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The Home Front Waste Land Williams, Zukofsky, and Epistemology after Eliot

How will the dead bury their dead? —Louis Zukofsky

In the wake of World War One, or at least at the end of the first interval of world-wide war that has characterized lived experience since 1914, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) happened to poetry the way that James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) happened to prose. But what exactly was that *happening*—what did it mean? There's no sustainable way to doubt that *The Waste Land* is a powerful poem, regardless of whether you think its effects/affects on the field of poetry have been positive, negative, over- or under-underemphasized or –recognized, or what-have-you. The real project is figuring out *what* the impact was—what the *power* of the poem is. This essay will argue that some of the most interesting effects it has had have been philosophical—epistemological. I want to look at two (of many) poetic works written in (direct) response to *The Waste Land*, William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All* (1923) and Louis Zukofsky's "Poem beginning 'The'" (1926/28¹). This paper isn't about Eliot; it's about Williams and Zukofsky. But their pieces, I'll argue, take up the WWI-inflicted problem of epistemology Eliot's poem foregrounds, attempting to offer home-front reconciliations of Eliot's problematic of *inside/outside* or *subjective/objective*—*imaginative/real*—in the space opened up by *The Waste Land*.

With regard to form, the three following sections of this essay will discuss Eliot, Williams, and Zukofsky, respectively, with the first functioning as a scaffold

¹ Written/published

for the latter two. In the first, I'll flesh out a brief introductory framing of *The Waste Land*—less a reading than a suggestion of a way to think about the poem—focusing heavily on Eliot's philosophical work within (and without) the poem. The next two sections, significantly heavier, will focus on readings of Williams' and Zukofsky's answers to Eliot and the problematization of knowing his poem incurs. Most specifically, I'm interested in the way that both poets' works conceptualize the relation of the imagination to reality: similarly yet paradoxically in opposition to the way Eliot's poem does, but also in a way that pre-empts Wallace Stevens' exploration of the *imagination/reality* tension. Toward the close of my Williams section, I'll introduce and briefly discuss Stevens' *Necessary Angel: Essays on the Imagination and Reality*, which *Spring and All* pre-empts. Stevens' collection will surface, as well, in my section on Zukofsky. The titles of each section, you'll notice, are jokey derivatives of lines from the poetry I'm reading in this essay. You'll also notice that each section of this essay, with the exception of this introduction, incorporates a portion of correspondence between the poet I'm discussing and Ezra Pound.

On the one hand, Pound's letters are as cryptic and interesting as anything he or any other (post)modernist has written, and worthy of study in their own right. But on the other hand, I'm using Pound to contextualize my readings because no real discussion of poetry between WWI and WWII would be complete without at least a nod toward how he "was the force upon which many depended and with which all had to contend" (Wright *viii*). The motivation behind my Eliotic scaffolding and Poundian segues is to focus on Modernist poets other than Pound and Eliot without completely disregarding the influence of either on poetry being written—globally—in the context of WWI. And the motivation to revisit poetry written at the ostensible end of WWI is that, in a half-poetic sense, *we're just now entering its hundredth year*². An alternate title for this essay could have been "World War One at 100," following the month-long "Burroughs at 100" posthumous celebration of Uncle Bill's life occurring right now (April 2014) in New York City. "WWI at 100," though, wouldn't be a retrospective; rather, it'd be something in the way of a centennial, a recognition of continuation—a call for help. The epistemological problems of a world ravaged by WWI are as relevant today, as it becomes history's second Hundred Years' War, as they were

2 Was the interval of 'peace' between WWI and WWII a gap between two distinct wars? Or, rather, might we think of it as a pause in one, longer war? I want to stretch this somewhat tired question's jurisdiction to cover global violence since WWII's ostensible end, up to and including current U.S. militaristic presence in the Middle East.

approximately 100 years ago. I'll turn now to *The Waste Land*, a documentation of what, exactly, those problems were—*are*.

*Philprof, thy lectures were to us...*³

In a letter to Eliot (December 24, 1921), commenting on an early draft of *The Waste Land*, Pound writes: “Complimenti, you bitch. I am wracked by the seven jealousies, and cogitating an excuse for always exuding my deformative secretions in my own stuff, and never getting an outline” (“181” 169). In response (January 1922), Eliot remarks: “Complimenti appreciated, as have been excessively depressed” (*Untitled* 170). In the midst of an underhanded complement/insult, that is, not unlike Eliot’s own dedication to Pound—“*il miglior fabro*”—the latter (ironically?) expresses his jealousy of the former’s ability by foregrounding his own lack of formative content and outlines. *Outlines of what?* Is the obvious question, but the word “cogitating,” as opposed to “thinking about,” “generating,” or any number of synonymic formulations, is important: it signifies within a formal (formative?) philosophical register, invoking the *cogito* of Descartes and the whole tradition of Modern philosophy flowing from it. The rest of this paper, after this section, will be concerned with Williams’ and Zukofsky’s responses to/within the epistemological investigations/space of *The Waste Land*. This section, taking its cue from the “complimenti” Eliot appreciated receiving from Pound, will focus on the philosophical work in the poem.

