however, summoned a scientific ataraxia in his readers by marking an insurmountable limit to any attempts at further analysis. He uncovered the impersonal face of reality before and below any form of human-scaled moral issues, since at the level of atoms there is no violence, passion, sense, right or wrong. Just as there is no agency in matter to assign a mission to us, nor is there a debt or responsibility accompanying the discovery of the porosity of the universe. Long before the decentralization evoked by the Copernican Revolution, Lucretius displaced human existence from its individuality. Even if at the time of Lucretius the human body still retained its central position in the universe, in Lucretius’ thinking it irrevocably lost the significance of its individuality, scattered as it was now amongst innumerable centers of atoms. Not only were atoms instituted as the stable material cause of a constantly changing world, but even the process of decomposition became understood as a mode of composition equivalent to releasing particles from the imprisonment of form. To paraphrase a contemporary physicist, the fact that we die can be attributable to the fact that we are large systems. By redefining death as an inevitable dispersion, Lucretius dispelled once and for all any existential anxiety about mortality. Nowhere can I find a better expression of his grandiose argument than when he describes the atomic-scale bottleneck that life passes through when entering or exiting polyatomic life:

How else could creatures at the door of death  
Return to life, their minds restored again,  
Rather than make their exit by a route  
They have travelled almost to the end, and pass away?

Lucretius possessed an alphabet of elements, finite in kinds but infinite in number and combinatory power. Drawing on his own analogy, we could suggest that the mute void in which atoms reside is not only the privation of matter, but also the privation of signification. The necessary gap between words mirrors the ostensibly necessary gap between things. (How can I refer to the space between elements; how can I make sense of the void as the receptacle of combination?) Goethe, conversely, used the metamorphic power of the leaf as a medium for the fusing of words. In his text, the stamen is described as a contracted petal, or the petal as an expanded stamen—a new kind of a continuum that shortens the distance between the segregated entities and their parts in Linnaean categories. Language can only describe the geometrical: that which is stable and that which is extended. Yet as a result, language fails to capture the organic, the labile, and the intensive. By admitting his inability to adequately name the parts of plant growth, Goethe discovered the limit of his symbolic order, and at the same time instigated the collapse of signs in favor of a continuous process incapable of being parcelled into and signified by immobile words. The only thing that can be named is the process itself and the vectors of its forces.

While Lucretius put together his ontology inspired by the structure of language, Goethe looked for a new means of representation to describe the organic world by pushing language to its limits.

* * *
Perhaps this is precisely what Goethe meant in declaring that “science had developed from poetry.”

For Lucretius, the only sense able to distill adequate information from the otherwise remote microcosm of atoms is a tactile kind of vision; atoms, by analogy, can only be ‘seen,’ or at least visualized through a synchronic process of moving closer to them with the mind’s eye. The vertical approach of Lucretius’ method thus anticipates the invention of Hooke’s microscope. One could even go further by interpreting *On the Nature of the Universe* as functioning in a manner analogous to the microscope. Vision—as presented in his poem—is the only modality of perception that could, at some point, reach the atomic core of the truth and feel the speculated primary qualities of matter. In so far as it directly senses the atomic constitution of the world, vision lies at the center of Lucretius’ epistemology, propagating outward from things in gusts of polyatomic waves. Through the optical analogy we can immerse ourselves in different scales of the truth without losing any loss of quality or information. Like words or specks of dust, atoms embody a miniaturized version of the system to which they belong, allowing us to grasp its constitution at any scale:

To some extent a small thing may afford
An image of great things, a footprint of a concept.

In the case of Goethe, we also observe an inclination for his new science of Morphology to depend on an optic sense and imaginary synthesis:

While the physico-chemical study of form is achieved by means of conceptual reason, together with causal analysis, the morphological position is reached through combining conceptual reason, and thought which is visual and tactile.

Yet whereas Lucretius’ vertical kind of thought prefigured the advent of the microscope, the horizontal axis of Goethe’s method prepared the ground for the birth of photography—or, more precisely, the motion capture techniques of the late 19th century, which would eventually render the ineffable metamorphosis of natural forms as capturable:

Goethe’s overall intent was for the parts to form a whole and fluid story of floral forms in process—to present, in effect, a motion picture of the metamorphosis of plants.