First, though, I’ll turn to the nominally philosophical work Eliot the PhD candidate—in Philosophy—was up to prior to *The Waste Land*’s publication. One of the central problems in Eliot’s dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, is the basis of knowledge, or epistemology. The opening paragraph of the dissertation denies this focus, however, in typically shrewd Eliotic fashion: it claims that the usual objects of epistemological investigation “fall outside the scope of [his] attempt” (*K&E* 15). This disclaimer is typical Eliotic possum-playing, since the following pages analyze precisely the interplay of “the experience” and “the real” as each relates to “knowledge.” While Eliot the (almost professional) philosopher is certainly *not* practicing Phenomenology in his dissertation, experience does play a central role in the accumulation of data that refers to what is *real*. Eliot’s playing with the concepts of subject and object is ultimately aimed toward the question: *what can one say one knows?*—and the corollary question: *how?* To deny the investigation its proper nomenclature is to play a semantical game, however, and Eliot’s essay enters the realm of a knowledge-

3 See: “Poem beginning ‘The,’” lines 168-172, quoted in full below.

concerning-knowledge whether or not he shrewdly denies the “epistemological investigation.”

If Eliot’s theorizing is epistemological, however, this does not mean that he *solves* the basic question of *how* one can *know* that he or she *knows* something—he hasn’t, necessarily, fleshed out a neat and complete (formal) theory of knowledge. Rather, it implies that he is *asking* about knowing—that he is concerned with it as a problem. Eliot sums up the epistemological problem as follows: “Experience is certainly more real than anything else, but any experience demands reference to something real which lies outside of *that* experience” (*K&E* 21). Meaning: the clear distinction between objective things in the field of knowledge and the subjective consciousness which knows them is not concrete and obvious. Rather, this distinction, between subject and object, is the hard question itself. The question of what is “real” or “true” will depend on where reality is located: either “in” the interior experience or “on” the exterior phenomenon.

It would be dangerous to assume that Eliot picked up his poetry pen with the same *exact* motives in mind as when he picked up his philosophy pen. That would be a narrow reduction. But the hard problem of epistemology Eliot stumbles upon in his study of F. H. Bradley *does* turn up in *The Waste Land*, if in a different way. The epistemological question of the poem is focused particularly on the *knowing* of divine experience. The poem, if it is to establish a knowledge of the divine, must generate a methodology for justifying that data *as* knowledge—that is, as a held conception of what is real. Subjectivity proves problematic toward this end, precisely since the experience *does* depend on the phenomenon, and the phenomenon of God does not present itself in the present: a world in which the combination WWI and Spanish Influenza have killed millions, and “the burial of the dead” (the title of the first section of the poem) is central to quotidian lived experience—reality.

Despite the depravity and gloom of *The Waste Land*’s first section, though, one disillusioned lover within it, “neither living nor dead,” finds himself “looking into the heart of light, the silence” (Eliot *TWL* 39-41). The conflict in Eliot’s poem revolves around this sense of spiritual yearning in the face of despair. Eliot raises the question of Theodicy in *The Waste Land*, attempting to reconcile some notion of the divine with the lamentable human condition. In another sense, Eliot is searching for what exactly the word “God” refers to in a world wherein its traditional antecedent is nowhere to be found. It is a case study in theistic faith that seeks at all costs to affirm its legitimacy. Eliot takes up the position of Nietzsche’s madman, frantically searching, relentlessly asking, “whither is God?” (Nietzsche 181). Whereas Nietzsche’s atheism (anti-theism?) and Eliot’s own Christianity

may seem irreconcilable⁴, I want to suggest that *The Waste Land's* theological-epistemological project is Nietzschean in form: it takes up the anti-logocentric character of Nietzsche's own *gaya scienza* or *gay science*.

Unable to find the divine in the present, Eliot enters into a metaphysical/epistemological exercise in pursuit of God. To suit his purpose, he conducts two large-scale thought-experiments, first eliminating a subjective, experience-based epistemology of human experience, and afterward negating all reference to an objective presence of a natural world outside of experience. Eliot the philosopher, after denying both absolutist subjective and objective accounts of the meaning of existence, finally poses God as a hypothesis to disprove his own nihilistic findings. Eliot invents God in order to believe in him—in order to have a central concept to affirm, a “hidden Yes” that bestows reality with its meaning (Nietzsche 340). In a word, Eliot's affirmative belief is a projection. However, within the framework of Nietzsche's *gaya scienza* or what I want to call Eliot's own *gay religion*, “projection” is not pejorative, since “projection” and “truth” are not antonyms, but synonyms. But since this essay is about Williams' and Zukofky's poetry, and not Eliot's, my claims in this section are admittedly sweeping. Regardless, I want to suggest an epistemological way into *The Waste Land* that a larger project might consider more subtly and concretely.