The growth of the plant can ultimately be represented as a diachronic sequence of infinitesimally brief shots—eventually termed frames—running together horizontally. The nebulous *Urpflanze* is seen here as something that remains present throughout the duration of the recorded event: instantiated in each frame, but nonetheless irreducible to them.

Both writers, each one attuned to a structural aspect of the Universe, grounded their vision on a unique metaphysical edifice. Their respective deliverances from the senses were molded into exuberant cosmologies by means of tools that were not yet invented and scales that were not yet tractable. Yet, like true metaphysicians, they both transcended their lack by assuming the roles of architects and morphologists of their imperceptible worlds. In doing so, they turned concrete absences into abstract presences.

5. “The fact that we grow old is attributed to the fact that we are large systems.” Quote from Ioannis Iliopoulos for an interview in *GK Magazine*, March 2009.
8. “The state or quality of being indivisible or inseparable,” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
11. Arber, “The Interpretation of Plant Morphology,” 211.
HEDGE HOUSE

Michael Vlasopoulos
The mystics will never cease to puzzle us. One must merely venture into the texts of Saint Teresa and of San Juan de la Cruz, to introduce oneself within the metaphysical speculations of Meister Eckhart, to enfold oneself in the fascinating territory of Islamic Sufism, to plunge into the teachings of Sankara, or submerge oneself in the spiritual intensity radiating from the Rhenish mystics of the Low Middle Ages to be convinced of this. Yes, mysticism is a boundless source of surprise, a mystery incarnate in the form of letters, phrases, and discussions, which attempt to transmit a unique testimony that, by its nature, approaches the ineffable.

The capacity of mysticism to engender wonder in the minds of contemporary men and women, accustomed as they are to pursuing strict processes of rationalization in all spheres of life—whereby the occult is relegated to a realm of mere fantasy or artistic creation—is indeed extraordinary. We are fully aware of our difficulty to consider the works of great mystic writers as anything more than exalted expressions of a strong psychological experience, as well as of the impassable barrier that science interposes between
them and us. Yet, conversely, we also wish that there truly existed a space for the indescribable, such that not everything be reducible to the often tyrannical dominion of intelligence. We would like to feel and learn only by feeling, for it is still true, as Pascal said, that the heart possesses reasons that reason cannot know. Thus a strange relationship exists between mysticism and our epoch: a nexus of love and hate, a vibrant enthusiasm for that which is inexpressible as well as for its intemperate opposite, faced with the vertigo produced by the idea that there might exist an immeasurable abyss that human knowledge would never be able to exhaust.

The quote above by Silesius is indefinable. The rose lacks a reason why; it limits itself only to blooming, and it blooms because it blooms. Its own and exquisite explanation resides within itself, and it is useless to look for any justification transcending the basic fact that the rose blooms. Here the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason, with its “nihil est sine ratione,” finds itself vanquished. We are thus conquered by the captivating sameness of the rose, by the unbeatable power of the factual, which becomes elusive to us, and we rest in the melodious calm of harmony engendered by the absence of problematicity, by the annulment of all unknowns, which are transformed into something incongruous or even absurd. In such a setting, there is no room to investigate the reason for the rose. And, as a consequence, there is no room to investigate the reason for the world, which does indeed exist, ever since it has been the world, and only the world that it is. Herein lies the blatant tragedy of the philosopher, who cannot live without formulating questions, but whose curiosity inevitably leads down a path without end—an unnecessary conundrum for his or her own head. How easy it would be to simply cower before the beauty of the rose, without saying a word, releasing ourselves to the peace generated by pure facts, without any mediation of understanding, abandoned to ourselves while letting other things interpellate us. Rather than depending on our lexicons and signs of interrogation, things in themselves would become the lively translation of our profuse vocabulary, and humanity could satisfy itself merely by directing its gaze at that which surrounds it. In the same breath, humans would also necessarily cease their earnest endeavor to raise doubts about nature.

Yes, the rose blossoms, and let us not try to fathom why it does so, says the mystic. Let us deliver ourselves instead to the contemplation of blossoming itself, let us show confidence in the seductive magic of a reality that elucidates itself alone, and which does not require any human being to stand in for the voice of those infinite spaces submerged in eternal silence. It is the mind that is empty, argues the mystic, whereas reality is blissfully replete of fruitful energy. The stark contrast that Goethe noted between, on the one hand, the green and golden tree of life and, on the other hand, the grayness of theory also applies to this unyielding truth. Despite the numerous and divine inquiries we initiate, on the behalf of all the things that we, like supplicants, painfully desire to know, the enigma of factuality stubbornly persists before us, as does the enigma regarding the degree of objectivity of one experience relative to another, of our own existence as beings on this intractable earth.

Mystical “Gelassenheit” is what he have here: an enraptured distraction, peaceful and almost hermetic, renounces itself before what is, lies down amongst the green pastures and refuses to think, but only to feel—to feel life, to feel death, but not to investigate anything, because doing so would mean torment—while curtailing the anxiety of existence, sinking deep into despair when confronted with the thundering orphanhood of answers. We intend to know, but we are not sure if we are ready to undergo the ordeal that this entails. And yet, nevertheless, we do not abandon this sovereign task...

No, I cannot believe in the “Gelassenheit”, or accept that the rose stands without a reason, imposing itself upon me as if it were an unassailable wall. The rose is not a god to me, but only a miniscule part of this marvelous scenario in which I live, and which has entitled me to examine it. By doing so I also come to know myself, and I perceive that I am the one who creates the universe. The rose will continue to be an open question, and humanity cannot rest, because the grueling fatigue that results from its interrogation is a luminous sign of resplendent life, and we aspire to live as something more, more than the rose, which does not know why it blooms, when we intend to audaciously scrutinize the reasons why we live.

It is not that the rose is devoid of a reason, but rather that she eloquently defers the question of the ‘why’. She is herself, she is the notable triviality that derives from the fundamental sameness of all being with itself, from the principle of identity. But she is not isolated, for she is by no means the only element in the vast cosmos. If the universe only were a rose, and no more, she would be her own question as well as her own answer. Yet within the colossal realm in which exists a humanity that survives by relentlessly enunciating that which remains unknown, and which advances down the path of
time by constantly precipitating new topics, the rose cannot constitute an absolute, unqualified reality that escapes all interrogative faculties. Rather, the rose is a particular demonstration of the question defining the celestial firmament: “why do you exist, universe; and why you, instead of another?” And yes, I venture to suggest, due to this question I find myself commanded to investigate why the rose blooms and to explore, with the minute tools offered to us by the venerable sciences, the complex mechanisms underlying this biological process. Moreover, I search for the origin of all roses and all plants, of all living things, of the Earth, and, eventually, of our galaxy, in order to—oh, what a sublime abstraction!—climb all the way back to the obscure beginnings of the cosmos. Thus I link the hypothetically trivial act of philosophizing about a rose that blooms to a lucubration on the world as a cohesive whole, to the question of why there is something rather than nothing, in the process connecting every single thing to everything else. And here lies the grandeur of the human mind, which, in the felicitous words of Aristotle, “is in a certain sense all things.” By concatenation, one moves from the insignificant to the grandiose, to which nothing, neither human nor non-human, is alien.

Rose of mine, eternal mystery that you are, as you hold within yourself a unique witness to the universal arcane, continue blossoming; intoxicate us with the bountiful beauty of your petals. Yet do not oblige us to content ourselves with observing you as prisoners of overwhelming abnegation. Do not be so ruthless and ungrateful as to douse the untamed flame of the question that burns so ardently in us, which, if it were not to spill out into this vast world, would end up consuming us, devouring our fragile being.

No rose without an apparent reason could extinguish the legendary cry of a humanity that rebels against the contemptuous obscurity springing from the clamorous lack of answers. We want to know because we yearn to live; we exist to know, and, furthermore, to ask. No rose, regardless of how beautiful it might be, and no matter how closely it might embody the aesthetic ideal of philosophers and poets, should dare to annihilate this impulse born in us, and which will never languish. Unamuno was right when he wrote in Del Sentimiento Trágico de la Vida en los Hombres y en los Pueblos that

the visible universe, which is the son of the instinct of conservation, seems narrow, like a cage that is too small for me, and against whose bars my spirit presses in its agitation; there is not enough air to breathe.