The first thought-experiment Eliot engages in his poem is a negation of subjectivity by way of time travel. The reverse-chronological structure of *The Waste Land* plunges its reader immediately into the most recent events within the poem's timeline, only to end in a time and space wholly prior to the rest of the poem. This is to say that the chronological beginning of *The Waste Land* is actually its final section, *What the Thunder Said*. Eliot effects his temporal displacement by using the language of the epochs he underwrites to make up the fabric of his poetry—to get outside of the present moment, wherein “God is dead” and “belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable” (Nietzsche 279). Although it does not stay there long, *The Waste Land* begins in a wasted Europe of 1922.

⁴ In Eliot's 1915 book review, “The Philosophy of Nietzsche by A. Wolf,” he criticizes/appreciates Nietzsche's work. F. N. Lees points to Nietzsche's having anticipated Eliot's idea of the “objective correlative”—and, incidentally, to both theorists' having located the device in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; at least one translator has rendered Nietzsche's phrase “*adeguata Objectivation*” in English as “objective correlative” (Lees 387). John Zicolsky foregrounds the similarities between Nietzsche's and Eliot's aesthetics, foregrounding both thinkers' concerns about the role of history/tradition in artistic practice, and ultimately categorizes Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent* as a “Nietzschean essay” (Zicolsky 31).

The setting of the last section of Eliot's poem, on the other hand, is *before* "torchlight. . .sweaty faces. . .silence. . .shouting. . .crying. . ."—or, human existence (322-328). The province of *What the Thunder Said*, and the chronological beginning of *The Waste Land*, is precisely the "empty chapel" of a pre-human earth; it is "only the wind's home," a natural setting, free of the nurture of society (389). The place Eliot travels to in *What the Thunder Said* is objective, in that it exists independently, "outside" of human knowledge of it. This objective setting, however, arises out of a negation of human subjectivity that operates on both an ontological and a qualitative level. The poem's final—or first—use of "Unreal" acts as a summative evaluation of the persons and peoples of the arctic journey, the great cities, as well as the ambiguous hordes "swarming/ Over endless plains" (360-377). The word "Unreal" refers to the whole of human experience; in the time-space of *What the Thunder Said*, humanity—subjectivity—*is* unreal. It is not present; it does not exist. He negates the unpleasant present in search of some objective, somehow superior presence that exists without and *in spite of* humans.

However, the arrival at the objective is the arrival at a meaningless totality. Arriving in *What The Thunder Said*, having completed his nihilation of the apparent, Eliot is left *only* with the natural world. He negates all possible dualistic conceptions of the world's matter; this pre-historic setting is unadulterated truth, unfiltered by the lagging senses to which it might *appear*. And yet, primordial earth is "*Oed' und leer das Meer*"—empty and desolate as the sea (42). It is a parallel landscape of the waste land of the present—the setting of *The Burial of the Dead*—only without the presence of humans. Paradoxically, there are physical phenomena present, but no interpreting agents to whom they *might* appear. That is, things are still *apparent*, even if not subjectively. The objects of the world are still *there*; it is just that they are not there *for* anyone to experience them.

Therefore, what Eliot arrives at is essentially the same manifold of data he has departed from in the earlier (subjective) sections of the poem. The earth is still its physical matter, although this matter is arranged in a different order. The carbon and hydrogen of primordial earth are no less "unreal," by Eliot's own standard, than that of *The Burial of the Dead*. Eliot has only rid himself of the language (all language) to name them as such. The arrival at the objective has eliminated the interpretation of the physical, but not the physical itself. The sensory capacity to witness matter and the mental capacity to process it are missing. It is in this climate, then, without a listener, that thunder speaks, and is somehow *heard* as the voice of God. The second thought-experiment Eliot engages in *The Waste Land* is, incidentally, a negation of the objectivity he has come to find. Although

Eliot escapes the present moment to find an objective guarantor of divine presence, God's existence appears to depend upon Man's.

God is dead to *What the Thunder Said* until man is born in the section. Until the human ear exists, to hear/interpret "DA," God is as dead as (s)he was in *The Burial of the Dead*. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Eliot *does* lament the "death of God," and it is the attempt at a negation of subjectivity, not of absolutism, that is the source of Eliot's gaiety. Eliot's first thought experiment is thus an attempt to undo the "death of God," to arrive back at an objectivist or absolutist landscape—to reverse the terminology, Eliot attempts to enact a "death of Man" in order to revivify the idea of God. This first thought experiment fails, however, as Eliot is left in a barren wasteland with no objective evidence of God, nor the capacity to subjectively experience it. The failure of Eliot's first experiment is an evaporation⁵ thereof objective epistemology. Eliot's ability to hear sound at all in *What The Thunder Said* evaporates the objective into the ear of the subject; his ability to see things evaporates the objective into the eye of the subject.

Further, it's feasible that the thunder's soliloquy is one among many noises Eliot hears on primordial earth. "The wind's home," after all, as well as the thunder; and the wind, too, probably speaks (389). To be precise, it likely whistles. Eliot does not, however, hear a passage from a sonata of Bach in the wind's friction against the earth; Eliot does not hear the wind at all. In the midst of an objective totality, Eliot's pre-historic listener takes a subjective stance in *choosing* what he will hear. Thus, the hypothetical rejection of subjectivity fails to yield the result at which it aims. Of course, this is because Eliot the philosopher hasn't escaped the human experience; he has merely conducted a thought-experiment. However thorough his philosophy has been, Eliot the poet arrives at his un-human destination *as a human*. The thought that he could witness phenomena without being a witness is not only contradictory; it is meaningless. What the poem does do, however, is set up a tension of objective phenomena *outside of* witness and the incorporation to the *inside world* of experience by way of witness—a tension from which it can't sustainably escape—from which *poetry*, if Eliot is right about his current moment, can't escape.

⁵ Emphasizing the word "evaporation" in Eliot's critique of Nietzsche and the chemical language of *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Zicolsky foregrounds the corrosive nature of metaphor in Eliot's writing (Zicolsky 30).

*Spring is the cruelest season...*⁶

In a letter dated February 9th 1923—just short of two months after the first publication of *The Waste Land* in book form—Ezra Pound writes to William Carlos Williams: “I do NOT advise you to pay for having vol. of poems printed. You can’t sell a vol. [*sic*]” (“194” 185). If Pound was talking about *Spring and All*, which would make chronological sense, his prescience is striking. In the introduction to New Directions’ recent (2011) re-publication of the poem/collection/manifesto in a facsimile of the original standalone volume, C. D. Wright notes that *Spring and All* was originally printed by the publisher of *Ulysses*, but “in an edition of three hundred, most of which went undistributed” (Wright *viii*). In the context of the “hide tide in poetry,” or 1922, as well as 1923—in which Wallace Stevens, Mina Loy, and Jean Toomer published masterworks, Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein were about to publish two more, and, finally, W. B. Yeats won the Nobel Prize—it is understandable that *Spring and All* might have been overlooked or drowned out, if you will. But Wright sees Eliot’s poem in particular as the “head blow to William Carlos Williams”—“head blow” or “head-y blow,” if you will, makes sense in an argument that foregrounds Eliot’s philosophical impact on other poets (*viii*). In this section, I’ll dig into how *Spring and All* answers Eliot’s epistemological problems, even if Williams’ own volume remained relatively underground for most of his life.

Before diving into my own understanding of *Spring and All*, I want to consider a few scholars’ approaches to Williams as an epistemologist and/or in conversation with Eliot. In what he positions as a “prolegomena to . . . a study” of “how Williams developed his separation from the rival modernist poets with the poems of *Spring and All*,” Philip Bufithis focuses on Williams’ “Poem” (as titled in *Dial* in 1923—“I” in *Spring and All*) as the Doctor’s answer to *The Waste Land* (216). Bufithis foregrounds the “redemptive” quality of Williams’ verse, citing the Doctor’s enthusiastic emphasis of the remarkable distinction of the local or everyday as contrary to Eliot’s focus on Tradition, religiosity, and metaphysics as distinct from the quotidian (219). Bufithis’ claims are part of a long tradition that reads Williams as a Modernist of *place* as distinct from the High Modernism of Eliot.

Equally important to Williams’ emphasis on place is “the inevitable flux of the seeing eye toward measuring itself by the world it inhabits” (Williams 26). For the Doctor, as Bufithis re-phrases him, “the *eye seeing*” is more important than “what the eye sees” (Bufithis 218). In contrast with Eliot, who attempts to epistemologically escape human witnessing but keep the thing witnessed, Williams

6 See: “April is the cruelest month...” (Eliot *The Waste Land* 1).

privileges the embodied activity of witness—the *hearing of* “DA,”—over the data it generates. In short, he is a Modernist of the *body*. Bruce Holsapple foregrounds Williams’ posthumously published *The Embodiment of Knowledge* as central to the Doctor’s philosophy. He cites Williams’ emphasis on embodiment as well as his “attack on the scientific and epistemological basis of current educational practices” (Holsapple 60). Epistemologically, such a tradition would read Williams’ poetics as phenomenological for its privileging of experiential knowing over knowledge generated by philosophy or science. Indeed, Williams positions his work thoroughly in the realm of reflection upon and theorization of experience, claiming that “there is work to be done in the creation of new forms, new names for experience” (44). But this is a position Holsapple understands as a debt owed to and/or a contention shared with Alfred North Whitehead, rather than any nominal phenomenologist⁷ (59-60).

Moreover, what Williams takes issue with, primarily, is abstraction—abstraction as an escape from the here/now of embodied experience (thereof reality—more on “reality” later). Whitehead’s epistemology, according to Holsapple, is concerned with a knowledge that is not only relative, but dynamic. The theory that Whitehead calls “provisional Realism” is one in which “Given volume A, A’s relationship to other volumes B, D, and D are aspects of A” (Holsapple 62). Meaning: A’s relationships to B, C, and D are *part of A*; the *abstraction* or isolation of A from its context(s) would “destroy the very essence of A”—another way of saying that any given phenomenon doesn’t/can’t exist without (its relationships to) other given phenomena. But this was the epistemological objective of *The Waste Land*: to (via temporal abstraction) isolate the existence of a pre-human earth from (all relationships with) the inhabited-albeit-inhabitable world of 1922.

Wright defines the effect of *The Waste Land* on Williams as “useful” if “painful,” claiming it illustrated a model of motion—backward—against which Williams could position his own poetic motion—forward (*viii*). In “Chapter 19” of *Spring and All*, Williams writes:

If I could say what is in my mind in Sanscrit or even Latin I would do so. But I cannot. I speak for the integrity of the soul and the greatness of life’s inanity ; the formality of its boredom ; the ortho-doxy of its stupidity. Kill ! kill ! let there be fresh meat... (5)

⁷ It is curious that Holsapple doesn’t put Williams in conversation with Merleau-Ponty, the great 20th Century thinker of the body. An interesting study might also chart points of similarity between Williams’/Whitehead’s critiques of conventional scientism with Sartre’s critique of psychologism and other forms of “seriousness” in *Being and Nothingness*.

Here, as elsewhere in *Spring and All*, Williams invokes Eliot's poem by foregrounding its use of ancient languages alongside English. Moreover, Williams also invokes the violent rhetoric of (Italian) Futurism immediately after his denial of Eliot's model of speaking (or writing). Both gestures position Eliot as representative of a past—the *Past*?—which Williams is anxious for “the great future” to violently replace (4). It is a past-as-abstract—abstraction from present, lived experience of the *now* of America—perhaps “inanity. . . boredom. . . stupidity”—Eliot also abstracted himself from *qua* expatriate. Further, Williams nationalizes the present's/future's relationship to the abstracted past, positioning “we the people of the United States...going to Europe armed to kill every man” (4). Thereby, he invokes the preamble to the Constitution to suggest a new Constitution of American poetics.

Spring and All thus calls for “a new sort of murder,” one of love, one that will “make leberwurst . . . Bratwurst” of “the English, the Irish, the French, the Germans, the Italians and the rest” (5). As alarming as this hyperbolic language may be, Williams' recourse to metaphors of meat products reveals the subtle, ironic character of the “new sort of murder” he proposes. This killing is less analogous to genocide and more congruent to hunting, fishing, or any number of other (albeit still ethically ambiguous⁸) forms of killing that lead to consumption. I add further that the end-game of this project of violence is not elimination of what it “kills,” but rather continuation—digestion or absorption. In contrast to the “THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM”—Bufithis remarks that this exact phrase is “coined mainly with Eliot in mind”—Williams' method of reference to Tradition is not regurgitative or classroom-bound (quotation-laden) but rather one of cultural consumption and expressive comprehension (Williams 15, Bufithis 221).

For Williams, “Art becomes ‘most human’ when it eschews copying,” and “writing must stay primarily concerned with the organization of its own materials” (Holsapple 85). Donald Wellman reads Williams as pre-emptive of postmodern poetry (specifically, Ron Silliman's brand thereof), especially since the Doctor “delights in shuttling among *part*-quotations and paraphrases,” notably from “avant-garde sources” as opposed to attic ones, “constructing a form of *meta*-commentary” on the present moment (306, my emphasis). “Meta” is important here, since Eliot certainly positions himself, with *The Waste Land*, as a commentator—though on Canon/Tradition moreso than on the current moment and its cultural production.

8 I understand that one argument on behalf of animal rights activists positions hunting as genocide. Further, the rhetoric of mass human-hunting, ostensibly for cannibalistic ends, is hard to justify. But as a metaphor it *is* distinct from one of purely wasteful genocide solely aimed at eradication.

Instead, Eliot uses Canon to understand/represent the present, but escapes from the present into an abstracted past made up of Tradition. In relation to Canon/Tradition, Eliot is less *alongside* it (observing/expressing) than he is *within* it ((re)presenting). Wellman notes that “Pastiche, not argument,” is what distinguishes *Spring and All* from the work of other Modernists (306). Williams is alongside—*with*—his subject matter, the things of his poems, whether theoretical prose wanderings or wheelbarrows in line-breaks. And these things are not abstractions from the world, nor world-ly, but world themselves.

On the one hand, the poem sections of *Spring and All*, moreso than the prose sections⁹, are concerned with concrete things. But this is not to say that the poetry is devoid of criticism or theory—nor is it to say that theory and criticism are *abstract* for Williams, or distinct from world. The line-broken sections are all but “Drunk with goats or pavements,” as the poem/section “V” says “Beastly humanity” is, but also teaming with meta-commentary (23). In “V” Williams implicitly talks to *The Waste Land*, taking issue with “Hate his [Eliot’s] of the night and the day/ of flowers and rocks” (23). Here, Williams reads Eliot’s abstraction as a hatred of both night and day—both the icy gloom of winter and the violent cruelty of spring. Williams agrees with Eliot, though, that

...Nothing
is gained by saying the night breeds
murder—It is the classical mistake
The day
(23)

—Again, substitute “winter” for “the night” and “spring” for “The day.” Since setting of *Spring and All* is spring, then “The day” is (subjective) consciousness, or presence-to phenomena in the world *vis-à-vis* being awake. Following the binary pairing, nighttime would be objectivity or abstraction. I read these lines as an explanatory re-phrasing of the first few lines of *The Waste Land*, or an agreement between Williams and Eliot that “April is the cruelest month,” as opposed to December or January. Cruel because the guise of re-birth and continuation attempts to hide

⁹ All sections of *Spring and All* are poetry; “poem” here signifies writing with imposed line-breaks, whereas “prose” signifies wrap-around lines, or writing with line-breaks left to machinations other than the author’s.

the repetitive killing that makes resurrection (perhaps re-generation for secular Williams).

Williams' ostensible agreement with Eliot, on the cruelty of day/spring (or contemporary lived experience), plays out in a way that shows up the two poets' epistemological discord. Picking up where I left him, Williams writes:

The day

All that enters in another person
all grass, all blackbirds flying
all azalea trees in flower
salt winds—

Sold to them men knock blindly together
splitting their heads open
(23-24)

Indeed, these lines further explain the cruelty of “The day,” or spring. When it “enters,” or when it is “sold to...men,” it is the catalyst of those processes “splitting their heads open”—in the context of 1923, WWI and Spanish Influenza. More importantly, however, these lines lead into the following conclusion:

That is why boxing matches and
Chinese poems are the same
(24)

Such a formulation would be impossible for Eliot! Or, better, it wouldn't be impossible, but distasteful.

Unlike Eliot, Williams doesn't “hate . . . the night and the day” (23). He doesn't note the present as a point from which to escape backward in time. Rather, he understands the equalizing consequences of spring as the starting point of a promising future. The whole of *The Waste Land*, on the other hand, is an attempt to undo the situation(s) that would equate “boxing matches and/ Chinese poetry” (24). I wrote above that the gaiety of Eliot's project is located in the attempt to escape subjectivist epistemology. I'll add here that for Eliot Canon or Tradition, though human, paradoxically provides an escape from subjectivity into the Objective. For Williams, on the contrary, the (epistemological) gaiety *is* subjectivity. Privileging

nothing but “the seeing eye” watching the boxing match, understanding it as equal to poetry—as *poetry*—is the epistemological project Williams uses to answer Eliot’s.

You might object that Eliot privileges “the seeing eye” too, or at least the hearing ear, since it is after all the act of hearing/interpreting “DA” that knowledge of divinity ultimately depends upon in *The Waste Land*. But here Williams’ prose is helpful in further outlining his distinction from Eliot:

The inevitable flux of the seeing eye toward measuring itself by the world it inhabits can only result in himself crushing humiliation *unless the individual raise to some approximate co-extension with the universe*. This is possible by aid of the imagination. Only through the agency of this force...
(27, my emphasis)

That is, whereas Eliot’s project seeks (unsuccessfully) to distinguish individual from universe in order to attain/guarantee knowledge about the latter, Williams’ project understands this distinction as the problem—the source of “crushing humiliation.” For Williams, the individual is co-extensive with universe/world: he/she is always-already world.

And the imagination, belonging to the individual, is also coextensive with the world—is also always-already world. But the imagination is less a belonging of the individual than *a part* of the individual—a “force” or faculty of his/her body. When Williams writes that “Only through the imagination is the advance of intelligence possible,” he doesn’t distinguish between imaginative knowing and the embodied knowing his later theoretical texts would privilege (28). The imagination as body—body as imagination—rather than as an agent of abstraction, is the guarantor of knowledge concerning reality. The relationship of reality and the imagination, then, doesn’t cut across borders: imagination and reality are not separate, but coextensive. For Williams, the imagination *is* reality. By way of comparison, this contradicts Eliot’s usage of imagination to paradoxically escape from reality but somehow then explain it. And Williams’ framework also contradicts, if it shares ground with it, that of Wallace Stevens. My next section will re-position the latter in conversation with Zukofsky. But I’ll end this section by drawing a distinction between Stevens’ and Williams’ chartings of the relationship between the imagination and reality.

To begin with, Stevens doesn’t position reality and the imagination as one and the same. Speaking at Princeton in 1942, Stevens remarks that “for more than ten years now, there has been an extraordinary pressure of news,” that is, “the pressure

of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation” (20). Stevens codifies this tension as the conflict of reality—“external,” outside—and the imagination—“contemplation,” inside—arguing that the two act as forces pushing against one another. The imagination is “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without,” or reality (36). The artist must use his or her imagination to push back against reality, which itself has a crushing effect upon the imagination. Although he claims that the two poles are “equal and inseparable,” he nonetheless understands that “[his] own remarks about resisting or evading the pressure of reality mean escapism, if analyzed” (30). Although Stevens works to erase the pejorative connotation of “escapism,” his system nonetheless separates the real and the imaginative as distinct entities and privileges one above the other. Furthermore, he claims as “fundamental” that “the poet is not attached to reality” or “does not adhere to reality” (31).

The “possible poet” Stevens attempts to construct “must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination”—a statement at the opposite end of the epistemological spectrum to that of Williams (23). The phrase “place it in his imagination” here is helpful; it suggests a location or jurisdiction of the imagination as distinct from the location of the real. This distinction is also present in Eliot’s formation: the attempt to get away from subjectivity is an attempt to get away from the realm of the imagination and into the realm of reality. For Williams, however, there is one realm. In his formulation, the imagination is not a force at odds with that of reality. The imagination and reality are not separate (*but equal*) and interdependent in the way Stevens positions them, but rather homogenous, homoousios: “In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality” (27). That is, the imagination’s project is not similar, congruent, nor opposed to that of reality—as a force, it is “exactly what” reality is. Though Stevens’ later dynamic might return to an Eliotic tension of reality/imagination, Williams’ more contemporary answer to Eliot’s epistemological problem is to refuse the heterogeneity of imaginative and real substance altogether. The imagination isn’t the key to knowledge because it gets outside of reality; rather, it is the guarantor of truth concerning the real because, as embodiment, it *too* is real.

○ ○ ○ ○ that Eliotic rag—¹⁰

In keeping with my use of Pound’s letters as context, I’ll turn to another he wrote to Williams, dated 16 January, 1930, in which he remarks that “Nancy [Cunard]

10 See: “○ ○ ○ ○ that Shakespeherian rag—” (Eliot *The Waste Land* 128)

has agreed to print Zuk's 'The.' Also wants something of yours, as I indicated when writin to Z. so'z to save a week's time [*sic*] ("240" 226). In his introduction to *Anew: complete shorter poetry*, Robert Creeley excerpts a portion of a letter Zukofsky wrote to Pound about a month earlier, on December 12, 1930:

"*The*" was a direct reply to *The Waste Land*—meant to avoid T.S.E.'s technique, line etc (tho I see how much more lucid it is than my own) occasional slickness, but intended to tell him why, spiritually speaking, a wimpus was still possible and might even bear fruit of another generation (qtd. in Creeley *ix*)

On the one hand, "wimpus" sounds like "whimper," and might be understood to signify an anti-climax. But Rachel Blau DuPlessis understands "wimpus" to be a reference to a device by that name, invented to aid male impotency by helping to sustain erections—in other words, Zukofsky writes Pound that "The" tells Eliot that a rejuvenation or upkeep of (spiritual) masculinity "was still possible" (*Purple* 66). DuPlessis stretches Zukofsky's meaning even further, finally understanding the poet's letter to imply that "[his] poem provides the wimpus for a prior poet, a prior poem, and for modernism itself" (67, my emphasis). If Williams' answer to Eliot is to contradict him, I want to position Zukofsky answering Eliot by taking the old possum's epistemological framework to its extreme.

First, I'll consider a recent scholarly approach to Zukofsky's poem in conversation with Eliot's. "Poem Beginning 'The,'" according to Bob Perelman, "takes *The Waste Land* as both norm and rival" (*The Allegory* 174). He notes several similarities between Eliot's poem and Zukofsky's reaction piece, including both poets' epigraphs the fact that the latter repeats but intensifies the former's numbering of his own lines, "as if," in each case, "the poem were already a classic" (174-175). The big similarity between the two poems that Perelman is concerned with is their "non-originary" form, something Perelman calls "an Eliotic poetics of quotation" (175). Two half-baked thrusts of his brief discussion of "Poem beginning 'The'" and *The Waste Land* stand out: one, that a "major contrast" between the two poems is Zukofsky's "rhetorically happy ending¹¹," and two, that Zukofsky's use of quotation "depend[s] at least in part on the university," or an education which is "in opposition" to his identity (175). *But is Zukofsky's education "in opposition" to his identity?*—or at least the identity he performs in "Poem Beginning 'The'"—I'm not sure, or at least I'm not as sure as Perelman is.

11 Another shocking statement in Perelman's chapter is his ostensibly transitional assertion that, despite its ending, "the core" of "Poem beginning 'The'" is "not so much political as cultural—as if the two can be separated!" (*The Allegory* 175).

I want to foreground two specific moments in Zukofsky's poem in light of Eliot's problematic and William's distancing his own poetic project from it. In "Fourth Movement: *More Renaissance*," the following sequence occurs:

168 Engprof, thy lectures were to me
169 Like those roast fitches of red boar
170 That, smelling, one is like to see
171 Through windows where the steam's galore
172 Like our own "Cellar Door"¹²

Before diving into his matrix of allusions, I'll remark that a base-level reading of this passage would understand Zukofsky's narrator to be appreciative of his English professor; the latter's lectures are analogous to cured meat (recall: Williams' "leberwurst. . .Bratwust" metaphor), the smell of which allows for clear vision even through an obstructed window. Six lines above this section, which the notes claim is about Edgar Allen Poe, Zukofsky writes:

162 Is it the sun you're looking for,
163 Drop in at Askforaclassic, Inc.,

—a sequence all the more interesting in light of the following excerpt from the notes: ". . .Power of the Past, Present, and Future—Where the reference is to the word Sun" (8).

The "Engprof" of the later lines is Eliot, and Zukofsky proves his gratitude to the (ABD) author of *The Waste Land* not only through implicit (symbolic) praise, but by applying an Eliotic disdain for lived experience in the early 20th Century. Line 163, according to the notes, is a reference to "Modern Advertising" ("Poem Beginning 'The'" 8). Note that "Modern Advertising" is where to look for "Power of the Past, Present, and Future"—that is, not the High-brow or the capital-C-Cultured elements of society. Power has shifted, Zukofsky seems to uncomfortably reflect, to the hands of advertisement and other (lowly) worldly institutions. What's worse: advertisement (here a stand-in for Kitsch more broadly) positions itself as Canon, signifying as "Askforaclassic, Inc.," as though one might be printed on demand (for the right price). Like Eliot, Zukofsky is bitching about the bastardization of something High and Pure—in this case, Art/Canon. Unlike Williams, Zukofsky

12 Since Zukofsky numbers his own lines, I've taken the liberty of omitting the conventional in-text citation (by line-number) where it would be redundant. In-text citations for this poem, for un-numbered portions, are to page number.

buys the *imagination/reality* binary explicitly central to Stevens' own philosophy and also implicit in Eliot's project.

Abstraction is the game—escape from the actual—and Zukofsky, after Eliot, is trying to do Eliot one better. Although Williams took issue with Eliot for his putting poetry (back) into the classroom, this imagined corollary to old possum's epistemological wandering is precisely what Zukofsky attempts to re-double from and one-up on Eliot. If, as Perelman says, formal education is “in opposition” to Zukofsky's identity, I want to focus on how the poet takes the side of the academy—the assimilation—when it comes up against the codes of his quotidian family life:

238 If horses could but sing Bach, mother,—
239 Remember how I wish it once—
240 Now I kiss you who could never sing Bach, never read Shakespeare.

These lines occur in “Fifth Movement: *Autobiography*,” which Zukofsky opens by addressing his mother and in which he continues to address her throughout. In the lines quoted, I read Zukofsky having a warm if painful exchange with his mother. They experience friction on the front where home/quotidian and school/elevated meet.

In one reading, in line with Perelman's, the friction signifies Zukofsky's reluctance to privilege his newfound, Higher tastes over those simpler, mundane aspects of his mother's life. On the other hand, however, I want to emphasize the “Now” that starts line 240. Zukofsky's narrator looks back at a prior period, in which he speculated (perhaps in youthful curiosity/vigor?) about horses elevating themselves the height of Bach. “Now,” unfortunately, with age, Zukofsky realizes that such a transformation is likely impossible. He kisses his mother *despite*—not because of—the fact she doesn't “sing Bach” and has “never read Shakespeare” (239-240). I read Zukofsky here *reminiscent* of what he had “wished. . .once” in ignorance. “the pressure of news,” here, to use Stevens' phrase, is that there is nothing new Zukofsky can say about his mother—she is to him a weight that tethers him to that from which he would like to abstract himself from, escape: (his present) reality in all its ugliness. Put another way, Zukofsky want to re-center reality around his conception of the High, the Artful. Like Eliot and Stevens, he is after transcendence.

But recall that Williams took the exact opposite approach in *Spring and All*. In the way that Eliot's epistemological problem-posing set up a standard for Williams to pose his own project against, it also sets up a standard for Zukofsky to measure

his project against, being similar and supplementary to Eliot's own. If Eliot's answer to the problem of godless Modernity is to travel backward to redeem an epoch in which God is possible, Williams answers that Modernity itself might not even be a problem. But Zukofsky, like Eliot, seeks to transcend existence in the current moment—removed farther spatially and temporally from WWI than Eliot was, Zukofsky's reaction is less to the degradation of Modern living than to its inanity—that same element that Williams, sharing a continent with Zukofsky, champions. All three poets, though, in their own ways, theorize how to contend with, if not to solve, the absolute impossibility of a global, universal epistemology in a world ravaged by WWI and the forever-war which would follow its ostensible end. I don't mean to suggest that any of these poets solves the problems WWI and Eliot opened up for poetry—but, together, they open up a channel of poetic epistemological investigation we need to understand ourselves inside of right now, considering we're still fighting the war they *thought* they were writing *after*.

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