More, more, and always more, I want to be myself without ceasing to be so, and also to be others, to introduce myself in the totality of visible and invisible things, to extend myself into the boundlessness of space and prolong myself into the endlessness of time. To not be everything, and forever, is like to not exist at all, or at least to be fully myself and to be so for ever and ever. And to be all of myself is also to be all the others. Either everything, or nothing!
I am talking to you today not about forests, but about a forest, from within a forest, in the words of a forest. It is an actual forest—it is the one we are in right now, you and I. Being writing such as this, it is not a real thing, but it is a real forest: a gathering of materials. Here we are, then, gathered in this forest, gathering materials. I just need you to listen. What are we listening for? Only echoes. There is no forest to be found in this forest. No forest but the writing of trees. Just listen; you may even catch an image of your own voice.

It is called in Latin silua. Yes, this word means “forest,” but like the Greek hyle it also means “material,” not just timber, the matter of woods, but the raw material of thought and the material of a different kind of woods. What is more, silua means “literary history.” Silua is the place in which material is found as it is itself material, the material in which any poet finds herself. Accordingly, silua resonans means not only “echoing forest” but also “resonant material.” This is the first of two figures that I am going to discuss. The second is a figure that constitutes this forest, not as material, but negatively as the incision of material, as writing and rewriting. This is called arbor inscripta, the inscribed tree, a phenomenon of natural history.

Did I promise to talk about Roman poetry, about Virgil and about the text called the Eclogues? Precisely. This is what we have been talking about all
along, for so long now. “Virgil’s Nachleben is Western literature,” says Gian Biagio Conte. History is written by the readers, and poetry is written in the library. But the library is a forest, and *silua* provides the setting for what it is to be an *eclogue*—a word that means selection, something picked out, the words that have been chosen, that is, read. What monumental ruin have I chosen? Pastoral poems in Latin, Virgil’s *Eclogues*, also called *Bucolics*.

Pastoral is an atmosphere generated by bits and pieces, eclogues and forest gatherings. Intertextuality, which is the rich topic of this paper, generates relations not by dissolving materials together, not by establishing a continuity of presence, but by the arrangement of fragments, the piling-up of materials. The study of allusion is central to the characterization of Latin philology in the present. In such a discipline, Virgil has become intertextually overdetermined, and this intertextuality spreads out in every direction. *Silua* is the field of intertextuality, which is the reading of constitutive relations; in this field, literary history (the narrativization of a canon) becomes natural history (the arrangement of fragments).

The early sixteenth-century humanist J.C. Scaliger considered the materials of pastoral to be manifold. These materials constitute a forest of which poets were conscious and to which they often returned. To “meditate the woodland muse” as Tityrus does in the first *Eclogue* means to contemplate the forest through the ongoing rehearsal of a tradition, *poesis* as the working of materials. In the forest of literary history, just as in the Library of Alexandria, poets become literary historians. Roman poets were no less conscious of their belatedness (eight centuries separate Virgil from Homer) than modern ones and drew heavily on the textual resources of the past. As Michael Lipka has noted, *silua* is the principal metapoetic term in the *Eclogues*. *Silua* stands in for an impossible canon: shards of pottery, anonymous papyri and ruined villas. Try as you might, you will not find Virgil in these woods, no originary text-in-itself.

The question of origins is a troubled one, but posited answers nevertheless make for a good story. By most accounts, pastoral has its literary origins in a collection of Greek poems by Theocritus called the *Idylls*. A Sicilian writing in Alexandria in the third century BCE, Theocritus was one of several Hellenistic librarian-poets who rejected epic in favour of short but intricately and self-consciously allusive poems. Virgil also moved to the city to write poems for a wealthy patron, but it was from Cisalpine Gaul to Rome, it was the 40s BCE and the poems were in Latin. Here is the beginning:

*Tityrus, tu patulas recubas sub tegmine fagi
siluestrem tenui Musam meditaris auena;

tu, Tityrus, lentus in umbra
testam formosam resonare doces Amaryllida siluas. (1.1–5)*

*Tityrus, reclining beneath the spreading beech’s cover,
you rehearse the sylvan muse on your slender reed-pipe,
we are leaving the borders of our homeland and its sweet fields.

We are fleeing our homeland; you, Tityrus, easy in the shade, teach the forest to echo “lovely Amaryllis.”

Much has been made of the echoing terrain of the *Eclogues*. While an echo must have a source, it is not continuous with that source. Echoes are phenomena of imprecise repetition (they are always multiple); here they are the effects of intertextual relations in the forest of literary history. Nevertheless, the ultimate source of pastoral remains unknowable, because, like writing, echoes figure an absence, a lost original. In the Latin idiom, an echo is *imago vocis*, an image or reproduction of the voice. So writing itself consists in echoes, the gathered images of voices long vanished. Tityrus’ voice is not heard to sing “lovely Amaryllis”, rather, the phrase is heard as echoed in the forest, in the materials, in the text. As Marie Despont argues, the quality of resonance is inseparable from poetry. She writes: “L’incantation de Virgile, tout au fond, est une résonance.” This means: the singing of Virgil (Virgil’s song actualized as a reader’s song) is a spell that is from its origins and all the way down a resounding, the conjuring of afterimages, indeterminate like an atmosphere.

In his *Life of Virgil*, written in the fourth century, Donatus reports that the *Eclogues* achieved great popularity upon publication and were frequently performed on stage. He also recounts Seneca’s story about the poet Julius Montanus, who was wont to say that the text of the *Aeneid* was lifeless compared to Virgil’s recitation of it. While the *Eclogues* emphasize through intertextuality, self-referentiality and the trope of inscription the generically foundational role of writing (pastoral’s groundless grounds), the contemporaneity of Roman poetry was often aural, as the anecdotes from

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Timothy Chandler
Donatus indicate. In a contentious essay published in 1927 entitled “Voces Paginarum,” Josef Balogh argues that for ancient Greeks and Romans reading was only ever done out loud and was theorized as a threefold unity of seeing, hearing and understanding. While this hypothesis has been vigorously debated (and so, it seems, refuted), there is no doubt that the reading of literary texts aloud was popular among educated Romans, just as it is among readers of poetry today. Indeed, for aristocratic Romans, the experience of poetry, both Greek and Latin, frequently occurred by way of performance, with friends gathering to hear a lector’s recital from a papyrus scroll. Whether or not one accepts Balogh’s historical claim about the practices of reading in ancient Rome, the title of the essay—Voces paginarum, voices of pages—is a formulation that resonates with the Virgilian materials I have been gathering. An echo is the reflection of sound by material and the page provides the material against which the voice of reading rebounds; it is the forest that is both in and of the book, the forest pulped for cellulose and the forest of literary history, of the images of other voices. In Eclogue 6 the poem refers to its own inscription on the page as it stands in relation to the silus resonans:

\[\text{... si quis tamen haec quoque, si quis captus amore leget, te nostrae, Vare, myricae, te nemus omne canet; nec Phoebo gratior ulla est quam sibi quae Vari praescripsit pagina nomen. (6.9–12)}\]

The grove will only sing of Varus (a politician to whom the poem is dedicated), which is to say, the materials of the forest can only be made to echo, when the poem is read. With each reading, the page is retrospectively reinscribed with what is already written on it as the image of a voice. Balogh’s voice of the page, then, is actually an echo, not a voice as such but an image of a voice, the reflected voice of a reader, a voice that is different from itself. My voice, your voice, nobody’s voice: the voice of a page.

For a modern reader of Virgil’s Latin, the voice reflected from the page is indeed a strange one. Not only does a reader of the Eclogues become, like the poet in the poems (e.g., a shepherd) and the poet of the poems (i.e., Virgil), a bucolizer; but, moreover, the strangeness of such an encounter with the self immediately cancels the reader’s bucolic transformation: there is always something uncanny in an echo. The dialectic of strangeness and familiarity, self and other, closeness and distance, characterizes my own experience of reading Latin. The canonization of classical texts as originary means that I look into them narcissistically, desiring to see something of myself. The paratextual format of a Penguin Classic or Loeb should reassure me of the continuity of the text with my previous experience of literary books. When I begin reading, however, the self reflected loses its fidelity, is perceptible only as the voice of Echo. It is an experience of aura in Walter Benjamin’s sense of it: the appearance of distance in spite of proximity. In the case of Latin, which is no-one’s native language, the considerable difference between the voice and its reflected image opens a gap characterized by an uncanny aura in which we seem to hear our breaking voices sink into history and speak back from the past but in our own language made strange. When I hear the echo of my own voice in Latin, I realize that I am not fully present to myself, that I have failed to recognize my own image, the image of my voice.

I turn now to the second figure: arbor inscripta. To inscribe trees, to write (or write onto) trees: in the forest of literary history, the tree is written on (that is, written) again and again. From privileging orality, pastoral depends upon writing even more so than upon the echo, yet knows fully their fragility. All the trees in the resounding forest, all the materials echoing with the voices of countless readers, stand as trees inscribed. The figure has Alexandrian precedents in poems by Callimachus and Theocritus, but later Roman poets also wrote on trees. Calpurnius Siculus (first century), for example, makes the connection between page and tree explicit: *Sed quaenam sacra descripta est pagina fago* (“But what sacred page is written out on this beech tree?”). Nemesianus (third century) emphasizes the metaphor even more by playing on the double sense of *liber* (meaning both “book” and “bark”): *ceraurus . . . inciso servans mea carmina libro* (“a cherry tree, keeping my songs on its inscribed bark/book”). The instance I would like to discuss in detail, however, occurs in Eclogue 10, a love elegy dedicated to the contemporary poet Cornelius Gallus and taking as its subject matter his “loves,” his *Amores*: a collection of poems Gallus is supposed to have written, of which only a handful of lines survives despite their huge influence on Augustan poets such as Virgil, Tibullus and Propertius. The poem has Gallus in the wilds of Arcadia, lamenting unrequited love:
certum est in siluis, inter spelaea ferarum
malle pati tenorese meos incidere amores
arboribus: crescent illae, crescetis, amores. (10.50–54)

I have decided in the forests among the caves of wild beasts
to suffer and to carve my loves on young
trees: as they grow so you will grow, loves.

Virgil puts Gallus in the thick of the silua. As Conte has argued, the generic
tension between pastoral and love elegy informs the whole of Eclogue 10.4
The invention of pastoral elegy occurs when an unwitting Gallus, Virgil’s
Gallus, a Roman, uneasily colonizes the Greek silua of Arcadia through Latin
inscription. More than just carving a love, teaching the woods the imago
uocis of his lover’s name (in this case) Lycoris, Gallus inscribes his poems,
the Amores, into the forest in which he has chosen to suffer these loves, these
same poems. Gallus writes onto a tree and thereby writes a tree. It is not only
the case that the inscribed tree in Eclogue 10 stands in for the written page
(as Breed argues); it also works the other way around: the written page (this
page) stands in for the inscribed tree of the silua.

Writing is no permanent monument, but an ordering of fragments; no-
where is this better exemplified than in the case of classical texts, which
often survive only partially in several different versions, requiring scholarly
reconstitution to become legible. The irony of line 54—“as they grow so
you will grow, loves”—lies in the fact that next to nothing remains of these
particular inscribed trees, of Gallus’s Amores.5 Virgil’s allusion is not only
elusion, outplaying a reader, but elision (instances of which occur on lines
52 and 53), which is to say, it is written but unreadable. The text inscribed
in Eclogue 10 is but cannot be read as Gallus’s. With the verb incidere (“to
inscribe”) an incision is made both in the text—meos . . . amores, “my . . .
loves,” Gallus’s poems—and in the forest in which the text functions (silua),
that is in teneris . . . arboribus, “young . . . trees,” which themselves contain
the loves. As the object of inscription, that is, of the verb incidere, the mate-
rial worked, the amores and the arbores, are already being rewritten, that is,
written over, by Virgil.

By Virgil? Who exactly writes this Eclogue? Not Gallus, who is written into
the poem as its poet. But not Virgil either, who is similarly written into the
history of literature as its author. Rather, a reflection; not me, certainly not,
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS
