



**Nihilism**

**Modernism**

**& Value**

**John Fraser**

Nihilism,  
Modernism,  
&  
Value

Three Lectures

氣

John Fraser

Published in eBook format by eBookIt.com  
<http://www.eBookIt.com>

Copyright 2001, 2013, John Fraser  
ISBN-13: 978-1-4566-1291-7

Except for quotations in discussions of it, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author or his estate.

Cover design: Barbara Bickle.

My thanks to Tom Adamowski, Bill Keith, and Michael Kirkham of the University of Toronto.

And to the eBookIt team, especially President Ryan Levesque, for patiently coping with my anxieties and giving me exactly the formatting that I wanted.

*Nihilism, Modernism, and Value* is for Nicholas Poburko

# *Contents*

Preface

I: Substantiality

II: Cold White Peaks and Snug Foothills

III: Being There Together

Sources

About the Author

## **Preface**

Back in the fall of 1990, I had the privilege of giving the four annual Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto, by invitation of University College, on a topic of my own devising.

They seemed to be well received, but they weren't publishable as they stood, and the death of my wife, the artist Carol Hoorn Fraser, soon gave me more important matters to attend to.

In 2001, I tweaked the three lectures that you see here and inserted them into my new website, [www.jottings.ca](http://www.jottings.ca). The fourth, on language, took on a life of its own, so I used it elsewhere on the site..

The texts here are unaltered, but I've corrected a major error in how the sources of quotations are identified.

My approach is personal and heuristic, a thinking-through, an attempt to get some things clearer for myself that have quite rightly been found disturbing, at times deeply so, by a lot of people. I have not tangled with other academics, I have done my best to avoid jargon, and the numerous quotations are nodes of energy rather than detachable inserts in a line of argument leading to a foregone conclusion.

The quotations deserve reading for themselves as portals of various kinds, which, if my own experience is anything to go by, can make the lectures feel fuller than their measurable lengths.

And if a writer has spoken differently elsewhere, that doesn't affect what is quotably said here, since what matter here, as in most affairs (think of the power of quotations in the media), are incitements to thought rather than invitations to do research into somebody else's elusive mind.

There are numerous real-world portals here, and a lot of the fictionists are themselves concerned with problems of knowledge and values. Most of the material comes from the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Real-world back then, even while being interrogated, had more heft to it . As evoked in the arts, it was more than a free-form dance of subjective fictions.

And "theory" had not yet reached a tertiary level of abstractions commenting on abstractions, from which it would be difficult to

make one's way back to something resembling solid ground and significant human emotions.

2012

# I: Substantiality

## I.1

Let me start with a couple of quotations:

How cold the vacancy  
When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist  
First sees reality.

*Wallace Stevens*

“Ah yes, things have their life, that is what I always say,  
things have a life.”

*Samuel Beckett*

To which I may as well add something from one of Woody Allen’s parodies:

Cloquet hated reality but realized it was still the only place to  
get a good steak.

You will glimpse my prejudices.

## I.2

I am concerned in these lectures with a *Gestalt*, an intellectual configuration, a quasi-orthodoxy, part philosophical, part aesthetic.

You can see it conveniently in that fat and intimidating Penguin volume *Modernism* (1974), where it has the blessing of the editors.

Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane obviously *like*

the passion in Modernism to see the universe as contingent, poverty-stricken, denuded until it has been reimagined, its local virilities apprehended through the planes and conjunctions available to the fictionalizing mind.

They *like* how modernist experimentalism “does not simply suggest the presence of sophistication, difficulty and novelty in art; it also suggests bleakness, darkness, alienation, disintegration.”

For in doing so (I am extrapolating here), modernism is being true to the essential nature of things, given the logical—and inescapable

—reversibility of the relationship described above—the collapsing of the enriching imaginings back into the primal poverty.

### I.3

Modern art, in that view of things, is there to make us uncomfortable, to bring things into question, to challenge our ontological complacency, our unwillingness (as in those eve-of-war lines of W. H. Auden ) to

see where we are,  
Lost in a haunted wood,  
Children afraid of the night  
Who have never been happy or good. —

and who play their little games to keep out the cold.

And if modern art, doesn't do its duty—if works seduce us with a seeming richness of lived experience, or formal strengths and graces, or vivid what-happens-next imaginings—, well, there have been critics and theorists enough to jolt us back to our senses; which is to say, to the obligation to live with Wallace Stevens' "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

### I.4

From this point of view, the ideal modern artist is someone like Jorge-Luis Borges' imagined man-of-letters Pierre Menard, who devotes himself to composing a *Don Quixote* that will be word for word the same as Cervantes' novel of that name but a *different* work and much more interesting.

He has found a game to keep out the void, the game is absurd, nothing concrete results from it, and if we fail to see its greatness, this simply—as his fictional eulogist assures us—reflects on "the hesitant and rudimentary art of reading."

### I.5

Personally I don't much care for this take on the world. It seems to me to display what Martin Heidegger in his book on Nietzsche calls "those features that usually describe what one means by the familiar term *nihilism*: something that disparages and destroys, a decline and downfall."

It also seems to me simply untrue of a lot of good art, including a lot of modern art, especially during those crucial decades between about 1890 and 1930.

So in these lectures I shall muddle away among my anxieties and try to sketch a somewhat different configuration.

Let me start with the reference in the Penguin volume to the modernist “belief in perception as plural, life as multiple, reality as insubstantial.”

It is that “insubstantial” that bothers me.

## I.6

In a rather cozy book on nihilism, the kind that makes you feel, “Well, if that’s what it’s all about, maybe *I’m* a nihilist,” the theologian Michael Novak informs us that

I recognize that I put structure into my world. Such recognition is a necessary condition of the experience of nothingness. There is no “real” world out there, given, intact, full of significance. Consciousness is constituted by random, virtually infinite barrages of experience; these experiences are indistinguishably “inner” and “outer.” The mad are aware of that buzzing confusion. The sane have *put* structure into it. Structure is *put into experience by culture and the self*, and may also be pulled out again.

It sounds a bit like keeping a bank account.

“And what can we do for you today, Professor?”

“Oh, I think I’ll just withdraw Truth and Beauty and put back Social Relevance and *Nouvelle Cuisine*.”

But are we really so free to choose how we are situated in the world?

## I.7

Samuel Johnson certainly didn’t think so.

“After we came out of the church,” James Boswell famously recalls,

we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that everything in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I shall never forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, "I refute it thus!"

Nor did Louis-Ferdinand Céline think so.

The doctor-narrator of his great *modern* novel *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936) recalls how a colleague who used to wax lyrical about "exquisite deaths"

died of the heart eventually under conditions that weren't nice at all: a paroxysm of angina pectoris lasting twenty minutes. For a hundred and twenty seconds he certainly stuck to his classical resolutions, the great tradition, the Stoic ideal... but for the other eighteen minutes he screamed like a pig having its throat slit.

There seems, on the face of it, a good deal to be said for Yvor Winters' observation that

The realm which we perceive with our unaided senses, the realm which our ancestors took to be real, may be an illusion; but in that illusion we pass our daily lives, including our moral lives; the illusion is quite obviously governed by principles which it is dangerous, often fatal, to violate...

And besides, where else would you go for that steak?

## I.8

Moreover, as we grow up, we don't *give* the world around us meanings that we have the option of withholding. Reality (Northrop Frye's *The Educated Imagination* to the contrary) isn't something that an individual comes to like a shipwrecked sailor landing on a desert island—something utterly alien and other, non-human, voiceless.

The China Seas, Conrad observes in his marvellous short story "Typhoon," were "full of everyday, eloquent facts, such as islands,

sand-banks, reefs, swift and changeable currents—tangled facts that nevertheless speak to a seaman in clear and definite language.”

Nor will a desert island (meaning uninhabited, not sandy) be alien and voiceless to someone acquainted with the flora and fauna of that region and knowing what to look for even before his raft beaches on the sand. (“No sharks in the lagoon.... an animal trail into the jungle... fresh water nearby, probably....”) The island *speaks* to him. It is charged with meaning.

And the process by which a particular tall shape becomes for him, as he approaches it, not only a tree but a cabbage palm—a cabbage palm with an edible heart—is simply a continuation of the processes that began in infancy.

As Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* reminds us—or the more methodical enquiries of the child psychologist Jean Piaget—the world “grows” for the child in an endless series of interactions with physical objects, other people, and language, a process imbued with valuings.

## I.9

There is a lovely paradigm of this in Richard Hughes’ novel *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1929).

Ten-year-old Emily Bas-Thornton and other assorted children are at play on the beach near their family home when odd things happen. The water in the bay ebbs away a little, then rushes back in tiny waves.

Mouthfuls of turf were torn away; and on the far side of the bay a small piece of cliff tumbled into the water: sand and twigs showered down, dew fell from the trees like diamonds.... That was all.

But afterwards—ah, afterwards!

“Well, anyhow I said there was going to be an earthquake and there was one,” said Margaret.

That was what Emily had been waiting for! So it really had been an Earthquake (she had not liked to ask, it seemed so ignorant: but now Margaret had said in so many words that it was one).

If ever she went back to England, she could now say to people, “*I have been in an Earthquake.*”

With that certainty her soused excitement began to revive. For there was nothing, no adventure from the hands of God or Man, to equal it. Realize that if she had suddenly found she could fly it would not have seemed more miraculous to her. Heaven had played its last, most terrible card; and small Emily had survived, where even grown men (such as Korah, Dathan, and Abiran) had succumbed.

Life seemed suddenly a little empty: for never again could there happen to her anything so dangerous, so sublime.

### I.10

And a little later we have the counterpointing irony of Emily’s *non-hurricane*.

The prodigious storm that kills the Bas-Thorntons’ negro servant Sam and drives the Bas-Thorntons themselves into the tenuous shelter of their cellar (after which it proceeds to rip the house apart) cannot come into existence for Emily *as* a hurricane because no-one puts a name to it.

If Emily had known this was a *Hurricane*, she would doubtless have been far more impressed, for the word was full of romantic terrors. But it never entered her head: and a thunderstorm, however, severe, is after all a commonplace affair. The mere fact that it had done incalculable damage, while the earthquake had done none at all, gave it no right whatever to rival the latter in the hierarchy of cataclysms: an Earthquake is a thing apart.

### I.11

Common sense (Johnsonian? Célinesque? Wintersian?) also murmurs its pedestrian cautions about the draining away of meaning and value.

There are indeed states of mind and body in which this happens—happens dreadfully.

For the speaker of Wallace Stevens’ all-too-real-feeling “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,”

The time of year has grown indifferent.  
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow  
Are both alike in the routine I know.  
I am too dumbly in my being pent.

In Hemingway's "Soldier's Home", Harold Krebs, back in Oklahoma with his parents after being demobilized, "did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again."

William S Burroughs during his stay in Tangiers in the 1950's

had not taken a bath in a year nor changed my clothes or removed them except to stick a needle every hour in the fibrous grey wooden flesh of terminal [morphine] addiction.... I did absolutely nothing. I could look at the end of my shoe for eight hours. ...If a friend came to visit ... I sat there not caring that he had entered my field of vision—a grey screen always blanker and fainter—and not caring when he walked out of it.

And what about the spiritual collapse of E. M. Forster's Mrs. Moore after the disastrous excursion to the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India* that leaves her with the sullen consciousness that "Everything exists, nothing has value"?

Or poor valiant alcoholic F. Scott Fitzgerald's crack-up sense in the Thirties of "a vast irresponsibility toward every obligation, a deflation of all my values"?

## I.12

Such states of mind are very real and very terrible.

We have all had glimpses of them, if only during the grey-outs of sleeplessness or the derealization that comes with the aftermath of flu—feelings about the triviality of our work and the unchangeableness of the "real" world, the unchangeableness that torments Conrad's little bomb-making "Professor" in *The Secret Agent* and that Conrad himself was obviously well acquainted with.

We can all respond empathetically to Marlow's account in *Heart of Darkness* of his fever-ridden disintegration after the death of Kurtz:

“I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without clamour, without glory; without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary.”

We know what Fitzgerald was talking about when he said that “In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning, day after day.”

### I.13

And the body can torment you in more insidious ways.

It can send your morale up and down with the barometric pressure. It can saddle you with systemic allergies and chronic metabolic insufficiencies. It can make you feel like the young man in Kafka’s story “Conversation with the Suppliant”:

“There has never been a time in which I have been convinced from within myself that I am alive. You see, I have only such a fugitive awareness of things around me that I always feel they were once real and are now fleeting away.”

### I.14

However, as Nietzsche knew all too well (he speaks of “the deep depression, the leaden exhaustion, the black melancholy of the physiologically inhibited”), we needn’t rush to metaphysicalize such phenomena and give them a cognitive status. So I shall keep going for a bit along the present route.

### I.15

Environments too can obviously have their say in the thinning out of the self.

They certainly did so with respect to what Hannah Arendt calls that “*disease* of the nineteenth century, its terrible boredom.”

—the boredom that runs like a leit-motif from the writings of François-René Chateaubriand and Étienne Pivert de Senancour at the start of the century to Anton Chekhov’s at the end,

—the boredom voiced by Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* (“so confoundedly bored, gentlemen,... so horribly bored”),

—the boredom of Alexandr Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (“men’s thoughts, their plots, the words they speak/ all of an emptiness so killing”).

In backwoods, how d’you pass this season?  
Walking? The country that you roam  
is a compulsive bore by reason  
of its unvarnished monochrome...

Alternatives? A game perhaps?

and then, indoors the livelong day,  
alone, and sunk in calculation,  
with a blunt cue for the duration  
from early morning on he will  
at two-ball billiards prove his skill

One of Borges’ imagined men-of-letters speaks of “The essential features of all games: symmetry, arbitrary rules, tedium.”

But even tedium is boring when there is no-one to play against.

## I.16

Boredom is *deprivation*.

When beautiful consumptive twenty-six-year-old Edele Lyhne in Jens Jacobsen’s *Niehls Lyhne* (1880) is sent into the country for her health, she fills “letter after letter with entreaties that her exile might be brought to an end...”:

It was not exactly the amusements [of Copenhagen] she missed so sorely, but she was accustomed to hear the sound of her life gradually drowned by the noisy atmosphere of the large town, and here in the country such a silence reigned in thought, in word, in looks—in everything, in fact, that she was continually hearing herself with the inevitable distinctness with which we hear the ticking of a clock in a sleepless night. And to know that life was going on over there, going on just as before! It was like being dead and, in the silence of the night, hearing strains from a ball-room die away in the air above her grave.

During *his* temporary stay in the country, with no work to do, Tolstoy's up-and-coming lawyer Ivan Ilych, in "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (1886), "experienced ennui for the first time in his life, and not only ennui but intolerable depression, and he decided that it was impossible to go on living like that."

As Pascal had put it, two centuries earlier in his *Pensées*,

Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort.

Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness.

And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.

## I.17

And "communication" itself in such situations, when it occurs, can become a torment.

For Edele Lyhne, "there was no one here with whom she could talk, for they never took up that shade of meaning in her words which alone gives life to speech." But when the "sensitive" yearn for people to talk to, what they want to talk about is always *elsewhere*.

It is the doings of urban society. It is the "daring" philosophizing going on in the pages of "advanced" periodicals. It is the tragic grand passions and consuming ennui of romantic heroes

—heroes like Onegin,

—heroes like the Byron who had demanded in *Don Juan*, "Must I restrain me through the fear of strife/From holding up the nothingness of life?"

— heroes like Mikhail Lermontov's Pechorin in *A Hero of Our Time* (1839) , who said things like, "[A]s our ancestors rushed from illusion to illusion, so we drift indifferently from doubt to doubt. But unlike them we have no hope, not even that indefinable but real sense of pleasure that's felt in any struggle be it with men or destiny."

—heroes like Senancour's Obermann in the 1804 novel of that name, terminally bored among mountains. ("In the midst of what I've desired, I lack everything; I have obtained nothing, I possess nothing; boredom consumes my stay in a long silence.")

### I.18

And the jolly retired generals and hard-working landowners and brisk maiden aunts in Chekhov with whom the sensitive are obliged to rub shoulders socially are not just people who don't know the right kind of society or haven't read certain books.

With their blindness to the tragic nature of existence, they are *the enemy*. So that to talk *seriously* with them about crops or the doings and misdoings of peasants would be to give up part of your own true self.

And the tragic exhilarations and heroic ennui of literature exacerbate your own feeling of being *different* and further derealize the everyday conversation of the unliterary, members of the opposite sex among them.

With disastrous results at times, if, like Onegin, or poor Emma Bovary, or Thomas Hardy's Eustacia Vye, you make emotional demands on the few individuals with whom you *can* talk which they are incapable of satisfying.

The elsewhere kills the here; sometimes literally.

### I.19

But at least in the country the encountered others, the figures at the parties you were forced to attend, the figures on the road when you were out walking, were still presences requiring *some* response.

In the city, on the other hand, you could endure a tantalus-like emotional poverty in the midst of plenitude—the torment of proximity without any relationship at all.

As the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel pointed out in the early 1900's, "Before buses, railroads, and streetcars became fully established,... people were never put in a position of having to stare at one another for minutes or even hours on end without exchanging a word." And Walter Benjamin remarked some years later that "The man who loses his capacity for experiencing feels

as though he is dropped from the calendar. The big-city dweller knows this feeling on Sundays.”

The young readers of E. Nesbit’s *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899) obviously knew all too well what *she* was talking about when she said, “There are some days when you seem to have got to the end of all the things that could ever possibly happen to you, and you feel you will spend all the rest of your life doing dull things just the same way.”

As do the characters in Walter Sickert’s London painting “Ennui” from around 1914.

A moustached middle-aged man, heavy-set, brown-suited (almost all the picture is shades of brown) leans back in his chair, a cigar held to his mouth, a half-empty glass of beer on the living-room table before him, gazing into vacancy.

Behind him a woman, half turned away from us, leans her elbows on a sideboard, staring up at a picture of which we see only the edge.

They are immoveable; they have run down. The silence between them is palpable.

## I.20

*Things* can wear out, lose their charges of significance, lose their *voices*, leaving you with what F. R. Leavis calls “the automatism, acquiescences, blurs, and blunted indifferences of everyday living.”

Books wear out: “La chair est triste, hélas! et j’ai lu tous les livres,” as Stéphane Mallarmé says in “Brise Marine” (“Sea Breeze”), that poem of romantic yearning for escape and renewal. (“The flesh is sad, alas, and I’ve read all the books.”)

And as you age, your recollections also fade and it becomes harder and harder to summon things back with the small or not so small differences, the subtle shifts in viewpoint, the possibility of having behaved otherwise, that help to keep them alive.

Even Emily’s earthquake will fade for her. As Charles Baudelaire says in “Le Voyage,”

Pour l'enfant, amoureux de cartes et d'estampes,  
L'univers est égal à son vaste appétit.  
Ah! que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes!  
Aux yeux du souvenir que le monde est petit!

[To the child, in love with maps and pictures,  
The universe is vast as his appetite.  
Ah how immense the world is by lamplight!  
How small the world is in recollection.

*Barbara Gibbs]*

Roads are irrevocably not taken, options are closed out, the promise and glamour fade from what had earlier seemed a whole forest of forking paths.

## I.21

But of course I'm being a bit simple-minded, aren't I?

Such phenomena obviously don't explain, let alone explain away, self-disgust, despair, remorse, the "awareness/ Of things ill done and done to others' harm/ Which once you took for exercise of virtue" (thus T. S. Eliot).

They don't explain away Gerard Manley Hopkins' mind-tormenting "Cliffs of fall,/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed," or Fulke Greville's Renaissance sense of being "Down in the depth of mine iniquity,/ That ugly center of infernal spirits," or Nietzsche's agonies, or the conclusion to the nightmare symbolist vision of Baudelaire's "Les Sept Vieillards" ["The Seven Old Men"] in the 1850's:

Vainement ma raison voulait prendre la barre;  
La tempête en jouant déroutait ses efforts,  
Et mon âme dansait, dansait, vieille gabarre  
Sans mâts, sur une mer monstrueuse et sans bords!

[In vain my reason tried to take the helm;  
The tempest rollicking led it astray,  
And my soul danced, danced like an old lighter  
Without masts, on a monstrous, shoreless sea.

*Barbara Gibbs]*

It isn't boredom that at the end of Pier Paolo Pasolini's movie *Teorema* (1968) drives the head of the well-to-do Italian household, all of whose members have been seduced by the dishy and enigmatic young Terence Stamp, to "break," in a classic collapse of R.D. Laing's "false-self system," and strip himself naked in a railroad terminus, and walk through the crowd with the sensation of staggering up a slope of powdered lava under a merciless sun.

Nor is suicide normally the result of ennui. As works like *Hedda Gabler*, *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, and D.H. Lawrence's *The Trespasser* remind us, it is more likely to be the result of a torment of irreconcilable imperatives.

Or of too total a loss of a hoped-for future, and the prospect of being henceforth condemned to be a self that you don't recognize—or recognize all too well—and cannot bear to live with.

## I.22

However, some deeper alienations may still be psychological rather than philosophical.

In Conrad's *Nostramo* (1904) the young French intellectual Martin Decoud is marooned (with his consent) on the for him completely alien and voiceless islet of Grand Isabel off the coast of the fictive Latin-American country Costaguana. And after ten days of solitude, he loses "all belief in the reality of his actions past and to come" and shoots himself.

The brilliant Decoud, Conrad tells us,

was not fit to grapple with himself single-handed.... After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, [he] caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature.... Decoud lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come.... He beheld the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images....The great gulf burst into a glitter all around the boat; and in this glory of merciless solitude the silence appeared again before him, stretched taut like a dark, thin string.

There is nothing metaphysical about a sensory-deprivation tank in a psychology lab.

### I.23

And if Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus hadn't had their novels about emotional emptiness, *Nausea* (1938) and *The Stranger* (1942), narrated in the first person, with the customary French air of certitude, those narratives mightn't have come across as so (for a time) prestigiously philosophical.

Sartre's Roquentin, after all, is cushioned against the claims of necessity by what appears to be a reasonably comfortable unearned income (from what investments?). And when you don't *need* to do anything in particular, such as completing the scholarly biography that he has been writing, it isn't all that difficult to feel that there are no compelling reasons for doing anything at all.

As for Camus' Meursault, the narrative is simply a fake.

After lunch I went up to my room read a while, and went to sleep. When I woke it was half past four. I found my swimming-suit, wrapped it with a comb in a towel, and went down-stairs and walked up the street to the Concha. The tide was about half-way out.

Thus Jake Barnes near the all-passion-spent end of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.

Camus simply tapped into that mode of discourse for the requisite "existential" numbness, and then increased Meursault's sensitivity and intelligence whenever he needed to inject his own interpretation of what was going on.

Gustav von Aschenbach's disintegration in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) is not presented by Aschenbach himself, and Mann does not attempt to turn a particular tragic case into a universal statement about what life *really* is.

### I.24

Moreover, there are reminders enough in art, including modern art, that the philosophizings of a Roquentin or the programmatic indifferentism of a Meursault are not the only options with respect to alienation.

## I.25

In one of the sketches in Kafka's first book, *Meditation* (1913), we read how:

I force myself out of my chair, stride round the table, exercise my head and neck, make my eyes sparkle, tighten the muscles round them. Defy my own feelings, welcome A. enthusiastically supposing he comes to see me, amiably tolerate B. in my room, swallow all that is said at C.'s, whatever pain and trouble it may cost me, in long draughts.

The whole volume, with its celebration of childhood energies, its reachings-out into the life of the streets, its fighting back against intimidations, is in effect a Nietzschean extension of such will-strengthening exercises. It demonstrates that you don't have to veer between the yearnings voiced in the sketch "The Wish to Be a Red Indian" ("instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind") and a numb passivity.

To be sure, the states of higher energy achieved in this marvellous little book are precarious. As the narrator of "Resolutions" acknowledges, "[O]ne single slip, and a slip cannot be avoided, will stop the whole process, easy and painful alike, and I will have to shrink back into my own circle again."

But it *is* a slipping back and not an ascent into truth, and the struggle against it goes on with increasing success in the stories that Kafka published in his lifetime and wished to be remembered by, and gives his career the moral grandeur that it has.

## I.26

By the same token the authority of Samuel Beckett's career derives in part from our knowledge of those appalling, those almost literally paralyzing depressions of his in the Thirties. Like the insensate turbulences from which the adolescent Ferdinand partly escapes in Céline's *Death on the Installment Plan*, Beckett's psychosomatic despair, boils and all, was a given, not a chosen, and his writing prevented it from destroying him.

And when Borges embarked on the intricate explorations and exorcisms of *Ficciones*, he had just come close to death from

septicemia and passed through a fever-ridden nightmare of demoralization like that of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*.

## I.27

An engagement with an out-there reality need not entail fantasy, either, in order to be emotionally satisfying. It need not entail Emily's inflation of her earthquake, or the card-house constructions of Northrop Frye's beloved "romance."

Knowledge, precise functional knowledge, can bring its blessed and lasting enrichments, as we see in the joyous precision of observing and naming in D.H. Lawrence's essay "Flowery Tuscany," or in the progression from the "literary" surface perception of the Mississippi in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, via the growing understanding of its musculature in his *Life on the Mississippi*, to the rich totality of *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), that novel from which, in Hemingway's perception in the Thirties, all modern American fiction had come.

As books like Ivan S. Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* (another of Hemingway's favourites) and the British proto-Lawrence Richard Jefferies' *The Amateur Poacher* (1880) remind us—and as anyone who has prowled the city streets with a camera knows—the stalker looks more attentively and sees more of interest than the stroller; sees the individuating there-ness of relationships.

Escaping from what Heidegger calls "the pallid lack of mood which dominates the 'gray everyday' through and through" can involve not a turning away from reality but a moving deeper into it.

## I.28

Arthur Schopenhauer, from whom so many configurations and attitudes come, had spoken scornfully of how ordinary people merely want to "use" nature, rather than "contemplate" it.

But the peasant or gardener, existing in a both/and relationship with growing things, was more likely to experience them in their totality than the would-be "beautiful souls" who went to them as a ground on which to have soul-state experiences—persons like Helena Verden in D.H. Lawrence's second novel *The Trespasser* (1912), for example, who

wanted to see just as she pleased, without any of humanity's previous vision for spectacles. So she knew hardly any flower's name, nor perceived any of the relationships, nor cared a jot about an adaptation or a malfunction.... She clothed everything in fancy.

With their ongoing curiosity about country things and country people, writers like Jefferies, Turgenev, Hardy, Edward Thomas, Lawrence, Robert Frost, and Jean Giono weren't bored in the country.

### I.29

Even when the moving deeper in is purely mental and private, there may still be an enriching social dimension to it, an implicitly collaborative activity. Emily Bas-Thornton's fiction-making is not simply shadowy and weightless.

As she sits with the rest of her family in the hurricane-beleagured cellar and wishes that "the wretched thunderstorm would hurry up and get over," she soothes herself, and puts out of her mind the dreadful fate of the family cat Tabby, by thinking about "her" earthquake.

But the thinking-about is not merely a matter of envisioning, as if looking at a continuous motion-picture shot.

First, she held an actual performance of the earthquake, went over it direct, as if it was again happening. Then she put it into *Oratio Recta*, told it as a story, beginning with that magic phrase, "Once I was in an Earthquake." But before long the dramatic element reappeared—this time, the awed comments of her imaginary English audience. When that was done, she put it into the *Historical*—a *Voice*, declaring that a girl called Emily was once in an Earthquake. And so on, right through the whole thing a third time.

### I.30

Furthermore, the idea of a necessary conjunction between significance in modern art and an adversarial bleakness looks increasingly odd when you allow your mind's eye and ear to linger over the works of figures like Gabriel Fauré, Pierre Bonnard, Marcel Proust, Jean Renoir, Vincent Van Gogh, Wallace Stevens,

D.H. Lawrence, Eugène Atget, Paul Valéry, Jean Giono, Paul Klee, Luis Buñuel, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jean Sibelius, Auguste Rodin, W.B. Yeats, Gustav Mahler, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Virginia Woolf, Scott Joplin, The Beatles, Jean Vigo, John Ford, Max Ernst, Claude Debussy, Gabriel-Garcia Márquez, Joan Miró, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Henri Matisse, and Henri Rousseau.

Nor are the stories that Kafka himself published and wished to be remembered for, stories so inventive, so robustly communicative, so seriously witty, the works of someone whose imaginative world resembles (the Penguin *Modernism* again) the vision of “an animal looking out from its burrow on to a world which in its flatness and greyness no longer belongs to him.”

### I.31

And if Mallarmé would not have been Mallarmé without the ontological crisis of his mid-twenties, in which he experienced a terrifying sense of the void of an entirely godless, purposeless, alien universe, he would also not have been Mallarmé without those Tuesday evenings of intellectual discourse and tobacco smoke that he hosted so gracefully and so influentially in his apartment in the Rue de Rome.

For that matter, the dominant characteristic of Beckett’s work is *talk*—and not just talk in the Shavian fashion, but communication or would-be communication at deeper levels.

The responding mind of someone else is always implicit in what is said by the protagonists of Beckett’s plays. And what is sought is usually sympathy.

### I.32

If alienation and impotence have indeed been strong presences in modern art, there has also been a powerful resistance to them.

There has been an energetic fighting back against the kind of dead-ending displayed so painfully in that epitome of fin-de-siècle Schopenhauerian pessimism, Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1896).

And we don’t, we really don’t, have to feel that the poignant melodiousness of a Fauré or those glowing light-and-colour-

drenched paintings of Bonnard (“the strongest of us all,” according to Henri Matisse in 1926) are somehow not *really* modern.

### I.33

Everything, well almost everything, is there in *Jude* when it comes to fin-de-siècle pessimism.

Think of poor working-class Jude Fawley’s hopeless fixation on the romanticized heights of Oxford.

And the aridity of the academic Oxford that we glimpse in the novel.

And poor Sue Brideshead’s doomed yearning to transcend herself in sexual relationships.

And her corrosive, superstitious sense of guilt, even worse than that of the unfortunate Tess in *Tess of the Durbervilles*.

And the constant destructive pressure on the two of them of “respectable” public opinion.

And the accuracy of Jude’s diagnosis, “We are horribly sensitive; that’s really what’s the matter with us, Sue.”

And the absence of any communal structures in which self-forgetful enjoyment is possible for the two of them.

And Jude’s unmourned final vanishing down the memory hole.

And Hardy’s own evident inability in the novel to see any way in which Jude could have enabled himself and Sue to achieve any kind of permanent happiness together.

And the drabness of his prose.

### I.34

Two years after *Jude* appeared, the Irish realist George Moore (on whom Joyce improved in *Dubliners*) imagined Flaubert saying to himself apropos of *L’Education Sentimentale* (1865),

The entire phantasmagoria of life shall pass before the reader, scene after scene, all equally trivial, all equally meaningless—the eternal spectacle of human misery and the eternal spectacle of ennui watching over it; that shall be my book.

Moore was obviously well aware of how for Schopenhauer,

However much great and small worries fill up human life, and keep it in constant agitation and restlessness, they are unable to mask life's inadequacy to satisfy the spirit; they cannot conceal the emptiness and superficiality of existence, or exclude boredom which is always ready to fill up every pause granted by care.

It is against that sort of background that a good deal of modern art deserves to be viewed.

### I.35

And what we see, I suggest, is a recoil from, and a variety of disruptions of, the dichotomy that Scott Fitzgerald referred to when he complained in a letter, a few months after the publication of *The Great Gatsby* about "this eternal looking beyond appearances for the 'real,' on the part of people who have never even been conscious of appearances."

Which is where we get further into philosophy.

### I.36

In terms of that dichotomy, the *really* real stands in an antithetical relationship to the "ordinary" world, as it does in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, with their polarity of ineffable moments of rose-garden insight and blank-faced commuters sitting in a stalled Tube train and knowing only "the growing terror of nothing to think about."

Once you have glimpsed things outside the cave in "the true sunlight" (Schopenhauer's phrase), or concluded that that is what you should be bending all your energies towards, coping with things in their time-bound physicality indeed becomes problematic—like having to make small-talk at a dreary party out on the steppes while being all the time conscious of those brilliant balls in St. Petersburg and the Byronic intensities of romantic novels.

And philosophical nihilism is coming at you fast.

As Heidegger reports, "nihilism, i.e., Platonism, posits the supersensuous as true being, on the basis of which all remaining beings are demoted to the level of proper nonbeing, demoted, denigrated, and declared nugatory."

### I.37

How devastating the problem could be we see in the *Journals* of that poor, sad, brave Swiss academic Henri-Frederic Amiel, born like Baudelaire and Flaubert in 1821, and like them a major analyst of the effects of Romanticism.

As he notes in the dreadful 1850's, "I am distrustful of myself and of happiness because I know myself. The ideal poisons for me all imperfect possession."

For not only is he cursed with "the ironical temper which refuses to take either self or reality seriously, because it is for ever comparing both with the dimly seen infinite of its dreams," As he also acknowledges,

I hold so lightly to all phenomena that they end by passing over me like gleams over a landscape, and are gone without leaving any impression. Thought is a kind of opium; it can intoxicate us, while still broad awake; it can make transparent the mountains and everything that exists.

With the result that, as he writes at the age of forty-one,

Nothing seems alive inside me any more, or outside me. It is the void, oblivion, nothingness. I am present like a mummy at the march of time, and joy withdraws from me like the light of the valleys after the sunset.

I am nothing, and I am conscious of this nothingness.

This wasn't romantic posturing or play-acting, and the posthumous selection from the journals that appeared in English in 1884 was a there-but-for-the-grace-of-God demonstration of what to avoid.

If you could.

### I.38

It was a very different vision that spoke when William James, who had himself lived through a hideous depression as a young man, said in 1909,

Dive back into the flux itself,... Bergson tells us, if you wish to *know* reality, that flux which Platonism, in its strange belief that only the immutable is excellent, has always

spurned; turn your face toward sensation, that flesh-bound thing which rationalism has always loaded with abuse....

It is a very different voice that we hear when W. B. Yeats three years earlier said, famously,

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body.

It was a very different voice that had sounded in Nietzsche *passim*, in the Seventies and Eighties, in his challenges to Schopenhauer.

### I.39

The affirmation of the body during the early modern period was a double one.

In part, there was the insistence on the body as a source of misery and limits that made its ineluctable claims and reminders, as it did for J.-K. Huysmans' rich young nobleman Des Esseintes in *A Rebours*, seeking to construct his own aestheticised reality out in his country house.

It forced you to attend to its aches and pains, like Des Esseintes' memorable toothache.

It *imposed* itself on you like the emblematic 1890's body of the Elephant Man, so that in the end Des Esseintes is forced back to Paris—boring vulgar plutocratic Paris—by his ruined digestion.

It warned you that all your plans and hopes could at any time be shattered, like those of Ivan Ilych, and that your dying, your inescapable dying, might, like Ilych's, be not at all amusing.

Zola, especially, was the great poet of the adversarial body.

But there were the body's energies, too. Its *benign* energies.

### I.40

The body as celebrated by Nietzsche and Lawrence, or by Tolstoy in the great mowing scene in *Anna Karenina*, is not simply a Zolaesque source of trouble—of boils, carbuncles, tuberculosis,

indigestion, frightful headaches—as it was for so many people in the supremely toxic nineteenth century.

Nor is it just an object to be plopped down in over-stuffed armchairs, fed enormous meals, pampered with the contents of whisky decanters and cigar humidors.

As both art and the growing popularity of outdoor activities testified, the body, the doings of the healthy body engaged in significant action—fighting, swimming, riding, tramping through the countryside, playing games, making love, dancing—could be where you felt most fully alive and conscious, most fully “yourself.”

Looking back on his Mediterranean youth and his adored swimming, Paul Valéry (born in 1871) recalled how

Certainly nothing so formed me, permeated me, instructed—or constructed—me as those hours stolen from study, hours seemingly idle but really given over to the unconscious worship of three or four undeniable gods: the Sea, the Sky, the Sun.

## I.41

Examples of the new physical energy in art are legion.

I will simply remind you here of Anna Brangwyn, big with child, dancing with slow grave exultation in the privacy of her bedroom in Lawrence’s *The Rainbow*;

— and of the Homeric alternations between adrenalin-charged effort and *earned* relaxation in those classic early-twentieth-century thrillers Erskine Childers’ *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) and John Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915)

—and the rhythms of the Ballet Russe that burst upon London in 1911;

— and the jazz that the Original Dixieland Jazz Band brought to London in 1917.

The American philosopher-classicist Martha Nussbaum has suggested that Nietzsche would have liked the singing of Billie Holiday. He would surely also—that celebrator of the dance—have

approved of the irresistible early-twentieth-century ragtime rhythms of Scott Joplin.

#### I.42

Nor, in the new *Gestalt*, did the impermanence of the body's experiencings diminish their value.

During the high noon of Romanticism, A. W. Schegel had complained that

In the Christian view... [t]he contemplation of the infinite has destroyed the finite; life has become a shadow world and a nighttime, and only in the hereafter does the eternal day of essential existence dawn.

But for Father Gerard Manley Hopkins seventy years later, it was a good in itself (which is why it could be emblematic of greater goods) that

a lush-kept plush-capped sloe  
Will, mouthed to flesh-burst  
Gush!—flush the man, the being with it, sour or sweet,  
Brim, in a flash, full!

And for Paul Valéry in his great post-Christian meditation “Le Cimetière Marin”(“The Cemetery by the Sea,” 1920) an organic impermanence was simply one of the conditions of existence.

#### I.43

Death might and did await you, inescapably.

Les cris aigus des filles chatouillées,  
Les yeux, les dents, les paupières mouillées,  
Le sein charmant qui joue avec le feu,  
Le sang qui brille aux lèvres que se rendent,  
Les derniers dons, les doigts qui les défendent,  
Tout va sous terre et rentre dans le jeu!

[Of flattered girls the eager, sharpened cries,  
The moistened eyelids and the teeth and eyes,  
The charming breasts that parley with the flame,  
The shining blood at lips that pleasure rifts,

The fingers that defend the final gifts,  
All go beneath the earth, rejoin the game.

*Barbara Gibbs]*

But those beings and doings of the youthful body did not become any the less significant because “La larve fille où se formaient des pleurs” [“The source of tears the tracking worm devours”]

The glorious Mediterranean sky, and the pine-scented heat, and the sparkling blue of the sea, and the impulsion to go on thinking and creating, are not undercut by the awareness of “un peuple vague aux racines des arbres” [“A shadowy people of the rooted mold”].

On the contrary, you can virtually hear the hum of Valéry’s batteries being recharged in the course of his great and intricate poetic-philosophic meditation

#### I.44

What we have in this kind of “being-in-the-world” (to use Heidegger’s term) is that quality of attention, or what I myself think of as “grasp,” that is so vital in life and that has been so strong a presence and preoccupation in modern art.

It is the quality of being fully present *in* the experiencing, so that everything is there in its thusness and individuality.

It was what that great literary critic, educator, and philosopher of language F.R. Leavis was so deeply concerned with— more intelligently and knowledgeably, where literature was concerned, than Heidegger.

#### I.45

If a good deal has been said, in and around modernism, about fadings and blurrings of consciousness, the feebleness and fallibility of memory, the draining away of the past, there have also been intense efforts towards the recovery of the past—or pasts—, whether in novels like *A la recherche du temps perdu*, or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or *To the Lighthouse*, or in the poetry of recollection, Hardy’s for example (celebrated by both Leavis and Winters).

Even Beckett is as much the laureate of recollecting as of forgetting.

And implicit in this recovering, and in the literary criticism of writers like Pound, and Leavis, and Winters, is the conviction that it is indeed possible to get something *right*; right in the sense that a single photograph of someone will leap out of a batch of contact prints and impose itself by virtue of the feeling of life in it.

“Yes,” you say, whether you know the individual or not, “that’s it, that feels *right*!”

#### I.46

A special kind of focussing is involved in this concern with what Leavis called “felt life.”

“Manet’s eye,” observed Mallarmé, “when brought to bear quite new, virginal and abstract, on an object, on persons, sustained to the last the immediate freshness of the encounter.”

But that seeing, as evidenced for example in Manet’s marvellous late flower paintings, is an *energetic* one.

As Wallace Stevens puts it in a letter in 1944,

It takes an unbelievable vigor to attach oneself to the things that smack one in the eye. It is so much easier to call a wheel a wheel than to see it as, say, Holbein (to take him as an illustration) would see it and to name its parts.

In a discussion of drawing, especially that of Degas, Valéry speaks of how

The artist approaches, leans over, screws his eyes up, his whole body behaving like an instrument of the eye, becoming entirely a means for aiming, pointing, controlling, reducing to focus.

#### I.47

A well-known passage by the British art-theoretician T. E. Hulme from around 1912 in his seminal essay “Romanticism and Classicism” is very much to the point here:

You know what I call architect's curves—flat pieces of wood with all different kinds of curvature. By a suitable selection from these you can draw approximately any curve you like. The artist I take to be the man who simply can't bear the idea of that "approximately." He will get the exact curve of what he sees whether it be an object or an idea in the mind.

That "seeing" is much more than merely visual.

#### I.48

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer sums up a whole tradition of Romantic contemplation when he says:

We do not let abstract thought, the concepts of reason, take possession of our consciousness, but, instead of all this, devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein, and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else. We *lose* ourselves entirely in this object...

We hear a good deal about that kind of apprehending in Heidegger too, and it figures prominently in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Letter from Lord Chandos" (1902), principally with respect to its loss.

As the novelist Hermann Broch puts it in an essay on Hofmannsthal,

As long as objects are to you merely an antithesis to your "I," you will never grasp their real essence, and no amount of intensive observation, description, or copying will help you to do so.... For Hofmannsthal,... insight is complete identification with the object.

#### I.49

But as presented by such luminaries, the apprehending is curiously vague and unspecific—curiously ungrounded.

In *The Trespasser*, his there-but-for-the-grace-of-God reworking of *Jude the Obscure*, Lawrence makes clear how stultifying that kind of gazing could be.

If the two Wagner-drenched lovers, Siegmund and Helena, yearn in vain for a vitalizing meeting of souls during their stolen adulterous two weeks on the south-coast holiday Isle of Wight, a major reason for this is that there is nothing there for them to meet *in*, nothing real for them to share.

In their townee ignorance, the sea and sky and prim landscapes about which they strive to have hyper-sensitive *feelings* remain simply surfaces which they yearn to see beyond or which they decorate with cute personifications and similes.

### I.50

It is a much more *muscular* apprehending that is at work in the art that I am talking about. It involves a strong sense of energies and movements; of bodies in space; of forward-reaching pressures and strivings.

In contrast to William Wordsworth's and Percy Bysshe Shelley's vaporous skylarks, the badger of Shelley's coeval John Clare fighting back with doomed valour in the village street against the heavy-booted louts and the dogs they set on him had been, as Pound would say, *there*.

And so are Hopkins' kestrel "riding/ The rolling level underneath him steady air" in "The Windhover," and Yeats' swans that "paddle in the cold/ Companionable streams or and climb the air" in "The Wild Swans at Coole," and the moment in Hardy's "Afterwards" when "like an eyelid's soundless blink/ The dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades to alight/ Upon the wind-warped upland thorn," and Robert Frost's great lake-swimming buck in "The Most of It" that

appeared  
Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,  
And landed pouring like a waterfall,  
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,  
And forced the underbrush....

### I.51

So, even more, are those bats and goats and fishes, that poignantly dead mountain lion, that beautiful, venomous, earth-golden Sicilian

snake that Lawrence presents us with so unforgettably in his poems.

“Animality,” Nietzsche noted, in 1888, “no longer arouses horror; *esprit* and happy exuberance.”

Animals as Lawrence presents them are neither ethereal symbols, nor honorific human beings like the poor martyred horse Black Beauty, nor people in all but form like the inhabitants of Kipling’s *Jungle Books* and Kenneth Graham’s *The Wind in the Willows*, nor “bestial” subhumans like the imperfectly humanized creatures in H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.

They are beings into whose intelligible energies and reachings-forward you can project yourself in a non-sentimental way, as T. H. White’s young Arthur does later on in *The Sword in the Stone* when Merlin’s magic enables him to “become,” temporarily, in thrilling passages, a bird and a fish—and later still when Ted Hughes evokes his pike and fox and other creatures.

## I.52

The kind of concentration that I am talking about enabled Virginia Woolf to keep a whole dinner party going in *To the Lighthouse*, conscious of how all the fifteen highly individual persons present are acting and feeling at any point.

It enabled Conrad to give us the prodigious simultaneities of “Typhoon” and the even more prodigious ones of *Nostramo*.

It created *Anna Karenina*.

## I.53

And the “inanimate,” too, can be experienced in that empathetic fashion.

There is a lovely passage in Richard Jefferies’ autobiographical novel of childhood, *Bevis*, that nearest English equivalent of *Huckleberry Finn* and published two years earlier (in 1882). It is a passage that, more than any other that I know, makes real and intelligible the Romantic feeling of being at one with nature.

But essential to that oneness here, both in the experiencing and the rendering of it, is a grasp of the particularity of everything, a grasp

made possible by, among other things, young Bevis's reading about astronomy:

By day the sun as he sat down under the oak, was as much by him as the boughs of the great tree. It was by him like the swallows.

The heavens were as much a part of life as the elms, the oak, the house, the garden and orchard, the meadow and the brook. They were no more separated than the furniture of the parlour, than the old oak tree where he sat, and saw the new moon shine over the mulberry tree. They were neither above nor beneath, they were in the same place with him; just as when you walk in a wood the trees are all about you, on a plane with you, so he felt the constellations and the sun on a plane with him, and that he was moving among them as the earth rolled on, like them, with them, in the stream of space.

The day did not shut off the stars, the night did not shut off the sun; they were always there. Not that he always thought of them, but they were never dismissed. When he listened to the greenfinches sweetly calling in the hawthorne, or when he read his books, poring over the *Odyssey*, with the sunshine on the wall, they were always there; there was no severance. Bevis lived not only out to the finches and swallows, to the far-away hills, but he lived out and felt out to the sky.

It was living, not thinking. He lived it, never thinking, as the finches lived out their sunny life in the happy days of June. There was magic in everything, blades of grass and stars, the sun and the stones upon the ground.

The green path by the strawberries was the centre of the world, and round it by day *and* night the sun circled in a magical golden ring.

This kind of configuration—a configuration simultaneously of things in their interrelatedness, of the experiencing mind seeing and feeling that interrelatedness, and of the writer rendering the experiencing—is part of what Leavis was pointing to when he talked about “concreteness.”

## I.54

There are some formal aspects of this “recovering” of the world that I want to touch on in the remaining time.

When writers like Conrad, and Stephen Crane, and Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia Woolf, and the Fitzgerald of *The Great Gatsby* escaped from the grey depressiveness of novels like *Jude the Obscure*, they did so in part by means of what it is natural to refer to as cinematic techniques.

Or, more precisely, as montage, that building up of a scene, long or short, by a succession of touches, details, juxtapositions, of which the quintessential filmic example is still the Odessa Steps sequence in Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*.

## I.55

Montage, whether in cinema or in literature, acknowledges that when the adrenalin is flowing, we do not see and experience things in a continuum.

When we are well, our bodies, heads, eyes, are always in motion; it is only the depressed self, the *paralyzed* self, that stares numbly at a scene from a single perspective.

We see selectively, like tiny short-sighted Stephen Dedalus in the undifferentiated blur of a football game when suddenly “Jack Lawton’s yellow boots dodged out the ball and all the other boots and legs ran away.”

Things come and go, re-entering our attention from different angles and perspectives, in constantly shifting fields of relationships.

Just as they do in mirrors, which, far from flattening reality in a one-to-one reproduction, make it *strange*.

In the evening play of childhood, as Kafka recalls it in “Children on a Country Road,”

Stray figures went into the ditches, hardly had they vanished down the dusky escarpment when they were standing like newcomers on the field path above and looking down.... One

blinked as now and then a youngster with elbows pressed to his sides sprang over one's head with dark-looming soles.

### I.56

And as Conrad, who learned so much from Stephen Crane, knew, things can have a disproportionate “thereness,” cutting across conventional notions of relative importance.

At the end of the slow-motion, Hitchcockian murder of Mr. Verloc in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*:

Finding the table in her way [Winnie Verloc] gave it a push with both hands as though it had been alive, with such force that it went for some distance on its four legs, making a loud, scraping racket, whilst the big dish with the joint crashed heavily on the floor.

Then all became still. Mrs. Verloc on reaching the door had stopped. A round hat disclosed in the middle of the floor by the moving of the table rocked slightly on its crown in the wind of her flight.

End of chapter! Click.

There's no draining away of meaning *there!*

### I.57

Furthermore, in the turn-of-the-century drive to perceive, recover, record *precisely* the way things feel—a drive extending to dreams, nightmares, states of derangement—there was an awareness at times of the looseness of fit between concepts and percepts in unfamiliar situations, and of the linguistic bearings of this.

When the riverboat is attacked from the bank in *Heart of Darkness*, what we *see*, what Marlow sees, is not an-attack-with-arrows-and-spears. Instead, the poleman suddenly and strangely lies down on the deck—”Sticks, little sticks, were flying about—thick... Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!”—, and the speared helmsman

looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell upon my feet. The side of his head hit the wheel twice, and the end of what appeared a long cane clattered round and knocked over a little camp-stool. It

looked as though after wrenching that thing from somebody ashore he had lost his balance in the effort.

But the implication of such disjunctions is not that we suddenly glimpse below us the abyss over which we are suspended on the membrane of language.

### I.58

In the best fictions of Stephen Crane, that linguistically most sophisticated of American fictionists, characters are constantly bringing to their experiences prior expectations of what things ought to be like—a battle, a Western town—and finding that they don't fit their expectations.

But if at times people can be destroyed by that mismatch, like the cowardly Swede in “The Blue Hotel” (1899), they can also, if they are mentally flexible enough, reformulate their conceptions in the light of what is there, and function effectively by seeing more accurately.

This ongoing interplay between the general and the particular, by which we try to cope with the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, is part of the normal processes of living. It is how we make sense—*local* sense—of the world.

*The Great Gatsby* is full of that kind of making sense.

### I.59

In poetry too there was the drive to fasten yourself stylistically to the world of lived experience.

In that major text in modern poetics *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, the distinguished American orientalist Ernest Fenollosa pointed out early in the century that “The whole delicate substance of speech is built upon substrata of metaphor. Abstract terms, pressed by etymology, reveal their ancient roots still embedded in direct action.”

As mediated by Pound, Fenollosa's and Hulme's insistence on *accurate* analogy-making—on the need for fresh metaphors and similes that take you back out into the physical world rather than simply being cliché blurs in the mind—has been, of course, a major presence in twentieth-century poetry.

Again, it was Fenollosa who remarked that “I have seldom seen our rhetoricians dwell on the fact that the great strength of our language lies in its splendid array of transitive verbs....”

Around that time, William James complained that in philosophy “Conjunctions, prepositions, and adverbs play... the vital part.” In poetry there was a major shift away from that sort of structuring and from the magical use of the copula to create relationships and assert identities.

When Pound, turning Fenollosa’s prose translations of Chinese poems into free verse, opened “The River Merchant’s Wife; a Letter” with:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers...,

he was doing something significantly different from saying, “When I was young” or “When I was a little girl.”

## I.60

The concern with verbs—with writing sentences in which something or someone *does* something, rather than simply *is*—had played its vital part in the religious poetry of Hopkins, himself strongly interested in etymology.

It contributed to the vigour of Yeats’s poetry of generalization and summing-up (“And what rough beast, its year come round at last,/ *Slouches* towards Bethlehem to be born?”)

It ensured that there was nothing limp or ethereal about those two major philosophical poems, Wallace Stevens’ “Sunday Morning” (1923) in which

Deer *walk* upon our mountains, and the quail  
*Whistle* about us their spontaneous cries;  
Sweet berries *ripen* in the wilderness,”

and Valéry’s “Le Cimetière Marin,” with its magnificent key-establishing opening lines:

Ce toit tranquille, où marchent des colombes,  
Entre les pins palpite, entre les tombes;

Midi le juste y compose de feux  
La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée!

[This tranquil roof, with walking pigeons, looms  
Trembling between the pines, among the tombs;  
Precise midday the sea from fire composes—  
The sea, the sea, forever rebegun!

*Barbara Gibbs]*

The roof is the horizon-topped sea, and the birds (“doves” seems a preferable translation here) the distant forms of yachts.

And while we are in that greatest of twentieth-century poetic decades, the culmination of half a century of stylistic development, the 1920s, how about the thrilling opening lines of Rainer Maria Rilke’s incomparable sequence *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923).

Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!  
O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr!  
Und alles schwieg. Doch selbst in der Verschweigung  
ging neuer Anfang, Wink und Wandlung vor.

[A tree ascended there. O pure transcendence!  
Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tall tree in the ear!  
And all things hushed. Yet even in that silence  
A new beginning, beckoning, change appeared

*Stephen Mitchell]*

## I.61

An alertness to the energies of verbs made possible the disjunctions and unbalancings of T.S. Eliot’s early—and best—poetry.

April not only “is” the cruellest month, it *breeds* lilacs out of the dead land, *mixes* memory and desire, and so forth. The women whose recalled being menaces Prufrock “*come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo.*” The fog, cat-like, *slips* its tongue into the corners of the evening, makes a sudden leap, *curls* up.

And in the still spine-tingling first three lines of Part III of *The Waste Land*, we have, in terms of the degrees of energy of the verbs, a crescendo and diminuendo that foregrounds the energies

(as embodied in those ostensibly “small” leaves) of decay and death:

The river’s tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf  
*Clutch* and *sink* into the wet bank. The wind  
*Crosses* the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.

Something of that vigour (“Time and the bell have buried the day,” “The dove descending breaks the air,”) would still persist in *Four Quartets*.

## I.62

In a famous exchange at one of Mallarmé’s Tuesdays, Degas told the Master, “I do not see why I can’t finish my little poem; after all I have plenty of ideas.” To which Mallarmé replied, “But, Degas, poetry is not written with ideas but with words.”

He did not, however, say that poetry is “merely” words, any more than Degas, if pressed, would have conceded regretfully that his paintings were “merely” canvas and paint.

The concern with the medium that I have been talking about is not an either/or but a both/and affair.

It indeed requires us to resist, to struggle with, the natural set of mind that makes us want immediately to see “through” the artistic object to a beyond— a beyond of ideas, or the permanent state of mind of the artist (his or her “personality”), or a straightforward physical reality of weighable-and-measurable objects that are simply there regardless of how we look at them.

But just as something is both a sheet of paper with ink on it *and* a love letter; or a cylindrical piece of wood *and* a death-bearing arrow; so an area on a photograph is both a collection of crystals, *and* a dark trapezoid that could have been darker had the developing fluid been allowed more time to work on the crystals, *and* a doorway in an old barn.

And, conversely, if a light-and-heat-drenched painting by Van Gogh draws our gaze across a field of flowers to where red roofs are glimpsed among trees beneath a deep blue Provençal sky, those things are only there for us because of those staccato points of paint, those quick, bold, straight strokes, those swirlings.

## I.63

In Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* (1944), there is a classic account of how you can move from surfaces to depths.

"I'll show you how to look at a picture, " Gulley Jimson tells Cokie as they gaze at a Degas-like painting (his own) of a woman bathing herself:

"Don't look at it. Feel it with your eye.... And first you feel the shapes in the flat—the patterns, like a carpet.... And then you feel it in the round.... Not as if it were a picture of anyone. But a coloured and raised map. You feel all the rounds, the smooths, the sharp edges, the flats and the hollows, the lights and shades, the cools and warms. The colours and textures. There's hundreds of little differences all fitting together....

And then you feel the bath, the chair, the towel, the carpet, the bed, the jug, the window, the fields and the woman as themselves. But not as any old jug and woman. But the jug of jugs and the woman of women. You feel jugs are like that and you never knew it before. Jugs and chairs can be very expressive.... A jug can be a door if you open it. And a work of imagination opens it for you.

And then you feel with all the women that ever lived and all the women that are ever going to live, and you feel their feeling while they are alone with themselves—in some chosen private place, bathing, drying, dressing, criticizing, touching, admiring themselves safe behind locked doors. Nothing there but women's feeling and women's beauty and critical eye."

I shall leave us there. Next time I shall look more carefully into the abyss that I have so insouciantly skirted thus far.

## II: Cold White Peaks and Snug Foothills

### II.1

Last time I took a look at some attitudes towards perception and reality. I was concerned with certain disjunctions and disintegrations.

In the modernist orthodoxy that I began with, either things slip away from us into a voiceless alienness and otherness, or perception itself dissolves into a solipsistic blur.

As the English literary critic Frank Kermode informed us in 1979,

We satisfy ourselves with explanations of the unfollowable world.... World and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them, aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability, knowing that they may be narratives only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermetic tricks.

In this view of things, art becomes a game of fictions carried on, consciously or unconsciously, in an effort to palliate that state of affairs, and to veil from our gaze an unfillable void, a hollowness at the heart of all our endeavours.

And intellectual bonuses accrue to those who are clear-eyed enough to recognize that this is *the* human reality, the nature of things, the way things are.

As Socrates observes in the *Phaedo*,

When a simple man who has no skill in dialectics believes an argument to be true which he afterwards imagines to be false, whether really false or not, and then another and another, he has no longer any faith left, and great disputers, as you know, come to think at last that they have grown to be the wisest of mankind; for they alone perceive the utter unsoundness and instability of all arguments, or indeed, of all things, which, like the currents in the Euripus, are going up and down in never-ceasing ebb and flow.

## II.2

I suggested that these are by no means the only messages to be derived from modern art. And I pointed to a powerful thrust towards grasping and cherishing the world in which we live as physical beings existing in time and space and engaged willy-nilly in action.

The art that I talked about conforms to Nietzsche's statement that

We want to hold fast to our senses and to our faith in them—and think their consequences through to the end! ... The existing world, upon which all earthly living things have worked so that it appears as it does (durable and changing *slowly*), we want to go on building—and not criticize it away as false! ... Our valuations are a part of this building....

Such art is what might be called post-Idealist art.

It stands in contrast to what Nietzsche calls “the pessimism of doubt (a distaste for everything firm, for all grasping and touching)....”

## II.3

But to speak as I have done (even with Nietzsche's assistance) is to feel a nagging uneasiness.

In his influential little book *Art*, Clive Bell noted in 1913 how, when his attention relaxed and he gave way to “using art as a means to the emotions of life and reading into it the ideas of life,”

I have tumbled from the superb peaks of aesthetic exaltation to the snug foot-hills of warm humanity.... And let no one imagine, because he has made merry in the warm tilth and quaint nooks of romance, that he can even guess at the austere and thrilling raptures of those who have climbed the cold white peaks of art.

No-one likes to feel that he has shirked the challenges—and, perhaps, missed the raptures—of cold white peaks, and opted for cozy rambles among the foothills.

Or that he is one of those “other people” to whom William James referred when he said of his own near-breakdown in his twenties,

“I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life.”

## II.4

In the present lecture I want to look more closely at the spectre at our feast that I merely glanced at in the previous one:—in Heidegger’s words, “that occurrence which Nietzsche was the first to recognize and proclaim with full clarity: nihilism.”

## II.5

Nihilism, nothingness, the void. They have been around for a good while now, and some of the worryings about them seem a bit overdone.

In his book on the subject, the theologian Michael Novak describes how

Honesty... leads us to see that the myths and institutions that have shaped our identity are not necessary, solid, and permanent. And at first we are led to feel: ‘What’s the use? Everything is relative. Nothing makes any difference’.

But a philosopher off to play tennis doesn’t fall into despair because he and his racquet and balls are “really” only clusters of molecules, or even less substantial as-if constructs. Nor, when he has just shut out his opponent with his service, does he pause to wonder, “But are we really playing tennis? I mean, *really*?”

When you’re having a long, relaxed, late-night phone conversation with an old friend, you don’t feel pangs of dread because the two of you aren’t *really* communicating.

## II.6

Some of the fussing about death also seems a bit overdone. Albert Camus, for example, suggests in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the

idea that ‘I am,’ my way of acting as if everything has a meaning (even if on occasion I say that nothing has)—is given the lie in vertiginous fashion by the absurdity of a possible death.

Well, I can only say that being disturbed about the fact of death in itself—as distinct from the possibility of that judgment after death that terrified Samuel Johnson— seems rather like being disturbed philosophically by the prospect of becoming wrinkled as you age. As W. H. Auden might have said, Dearie, it's going to *happen!*

## II.7

Nor is it self-evident that what people fear most is the prospect of non-being.

Personally I'd have said that what most of us fear most is *pain*—unsought pain—and that in so far as human values in their totality can be said to be grounded on any one thing, it is on the reality of pain. Your own pain. The pain of others.

It is insidiously easy to talk about death as a parallel to birth. We come, we go, like turning the TV on and then turning it off again at the end of the programme.

But as Tolstoy went to some trouble to remind us in “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” the reality of death is dying, and whereas there is only one way of being born—well, strictly speaking, two—, there are a great many different ways of dying, and most of them are unpleasant.

The narrator of Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* remarks of her mother's death that, “the last minute when you are dying, that may be a very long time indeed.”

## II.8

But of course there's more to it than that. Absence is defined by presence. Something whose existence we are unaware of can't be *absent* to us.

What is dreadful is the loss of potential being.

The child or adolescent feels anguish at the prospect of *missing something*—a party, a dance—particularly when it's because of a prohibition.

He or she can be stoical about the limits imposed by a sprained ankle. It provides a new role, an individuating experience—poor-Sally-with-a-sprained-ankle-and-crutches. But behind a prohibition

—and, even more, your own *yielding* to a prohibition—lies the prospect of a series of further prohibitions and yieldings, all shutting you off from selves that you might become.

Because of your own weakness, you are *never* going to have certain experiences.

## II.9

And we all know the self-disgust that comes with the feeling of waste, of not being sufficiently “there,” sufficiently alive; of living, as E. M. Forster’s Fielding puts it in *A Passage to India*, at half-pressure.

We know why a sleepless night is called a *white* night.

We understand the horror inspired by the 1950’s image of perfect wife-hood as a squeaky-clean void—the model house, the scrubbed child pushed in a stroller through voiceless suburban streets, the Sisyphean cycle of cleaning and recleaning, feeding and refeeding.

## II.10

There are more “literary” emptinesses, too.

In the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “Letter of Lord Chandos” (1902), Chandos speaks of the unbridgeable interior abyss separating him from his “works lying seemingly ahead.”

I can certainly empathize with *that*.

Committed, let’s say, to the project of giving a set of public lectures, you feel with a sense of horror (particularly three-o’clock-in-the-morning horror) that you have nothing to say, nothing in your head, and that nothing will come—that there is a void ahead, a non-performance, a *disaster*.

Even when there *is* something ahead for a writer—glimpses of possibilities that he or she may be able to realize—the prospect of the void of their non-realization because of accidents can also appall. It is horrifying to think that the ideas beginning to take form, the sentences, the jotted notes, the glimpsed constellations, may simply not come into being, may vanish, not be there for anybody else, be unrealized.

At one stage Ludwig Wittgenstein, according to F.R. Leavis, whose companionship he sought out for awhile at the end of the Twenties, feared every night that he would not awaken the following morning, and that if he didn't copy down his thoughts of that day and give them to a philosopher-friend for safe keeping, they would be lost forever.

## II.11

Beyond such dreads lie the systematized absences of full-blown schizophrenia as R. D. Laing describes them in *The Divided Self* (1965), with its endemic feeling of “the emptiness, deadness, coldness, dryness, impotence, desolation, worthlessness of the inner life.”

In novels like *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1930) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) Jean Rhys brilliantly shows us what it means to exist on the edge of that experience, when your hold on your past, even the past of yesterday, is intermittent, people are problematic and menacing, and you cannot bring things into the kind of focus in which forward-moving choices between clear alternatives are possible.

As the heroine of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* tells a pick-up at one point,

“I felt as if all my life and all myself were floating away from me like smoke and there was nothing to lay hold of—nothing.

And it was a beastly feeling, a foul feeling, like looking over the edge of the world. It was more frightening than I can ever tell you. It made me feel sick in my stomach.”

Nor have these stages of ontological insecurity been overcome by the ends of those novels in ways that reassure us of the essential benignness of existence.

## II.12

But of course all this is “merely” psychological. And common sense is obviously not enough when it comes to what Nietzsche calls “the great nausea, the will to nothing, nihilism.”

There is a sizeable distance between unfortunate women adrift in pre-war Paris and London, dependent on men for money, conscious of their fading looks, and drinking too much, and the problems of Hofmannsthal's Chandos (who abandons writing altogether) or Valéry's Monsieur Teste (Mr. Head).

I am suspicious [the latter is speaking] of all words, for even the slightest reflection shows the absurdity of trusting them. I have come to the point, alas, of comparing those words by which we traverse so lightly the space of a thought to thin planks thrown across an abyss, which allow crossing but no stopping. A man in swift movement uses them safely; but let him pause for the slightest moment, and that bit of time breaks them down and all together fall into the abyss. The man who goes quickly *has learned* he must not dwell; it would soon be found that the clearest text is a tissue of obscure terms.

Valéry himself, by his own account, derived "Mr. Head" from an episode in his own life, around the age of twenty-five, that put an end to his poetry writing for twenty years.

## II.13

When we speak seriously of nihilism, we are talking of philosophical nihilism, not of mere local accidents.

"What has happened, at bottom?" enquired Nietzsche.

The feeling of valuelessness [is] reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of an "aim," the concept of "unity," or the concept of "truth." Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not "true," is *false*. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a *true* world.

And not only that.

In *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, Gershon G. Scholem speaks of how, in one of the underground traditions of Western thought, the nihilist mystic,

having attained the highest goal of mystical experience, namely, the dissolution of all form,... extends his mystical

insight to his relation with the real world[;] that is to say, he rejects all values and the authority which guarantees the validity of values.

Nor is this simply a matter of a passive denial, withdrawal, and contemplation.

“In his mystical experience,” says Scholem, the nihilist mystic

encounters Life. This “Life,” however, is not the harmonious life of all things in bond with God, a world ordered by divine law and submissive to His authority, but something very different. Utterly free, fettered by no law or authority, this “Life” never ceases to produce forms and to destroy what it has produced. It is the anarchic proximity of all living things. Into this bubbling cauldron, this continuum of destruction, the mystic plunges. To him it is the ultimate human experience.

Lucifer-like,

The nihilistic mystic descends into the abyss in which the freedom of living things is born; he passes through all the embodiments and forms that come his way, committing himself to none; and not content with rejecting and abrogating all values and laws, he tramples them underfoot and desecrates them, in order to attain the elixir of life.

## II.14

Given the long and powerful Christian tradition of life as a progress towards a destination, with choices along the way which if made wrongly may result in your *never* reaching the celestial city—and the sense of being at every point in a dialogic relationship with a being to whom all your doings are of ultimate concern—it is easy enough to understand the anxieties aroused by the threatened removal of the teleological from your life, and with it the possibility of invoking the name of that being when called upon to justify your moral judgments.

But that in itself is not enough to explain the felt threat of nihilism, given that many of those who have felt it have been only too glad to eliminate—sometimes with considerable effort—the supernatural from their lives.

## II.15

When we speak of nihilism, we are not simply speaking of a philosophical system, the kind of thing that—as seen, for example, in Heidegger’s four-volume study of Nietzsche—can be curiously safe and reassuring.

We are speaking also of *nihilists*.

Technically speaking, the insufferable Bazarov in Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* may have been a Positivist. But when, in Constance Garnett’s old translation, he tells his hosts out on the steppes that

“I shall be quite ready to agree with you... when you bring forward a single institution in our present mode of life, in family or social life, which does not call for complete and unqualified destruction,”

he is effectively being, and functioning as, a nihilist, in what was to become the familiar sense of the term, conscious that “Every man hangs on a thread, the abyss may open under his feet at any minute.” And Turgenev, was obviously disturbed by him.

Annihilators *are* disturbing.

In E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), when Helen Schlegel sits in the concert hall and listens to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony,

the music started with a goblin walking quietly over the universe, from end to end. Others followed him. They were not aggressive creatures; it was *that* that made them so terrible to Helen. They merely observed in passing that there was no such thing as splendour or heroism in the world.... [T]hey returned and made the observation for the second time. Helen could not contradict them, for, once at all events, she had felt the same, and had seen the reliable walls of youth collapse. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness! The goblins were right.

The assertions about nothingness in Forster’s novels are *made*—made by Helen’s imagined goblins—made by the echo in the Marabar Cave with its intimation that “everything exists, nothing has value.”

## II.16

As writers like Conrad and G.K.Chesterton and Borges have reminded us, a profound anxiety can be aroused by the kind of person who composedly makes certain denials, denials that boil down, in one way or another, to Paul de Man's coolly stated certainty that "The human mind will go through amazing feats of distortion to avoid facing 'the nothingness of human matters'."

In his first post-World-War-One thriller *The Three Hostages*, John Buchan's sturdily upper-middlebrow Richard Hannay, who was able to cope with various greying-out of confidence during his wartime adventures, comes close to meeting his Waterloo with that smooth and sophisticated villain Dominick Medina.

I know no word to describe how he impressed me except "wickedness." He seemed to annihilate the world of ordinary moral standards, all the little rags of honest impulse and stumbling kindness with which we try to shelter ourselves from the winds of space. His consuming egotism made life a bare cosmos in which his spirit scorched like a flame.... [H]e made an atmosphere which was like a cold bright air in which nothing could live.

But things can be even more disquieting than that. More *quietly* disquieting.

In Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), a Classics professor describes his wife's conversations with a schizophrenic colleague of his (Charles Watkins) at a time when she was worried about the state of their marriage:

Nancy says he was kind and helpful. But ... she was pretty upset because of his attitude—which was that the whole thing was not very important.... He spent a whole afternoon, she tells me, pointing out that he might have married her, and I Felicity [Charles' wife], and it would have been the same, and that we were all much too personal about the whole thing. Yes, "we are all much too personal about the whole thing." ... Anyway, Nancy found herself half crazy, because of Charles. She described it as feeling as if her entire life was made to look silly....

Faced with the calm confidence of certain denials, you feel in the presence of a system of moves that you don't comprehend because you cannot imagine engaging in them yourself, and which appear to make possible an invulnerable, an imperturbable self-sufficiency of negation.

## II.17

In part, of course, we may be the victims here of our own ambivalence with respect to order, knowledge, and power.

With a high-energy character like Shakespeare's Iago, we know that we are watching a demonic figure shut out from enviable zones of feeling and experience and driven by the will to destroy those inside it and demonstrate his dominative intellectual power. No-one roots for Iago.

But in *Paradise Lost*, given the thinness of the modes of being in Eden and Heaven, and the celestial *withholding* of knowledge from Adam and Eve, we more than half desire that Satan will succeed in disrupting all that nude gardening and proper wifely deference.

Knowledge can bring power. Or at least diminish powerlessness.

## II.18

And a recurring item in literature and in the popular imagination is the book of power, the repository of knowledge that transforms those who are bold enough to open its covers.

Think, for instance, of that strange and marvellous book (it bears little relationship to Joris-Karl Huysmans' actual *Against Nature*) with which the epigrammatic Lord Henry Wotton corrupts beautiful young Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Or of the Kabbalistic texts whose names intimidate us in the short stories of Borges, or the dread *Necronomicon* of "the mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred that keeps bobbing up in the Cthulhu mythos of H.P. Lovecraft.

Or of those works of Sade, *Juliette* especially, that Baudelaire may have had in mind when he spoke of how "an obscene book sweeps us towards the mystical oceans of the deep."

Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* obviously figured as such a book for awhile. In one of George Moore's turn-of-the-century short stories, the protagonist takes a copy with him on a train journey: "Its Nihilism had frightened him at first but he returned to the book again and again and every time the attraction had become stronger."

The power of books can be increased, too, when they were not in fact written *as* books by their nominal authors, but have been pieced together by others. Behind the "unwritten" book, as behind the unfinished poem or novel, such as "Kubla Khan" or Kafka's *The Castle*, we feel the authority of the perfect work that was intended, and strain unsuccessfully, and with a sense of our own insufficiency, to see its lineaments.

## II.19

Ontological dreads and anxieties are especially likely to be aroused by postulated hyper-realities that you can't flesh out in terms of any human doings that you have known, such as when we're assured that none of us ever "really" communicate with each other.

And zones of intellectual power and mystery can become zones of risk, like the Congo that Marlow too eagerly sets out for in *Heart of Darkness*. You can find yourself in a labyrinth of endlessly receding philosophical argumentation, full of chasms and ominous unfamiliar shapes like those through which poor Gervaise wanders near the end of Zola's *L'Assomoir* (*The Dram-Shop*, 1877) in the Paris that was being torn down and reconstructed by Baron Haussmann.

The possibility looms that the world may be utterly different from what it is customarily supposed to be, once your blinkers and tinted spectacles have been removed.

## II.20

Some underminings are irreversible, too.

Young Goodman Brown, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's story of that name, may have returned home physically after watching the witches' sabbath deep in the woods to which his curiosity has drawn him. But he has not returned to the same world, or

neighbours, or wife, and the rest of his days are darkened by mistrust.

The narrator of Borges' story "The Aleph" can never subsequently feel in the same way about his beloved cousin Beatriz, whose "unbelievable, obscene, detailed" love-letters he has been given the questionable privilege of seeing, along with a great deal else, through the magical Aleph, "the microcosm of the alchemists and Kabbalists, ... the only place on earth where all places are...."

As disputants with Socrates found to their cost, one step, one concession, can lead you on by a seemingly irresistible logic to another—and another: to entrapment within a total system; or, conversely, to the disintegration of all systems and order.

## II.21

In his fictive letter, Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos leads us through the stages of *his* progression towards a paralyzing total scepticism.

He recoils from words like "*spirit, soul, or body,*" experiences a growing nausea with normal conversational judgments like so-and-so is a "good man," and feels increasingly compelled to "view all things occurring in such conversations from an uncanny closeness."

But then, *everything* starts disintegrating—disintegrating "into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea." And the disconnected words that he's left with become "whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void."

The disintegration is made all the more unbearable for him by the way in which, at the same time, a physical object, such as a peasant's hat, can still appear charged with a transcendental but ineffable significance—a sense of an unseizable hyper-meaning and indescribable harmony.

## II.22

The kind of anxieties that I have been talking about are intensified if you believe that art is a privileged source of philosophical insight—ultimately, perhaps, the *only* source.

At the centre of the conventional image of art as revelation stands (or lies) the Romantic figure of the Poet as Seer, uttering philosophical truths about Nature, the Soul, Art, Imagination, etc., in an indefinitely continuable monologue. We can enter the poet's system anywhere, like entering a country, and find essentially the same things being talked about, and the same affirmations and denials.

The formal features of the poems don't particularly matter, though they make it easier to remember what is said. The poems are all part of the poet's ongoing discourse and revelation of his or her envisioned world, his (but of course more than merely his) reality.

The reality with which he or she is in touch exists *in extenso*, like the Hassidic wisdom in Borges' *Ficciones* and the law in Kafka's sketch "Before the Law."

And he or she partakes of it immediately by means of the kind of intuition which, in Sartre's words, "has often been defined as the immediate presence of the known to the knower..."

He is capable of what Sartre calls

those pantheistic intuitions which Rousseau has several times described as concrete psychic events in his history. He claims that on those occasions he *melted* into the universe, that the world alone was suddenly found present as an absolute presence and unconditioned totality.

## II.23

It is a blessed state to be in, obviously.

As Chandos recalls of a happier time,

In those days I, in a state of continuous intoxication, conceived the whole of existence as one great unit.

Everywhere I was in the centre of [life]...; at other times I discerned that all was allegory and that each creature was a key to all the others....

The existence of The Poet satisfies our hunger for someone somewhere whose utterances are charged with authority at every point.

The Poet is a voice that is *telling* us things and that it is our job and privilege to attend to.

At times, in fact most often, it will be a voice from an earlier time and hence distinct from us in varying degrees, so that, as with a malfunctioning radio receiver, not everything gets through to us equally clearly. But even when the details are problematic, we must still reach hungrily after what the author *must* have been trying to communicate.

Furthermore, as with biblical exegesis, the aura of authority carries over from the sacred texts to the critic-priest who is interpreting them.

The “real,” which is to say arcane, meaning of the work has to be arrived at by means of the critic’s decoding. The critic-seer sees the Truth in the dark glass, he tells us about it, and we must surrender to *him* (or her)—especially when he depersonalizes himself, avoids “subjectivity,” and acquires the status of the *scientist*-priest.

## II.24

However, that is only one side of the poetic coin.

If your possession or glimpsing of an at times ineffable and always imperfectly communicable knowledge can be like that of the Kabbalists (the *non*-nihilistic kind), it can also be like that of the shabby, oldish, cowardly Second Mate in Conrad’s “Typhoon,” who alone knows, which is to say *thinks* he knows—with a bitter sense of irony—what is *really* going on during the storm, and who shrinks into an impotent panic.

At times, knowing The Truth undercuts the belief that by means of language we can, as Maurice Blanchot puts it, “open up a road that takes one to the dark center of things.”

As Borges reminds us in “The Library of Babel,” each attempt to locate a meaning that is independent of any human utterer, and that confers a self-validating truthfulness on the utterances of him or her who had discovered it, can be demonstrated to be fruitless, so that ultimately the only truth is that there *is* no truth.

Or rather it is that the only truly serious human activity is to try and solve the riddle of the Sphinx, but that all solutions are equally

fictive, centreless, ontologically weightless. Which takes us back towards the demonic nihilism that I spoke of above.

## II.25

But if art can promote such feelings, art can also challenge them.

There are incitements enough in modernism to reject such a view of art while continuing to applaud F. R. Leavis's emphasis on the heuristic, the "exploratory-creative" nature of art.

To agree with Yvor Winters—no stranger to the experience of the void, as his story "The Brink of Darkness" demonstrates—that the languages of metaphysics, modern science, literature, and so on are "modes of being which were slowly enlarged to discover and embody an increasing extent of reality; they were forms of being and forms of discovery," need not lead us towards the void.

Nor need we necessarily feel intimidated by the asserted "rigour" of certain kinds of critical or theoretical explorings.

## II.26

The image of the "real" understander of art as a heroic mountaineer has its allure, of course.

Intensities, particularly the sustained intensities of high-energy heroic doing, always have their authority, especially when, as in the careers of a Conrad, a Wittgenstein, a Virginia Woolf, they are accompanied by a good deal of anguish. After finishing *Nostramo*, Conrad said that he felt as if he had been interminably trundling a wheelbarrow along a narrow plank over an abyss.

And we can understand the excitement of which Hans-Georg Gadamer speaks when he says of Heidegger that:

The tremendous power emanating from [his] creative energies in the early 1920s seemed to sweep along the generation of students returning from World War I or just beginning its studies, so that a complete break with traditional academic philosophy seemed to take place with Heidegger's appearance.... Even in the intensification of the German language that took place in his concepts, Heidegger's thought seemed to defy any comparison with what philosophy had previously meant.

## II.27

Think of all those dramas of seeking to find things out in Shakespeare: of Hamlet, with at the outer limits of his consciousness “that undiscovered country from whose bourne/ No traveller returns”; of Macbeth “bent to know/ By the worse means the worst.” Think of all those dark places of the mind—of Marlow’s Congo; of the pain-filled laboratory in H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau*; of the danger-charged mysterious sites in David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*.

“Freud,” R. D. Laing observes, “was a hero. He descended to the ‘Underworld’ and met there stark terrors.”

## II.28

But something rather different seems to me involved in the idea of the art-theoretician as a sea-green incorruptible like Robespierre, untainted by the muddled sentimentality and absurd desires of ordinary beings.

“It is really incredible,” Schopenhauer announced, “how meaningless and insignificant when seen from without, and how dull and senseless when felt from within, is the course of life of the great majority of men”

Contrariwise, how reassuring it must be to feel, like the Hegel of Alexandre Kojève whose much-attended lectures on him influenced several generations of French intellectuals, that, as Kojève phrases it, “I am a *philosopher*, able to reveal the definitive *truth*, and hence endowed with an *absolute* Knowledge.”—a truth, in William James’ words about Hegel, “indivisible, eternal, objective, and necessary, to which all our particular thinking must lead as to its consummation.”

How splendid to be one of those Napoleonic personages before whose entry onto the intellectual stage (as with the entry of the key character of a play), there had been only errors, half-truths, misperceivings.

How yummy to be able to say, with Nietzsche, “My philosophy brings the triumphant idea of which all other modes of thought will ultimately perish”!

## II.29

Moreover, as Nietzsche reminds us when he speaks of the will to dominance in philosophical exchanges, there may be darker sources of intellectual pleasure.

H.G. Wells' vivisectionary Dr. Moreau recalls the thrill of "burn [ing] out all the animal" by means of pain:

"I asked a question [Moreau tells his reluctant houseguest Edward Prendick], devised some method of getting an answer, and got—a fresh question. Was this possible, or that possible? You cannot imagine what this means to an investigator, what an intellectual passion grows upon him. You cannot imagine the strange colourless delight of these intellectual desires. The thing before you is no longer an animal, a fellow-creature, but a problem."

Nietzsche knew how delightful it is when "One leaves it to one's victim to prove that he is not an idiot. One makes others furious and helpless, while one remains the embodiment of cool triumphant reasonableness oneself—one deprives one's opponent's intelligence of potency."

And R.D. Laing notes how, at times, :

The self is... charged with hatred in its envy of the rich, vivid, abundant life which is always elsewhere; always there, never here. The self... is empty and dry.... It is unable to incorporate anything. It remains a bottomless pit; a gaping maw that can never be filled up.... The self tries to destroy the world by reducing it to dust and ashes, without assimilating it. Its hatred reduces the object to nothing, without digesting it. Thus, although the "self" is desolate, and desperately envies the goodness (life, realness) it imagines to reside in others, it must destroy it rather than take it in.

## II.30

But the greatest and most daring works of intellectual exploration, whether Spinoza's *Ethics*, or Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, or Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* aren't deliberately anxiety-making, or terroristic, or riddled with power-games.

Their authors stay close to the phenomenological concreteness of what is being explored. They are conscious all the time of the “here” from which they start, and of their readers’ expectations and reactions at every stage. They are concerned with taking the intelligent reader as scrupulously as possible to the “there” in which their arguments terminate; a “there” beyond which, of course, there may subsequently be further journeyings. They affirm rather than dissolve the intellectual bonds of the human enterprise.

And modern art too has its reassurances to offer.

### II.31

Let me return again to Conrad, supposedly the laureate of fictiveness and nothingness.

According to Tzvetan Todorov, “That knowledge is impossible, and that the heart of darkness is itself dark, is what the whole text [of *Heart of Darkness*] tells us.” And he goes on to explain that

The final meaning, the ultimate truth, are nowhere, for there isn’t any interior and the heart is empty; what was true for things remains even more true of signs; there is only the reflection, circular and yet necessary, from one surface to another, from words to words.

Hence, he suggests, “the story of Kurtz symbolizes the fact of fiction, the construction around an absent centre.” And if, as in this story, “human relationships are nothing more than a hermeneutic search,” it is a search that is predestined to fail.

### II.32

But *Heart of Darkness*, so far as I can see, proves none of those things.

The story is narrated by Marlow about his own experiences and attitudes when younger. And even though he may have been hoping for revelations from Kurtz—for “ultimate truths”—while he was making his way up river, you wonder what those revelations or truths could conceivably look like.

Kurtz, the Kurtz of whom Marlow has heard, and whom he finally meets, is not an oracle, and even if he were, the proffered wisdoms of oracles are notoriously elusive.

What Marlow felt, and what he describes to his hearers on the *Nelly*, was a superstitious craving for something impossible (encouraged, perhaps, by those little paw-strokes of fever that the wilderness inflicted on him).

It is absurd to equate that kind of longed-for secret-of-the-universe revelation with “knowledge,” and to perceive as philosophically sound the disillusionment and scepticism that result when—inevitably—it cannot be obtained.

### II.33

The belief that unless we have perfect knowledge and communication, knowledge and communication are impossible belongs with the superstitious feeling of some scholars about the perfect text—the feeling that unless we have a text of whose rightness at every point we can be wholly certain, the presence of even a single insignificant error, with its implication that there may be others, makes it impossible for us to read a work with any confidence or commitment.

What *Heart of Darkness* defines for us, and very memorably, is an obsession like those that Borges challenges in “The Library of Babel,” and some related conceptualizings.

### II.34

Marlow is journeying *into* something. He has to go a long distance and with difficulty (indeed, he may never get there) toward a featureless distant answerer. Along the way are a succession of “signs,” all of them requiring to be interpreted in relation to the answerer. And ultimately, after the goal has been reached and reality breaks in, the answerer is revealed as human-all-too-human.

Whereupon malaise and disillusionment ensue.

But even when supplemented by some authorial sleight-of-hand with respect to the narrative (if we don’t know what went on in the conversations between Kurtz and Marlow, it is not because of any existential or ontological mystery, it is because we are not *told*), *Heart of Darkness* remains an account of an obsession, with large gaps in the information with which the reader is provided, and not a revelation of “reality.”

Furthermore, the story seems to me to have been a stage in an ongoing attempted exorcism by Conrad of that kind of craving and obsession, the craving and obsession that Borges was trying to exorcise in *Ficciones*.

### II.35

Paradoxically, Conrad displays a greater philosophical sophistication with respect to knowledge, appearances, and action in the ostensibly much more objective “Typhoon.”

All on board the tempest-smitten *Nan-Shan* have limited knowledge, and some of them make mistakes—temporarily, like young Jukes the First Mate, or permanently, like the cowardly Second Mate—about what is going on and what needs to be done.

But because they are ignorant of some things—Captain McWhirr, for example, does not know experientially what it is like now in the engine room and the coolie hold—they are not therefore ignorant of everything.

They are not acting in error. There is no full, error-free knowledge that any one of them could have possessed. And if we have the illusion of superiority to them, it is because of that God’s-eye view of things that is uniquely possible to the writers and readers of fictions.

### II.36

More generally there seems to me to have been a misreading of Conrad in the emphasis on his irony and undercuttings.

He does indeed provide us with formidable critiques of romantic overreaching, particularly in *Nostramo*, and of complacency with respect to the supposedly solid bases of social order, as in *The Secret Agent*.

But in “Typhoon” he gives us unironically the professionalism of a purposive community functioning for desirable ends, in this instance the survival of themselves and their passengers.

And his presentations of supposedly more sophisticated intellectuals are almost all, in the final analysis, unfavourable.

Just look at them.

Look at Kurtz, for example, the man whom all Europe made—artist, orator, etcetera, and “hollow at the core.” Or Martin Decoud, the ironical *boulevardier*, who can’t endure the solitude of his voiceless islet in *Nostramo* and shoots himself. Or the idealist-anarchist Michaelis in *The Secret Agent*, grotesquely fat and endlessly word-spinning. Or the garrulously plotting Russian exiles in Geneva in *Under Western Eyes*.

In *Victory*, most tellingly of all in some ways, the gentlemanly Axel Heyst can’t overcome his ironical self-distancing and resist, on Lena’s behalf as well as his own, the three murderous invaders of his island retreat, headed by that cool nihilist Plain Mr. Jones.

### II.37

There is nothing ironical, in contrast, about the endorsement that Conrad gives in “The Secret Sharer” to the two young sea-captains, highly self-conscious and reflective, yet effectively committed to action, who live and work inside the same system as Captain McWhirr of the *Nan-Shan* and are deeply concerned with values.

They *must* act, both in response to the challenges immediately confronting them and in relation to the expectations and ambitions that draw them forward into the future—their sense of themselves as they can become.

### II.38

Even in the urban irony of *The Secret Agent* there is no flattening of heroic ambitions back into a world of endlessly multiplied and complacently mediocre common humanity.

We aren’t presented with those endless suburban houses and contented back-yard putterers that so exasperated H. G. Wells, or made to feel the sheer weight of city numbers that oppressed the anarchist “Professor” in the novel and were evoked in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) when “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,/ I had not thought death had undone so many.” Winnie Verloc is the prime representative of “ordinary humanity” in a novel that works in terms of representative individuals, and, as things turn out, there’s nothing comfortably anaesthetized about *her* consciousness.

On the contrary, it is in the intensity of her sufferings, especially the undescribed but all the more real mental agonies after her abandonment by the predatory Comrade Ossipon, that the imperative towards valuing is ultimately grounded.

### II.39

Nor, when we turn to two of the quintessential modernist explorers of ontological insecurity and paranoid dreads, Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges, do we find any concern to metaphysicalize those states into philosophical truth and wisdom, let alone put a Good Modern Authors stamp of approval on our friend the void.

I shall concern myself with those two writers during the remainder of the present lecture.

### II.40

In the short stories that Kafka himself chose to publish and that are assembled, in the order in which they first appeared, in the posthumous *The Penal Colony*, it is the “Typhoon” rather than the *Heart of Darkness* pattern that predominates.

In them Kafka gives us a world of intensely individual centres of consciousness, individual perceptions, individual stretches of experience, individual encounters.

But the encounters are not “merely” personal, subjective, insubstantial.

### II.41

There is nothing insubstantial about the experience of Wese in “A Fratricide”:

At the very corner dividing the two streets Wese paused, only his walking stick came round into the other street to support him. A sudden whim. The night sky invited him, with its dark blue and its gold. Unknowing, he gazed up at it, unknowing he lifted his hat and stroked his hair; nothing up there drew together in a pattern to interpret the immediate future for him; everything stayed in its senseless, inscrutable place. In itself it was a highly reasonable action that Wese should walk on, but he walked on to Schmar’s knife.

“Wese!” shrieked Schmar, standing on tiptoe, his arm outstretched, the knife sharply lowered. “Wese!” You will never see Julia again!” And right into the throat and left into the throat and a third time deep into the belly stabbed Schmar’s knife. Water rats, slit open, give out such a sound as came from Wese.

There is nothing insubstantial about the confident, laughing, whip-cracking Arab in “Jackals and Arabs,” the barbarian horsemen in “An Old Manuscript,” the brutish groom in “A Country Doctor” who grabbed hold of the serving girl and “pushed his face against hers. She screamed and fled back to me; on her cheek stood out in red the marks of two rows of teeth.”

The body’s strivings and resistances are omnipresent in this slim volume, and it is an *active* physicality. Apart from “A Country Doctor,” nothing is said about sicknesses, or about passive pleasures like the comforts of the bed.

In story after story, characters journey to or through something, or engage in high-energy performances, like circus artistry and “free” galloping:

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one’s spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath where horse’s neck and head would be already gone.

## II.42

Nor are there any intimations that daily human existence is hollow.

In the subset of stories published originally as *A Country Doctor*, public structures and doings are far from being merely cages—the cage of the kind of work that takes your energies away from the things that you would *really* like to do.

While no confident commitment of the self to a single structure or mode of being is possible, no blanket rejection of any of them occurs either. The various options that are sketched are all limited ones, but they are real.

There is no hint of any innate absurdity about the civil professions, or art, or technology, or fatherhood. Bucephalus—Alexander the Great’s horse turned attorney—confidently ascends the steps of the Law Courts “with a high action that made them ring beneath his feet.” He *enjoys* his public role; and the public respects both that role and the somewhat unusual self that is filling it.

Doctors endeavour to heal, engineers survey mines, coal-merchants sell coal, The father in “My Eleven Sons” is almost obsessively interested in his offspring.

We don’t have here the passivity, the irony, the feeling of social and personal unchangeableness that we get in Robert Musil’s novel *The Man Without Qualities* (1930- ).

## II.43

And the wide variety of styles and rhetorics in these stories of Kafka’s function always in relation to the given of the corporeal and the communal as we know them.

A postulate may be fantastical—a horse becoming a lawyer, an insurance clerk transformed into a giant beetle—but immediately, as in the magic tales of E. Nesbit or the science fiction of H. G. Wells that Borges so admired, the rules of the body and of the demands and expectations of others (they, too, Nietzschean nodes of power-seeking) come into play again.

Kafka isn’t giving us multiple worlds here.

It’s a single world, our world, apprehended through a multiplicity of languages.

Nor, *pace* the religious or pseudo-religious accounts of him, are there constant intimations in those stories of an infinitely realer “beyond” which casts a permanent shadow over the inferior gratifications of the “here.”

Insofar as there are beyonds, they are fuller and intenser modes of being and doing in terms of *this* world—of “more,” not “other.”

## II.44

If what we have in *The Penal Colony* is far from what Richard Sheppard, in the *Modernism* volume, calls “the vision of an animal

looking out from its burrow on to a world which in its flatness and greyness no longer belongs to him,” Jorge Luis Borges is likewise far from being a writer for whom, according to a couple of others, “the idea of absurd creation, random method, parody or self-exhausting fictionality is paramount.”

## II.45

Like G.K. Chesterton, that hero of his, Borges was frightened by the void of nihilism, the void that he himself experienced during his near-mortal bout with septicemia in 1939 and which, in the first story that he wrote during his convalescence from it, he embodied in the figure of the nihilist-symbolist French poet Pierre Menard (“author of *Don Quixote*”).

Borges brilliantly dramatized the adventures of the mind—*his* mind—among ideas, transposing into physical terms the experiences of reading and the mind’s yearnings and fears.

He gave us fables embodying the allure of the idea of a total compacted knowledge like that embodied in the Aleph of the Kabbalists, “the only place on earth where all places are—seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending.” He knew the craving for *unmediated* knowledge. He understood the frame of mind reported on by R.D. Laing when he says of one patient that

He had various “mystical” experiences in which he felt himself united with the Absolute, with the One Reality. The laws by which he secretly “knew” the world was governed were entirely magical ones.

But he also knew the terror of everything connecting up with everything else, with no fixed point anywhere, in a labyrinth without a centre, like the vertiginous, Piranesi-like Library of Babel, with its “indefinite, perhaps infinite number of identical hexagonal rooms.”

After solving (as he thinks) a set of clues, Detective Eric Lönnrot in “Death and the Compass”(1942) visits the abandoned Buenos Aires villa of Triste-le-Roy with its “superfluous symmetries” and “maniacal repetitions.”

He ascended dust-covered stairways and came out into circular antechambers; he was infinitely reflected in opposite mirrors; he grew weary of opening or half-opening windows which revealed the same desolate garden outside, from various heights and various angles... On the second floor, on the top floor, the house seemed to be infinite and growing.

Nightmarish!

## II.46

But we don't have to remain trapped with the scholars in the Library of Babel, obsessively searching for the key book that will put them in touch with the total, out-there, objective truth about everything, in an infinite regress of attempted authentication. (To find Book A you must first find book B, and to find Book B you must first find Book C, and so on.)

Nor need we settle for the counter-solution of the mythical post-modernist country of Tlön in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940), where the idea of objective truth is altogether absent—a country where all philosophizing consists of As If Constructions whose duty is simply to offer "a kind of amazement," and where a literary critic is free to "choose two dissimilar works—the *Tao Te Ching* and *The Thousand and One Nights*, let us say—and attribute them to the same writer, and then with all probity explore the psychology of this interesting homme de lettres."

We don't have to live in a world in which knowledge is by definition absolute and perfect, error (the absence of knowledge) is total error, and all fictions, being empty of real knowledge, are equally arbitrary, groundless, and weightless, so that all that remains is to subscribe to the ones you yourself happen to find the most "interesting."

## II.47

Detective Lönnrot allays, by rational explanation, his mounting dread in the villa. "*The house is not this large*, he thought. *It is only made larger by the penumbra, the symmetry, the mirrors, the years, my ignorance, the solitude.*"

The narrator of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” demonstrates that “Tlön may be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth plotted by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men.”

And stories like “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1942), “Theme of the Traitor and Hero” (1944), and “Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth” (1951) all show us the successful clearing up of limited mysteries.

Borges loved detective stories, Chesterton’s especially. The stories that I have named are all Chestertonian.

Borges’ labyrinths have centres.

## II.48

Moreover, if Borges was omniverously bookish, he was also fascinated by the military forebears on both sides of his family.

Soldiers, gauchos, outlaws, knife-fighting city toughs, and other men of heroic action are as much a presence in his work as are Platonic idealism and the Kabbalah, and are presented with a strong moral interest in courage, cowardice, and the Conradian possibility of second chances.

He is always respectful towards the energies of the body, even when they result in foolish deaths, deaths on behalf of “honour.”

The wickedest man in his works is the Plato-reading rancher Don Guillermo Blake in the 1967 story “The Immortals,” who “conclud [es] that the five senses obstruct or deform the apprehension of reality and that, could we free ourselves of them, we would see the world as it is—endless and timeless”

In Grand Guignol fashion, Blake

begets a son by one of the farm girls so that the boy may one day become acquainted with reality. To anaesthetize him for life, to make him blind and deaf and dumb, to emancipate him from the senses of smell and taste, were the father’s first concerns.... As to the rest, this was arranged with contrivances designed to take over respiration, circulation, nourishment, digestion and elimination.

## II.49

The perceptions of the paralyzed youth, Ireneo Funes in “Funes, the Memorious” have the instantaneous total fidelity to sense impressions that the literature of Northern Tlon, with its concern for rendering the uniqueness of phenomena like “the vague, quivering pink which one sees when the eyes are closed,” can only grope towards.

But the result resembles Roquentin’s vertigo in the park in Sartre’s *Nausea*, when concepts have slipped away from things, and he sits “dazed, stunned by that profusion of beings without origins; bloomings, blossomings, everywhere... .”

Funes, observes the narrator, was

the solitary and lucid spectator of a multiform world which was instantaneously and almost intolerably exact. Babylon, London, and New York have overawed the imagination of men with their ferocious splendor; no one, in these populous towers or upon those surging avenues, has felt the heat and pressure of a reality as indefatigable as that which day and night converged upon the unfortunate Ireneo in his humble South American farmhouse.

Funes dies at the age of twenty-one, in 1889, during the heyday of the Symbolist movement.

There are worse things than imperfect knowledge.

## II.50

Borges’ shapely and heuristic fictions are the antithesis of that sort of nausea, and of the activities of Pierre Menard. There is nothing absurdist about them.

If I may borrow from myself:

Far from endorsing the trivializing of art to the equivalent of erecting card-houses, Borges observes in [an article on Bernard Shaw] that “The conception of literature as a formalistic game leads, in the best of cases, to the fine chiseling of a period or a stanza, to an artful decorum, ... and in the worst, to the discomforts of a work made of surprises dictated by vanity and chance...” And in the same essay he

praises Shaw because his work, as he puts it, “leaves one with a flavour of liberation. The flavour of the stoic doctrines and the flavour of the sagas.”

Those flavours are also to be found in Borges’ own deeply Argentinian and chivalric *oeuvre*. If they weren’t, his work could never have played so central a role in the evolution of Latin American magic *realism*.

Next time I shall take up the question of power and plenitude.

## III: Being There Together

### III.1

Last time I spoke about some of the challenges made to us by the idea that the void is the underlying, the ultimate, the only *real* reality. And that the person who sees that truth and recognizes how it undermines the games and fictions with which we people our lives is the only undeluded—the only *real*—knower.

I recalled some of the modernist counter-challenges to such a position, and to the idea of the poet as a “seer” in touch with a transcendent Beyond that is more real than the world of “mere” substantiality.

Today I shall speak about power and plenitude.

### III.2

We hear a lot about about power these days, and about how everything is “really” only a struggle for power, a war of ideological fictions in the service of personal advancement.

And for some people that is evidently how things are.

But perhaps power isn't quite that simple

### III.3

When Borges on several occasions draws our attention to Spinoza's concept of the *conatus*—in Borges' words, the fact “that all things try to keep on being themselves; a stone wants to be a stone and the tiger, a tiger” —, he is pointing to something that is central not only to his own work but to a lot of other modern works that I have talked about, and to the constellation that they form.

Spinoza's *conatus*, Schopenhauer's Will, Nietzsche's Will to Power—with all of them we are indeed reminded of how we inescapably exist in time as dynamic organisms, and of what Nietzsche calls the “necessary perspectivism by virtue of which every center of force—and not only man—construes all the rest of the world from its own viewpoint, i.e., measures, feels, forms, according to its own force....”

But what we have here—or *can* have—is not a mere infantilistic striving for total freedom and a total dominance over others—a reduction of them to instruments of our own Sadean gratification. It is a desire for plenitude, for fullness of being, for a realization of potentials.

### III.4

As I have been suggesting, a good deal of modern art—and of earlier art seen from a modern perspective—affirms what Gerald Graff calls “the fact of the *coerciveness* of reality, that power possessed by objects outside of ourselves to compel human interpretations and judgments to move in one direction rather than another.”

I want to say a bit more now about the communal aspects of the striving for plenitude, and about what Hubert L. Dreyfus calls “our shared skills for coping with things in a shared context which Heidegger calls the world.”

### III.5

If, during those turn-of-the-century decades about which I have mostly been talking, there was an intense concern with consciousness, and a greatly enlarged repertoire of ways of rendering its multifariousness, there was also a powerful concern with consequences.

In effect, there was a shift back towards the speeded-up interconnections between thought, deed, and physical results in Renaissance drama.

Ibsen, of course, was the theatrical modern master of interconnections—the web of deed and consequence, of abrupt forkings, shifts in relationships, unendurable revelations —just as H. G. Wells was the master of the physical working-out of an abstract notion (time-travelling; becoming invisible), in ways that were taken further by writers like Kafka and Borges.

And in “The Death of Ivan Ilych” (1886) that master of long-term interconnectings, Tolstoy, had presented brilliantly in a small compass the parable-like relationship between the ostensibly “small” incident—Ilych slips and gives himself a knock while

hanging a picture—and the physical and spiritual agonies of death by cancer.

### III.6

But it was in novelists like Conrad, Forster, and Lawrence, those unabashed utilizers of the melodramatic, that we especially see a testing-out of value-systems in terms of their incarnate consequences, including the Ibsenesque-Strindbergian fact that bad sexual relationships can be lethal.

And the Great War of 1914-18, and the political horrors that followed it, intensified the concern with ideologies and their consequences.

Those virtual coevals Céline, and André Breton, and F.R. Leavis, and Jean Giono, had all survived that war conscious of the gulf between the smooth romantic-classical rhetoric about Duty, Patriotism, Glory, and so forth and the flesh-and-blood realities of the trenches.

And power relations were central to writers like Arthur Koestler and George Orwell in the war-filled Thirties and Forties.

In Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, that classic novel of a growing existential awareness of other selves and of, in T. S. Eliot's words, "Things ill done and done to others' harm/ Which once you took for exercise of virtue," the Old Bolshevik Rubashov is confronted at one point with a broken fellow-prisoner: "The essential point was that this figure of misery represented the consequences of his logic made flesh."

If the melodrama of power has been a growing presence in modern fiction, and if we are fascinated by autobiographical accounts of political imprisonments and torture, it is because in the confrontation between prisoner and interrogator we see at their most concrete the relationship between ideology, power, and the suffering self—and the will to *annihilate* the self of another, not only physically but spiritually.

### III.7

"Nihilism," too, is a matter of consequences: sometimes literally life-or-death ones. A consciousness of the void, of the collapse of meaning and values, is indeed there, waiting to pounce.

It is always possible to feel, with the narrator of Dostoevski's story "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," the "conviction ... that nothing in the whole world *made any difference*.... I suddenly felt that it made *no* difference to me whether the world existed or whether nothing existed anywhere at all."

It is always possible to be invaded by Mrs. Moore's sense in *A Passage to India* that "Everything exists, nothing has value."

And you would have to be very fortunate, or rather insensitive, or both, not to feel from time to time, with William James, that "our happiness rests upon undermined ground."

### III.8

But the caverns that lie below that ground are not a void; they are *peopled*. And for some of us—perhaps many of us—the alternative to reaching forward is not the cool professional irony of the comfortably tenured academic, but deterioration and collapse—collapse into alcohol, or drugs, or sexual disasters.

When Professor Rath in Joseph von Sternberg's movie *The Blue Angel* missteps, his subsequent voyage brings him not to philosophical "truth," but to the night-club stage on which, in a clown's costume and make-up, he stands before his former pupils in the audience and crows hoarsely when an egg is broken upon his forehead.

And the modern literature of deterioration and collapse is by now considerable.

Céline's fever-ridden, fantasizing, masturbating narrator at the outset of *Death on the Installment Plan*; the junk-stupified William S. Burroughs of the introduction to *Naked Lunch*; Jean Rhys's anguished heroines; Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* lost in the ultimate horror of cannibalism; Thomas Mann's Aschenbach, rouged, painted, obsessively and hopelessly pursuing his Tadzio; the appalling human wreckage in Hubert Selby, Jr's, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *The Room*—they and others writhe before us in our modern Inferno.

As do all those "art" suicides that are now part of our collective consciousness: Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf, Hart Crane, Ernest

Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, Mark Rothko, John Berryman, Diane Arbus, etc.

### III.9

In Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight*, the narrating Sasha reminds the reader that,

I'm not talking about the struggle when you are strong and a good swimmer and there are willing and eager friends on the bank waiting to pull you out at the first sign of distress. I mean the real thing. You jump in with no willing and eager friends around, and when you sink you sink to the accompaniment of loud laughter.

In Lawrence's reworking of *Jude the Obscure*, *The Trespasser*, Siegmund Macnair, whose psychology Lawrence himself put so much intellectual effort into escaping from, feels at one point, during his disastrous would-be-spiritual sexual escapade on the Isle of Wight,

detached from the earth, from all the near, concrete beloved things; as if there had melted away from him, and left him, sick and unsupported, somewhere alone on the edge of an enormous space. He wanted to lie down again, to relieve himself of the sickening effort of supporting and controlling his body.

It is a preliminary tremor, pointing forward to his emotional paralysis and suicide after he returns, guilt-poisoned, to his loveless suburban home.

### III.10

Moreover, to be ontologically fragile is to be vulnerable to *invasion* by others: by guilt-inducing voices or half-voices, with their conflicting imperatives, such as clatter away in the heads of the protagonists of Beckett's *Eh*, *Joe* and *Not I*, and which, in a writer, can lead to the kind of blocking in which you endlessly write and rewrite the same paragraph in an attempt to meet sensed objections, with each rewriting starting up a further swarm of objections.

### III.11

Kafka, like Beckett, knew all about such invasions, and embodied some of them in an early sketch in the figures that he called confidence tricksters:

How persistently they blocked our way, even when we had long shaken ourselves free, even when, that is, they had nothing more to hope for! How they refused to give up, to admit defeat, but kept shooting glances at us that even from a distance were still compelling! And the means they employed were always the same: they planted themselves before us, looking as large as possible, tried to hinder us from going where we proposed, offered us instead a habitation in their own bosoms, and when at last all our balked feelings rose in revolt they welcomed that like an embrace into which they threw themselves face foremost.

And you can be destroyed by those manipulations, just as you can be destroyed by the political interrogator.

In Kafka's "The Judgment," Georg Bendemann does all the "right" adult things—running a business, demonstrating concern for his friend, getting engaged, looking after his toothless, grubby old father.

But when he is faced with the trickster-like challenge of that father, it all becomes an absurd play-acting. And with the revelation of the dominative and unworthy attitudes of his own that underlie his ostensible virtuousness, all routes to public action on Georg's part are blocked, and he goes into the embrace of the river.

### III.12

You can destroy others, too, as you try to escape paralysis.

At the party of roistering former classmates, Dostoevski's underground man, an intrusive unwelcome presence, paces the floor in mute passive-aggression for three hours. Later that evening, he takes his revenge on a young prostitute at the brothel to which they subsequently go.

That quintessential modern figure Hamlet, so popular in fin-de-siècle Symbolist Europe, sends Ophelia before him into the grave.

### III.13

But if disintegration and collapse are possible, and if we are always at risk (“We didn’t need Nietzsche to tell us to live dangerously,” F.R. Leavis recalls of the *Scrutiny* group. “There is no other way of living”), resistance, self-affirmation, and forward-reaching are also always possible, if the will to them has not been undermined.

During his frightful depression of 1869-70, William James wrote in his diary:

Not in maxims, not in *Anschauungen* [contemplations], but in accumulated *acts* of thought lies salvation.... I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief, to be sure, *can't* be optimistic—but I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world. Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating.

### III.14

A lot of the works that I have discussed fortify that confidence, fortify the *conatus*, fortify a desire for plenitude, strength, and action.

They celebrate self-preserving aggression.

In none of them are chronic feelings of guilt and unworthiness presented and endorsed as desirable.

They don’t reinforce the guilt-feelings in T.S. Eliot’s earlier poetry or in *The Trial* and *The Castle*, where Joseph K’s spurts of aggressiveness on his own behalf are too often misdirected and silly or nasty.

As do critics like Pound, and Leavis, and Winters, and Mikhail Bakhtin, they help us to resist homogenization and intimidation, the sought domination of single systems with their claims to total truth.

And modernism offers us its heartening success-stories as well as its lacerating paradigms of failure.

### III.15

Attending always to the reality of how he *does* feel, in contrast to how he is supposed to feel in terms of this or that ideology—religious, political, literary, familial—, Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist* finds his way through the labyrinth of voices clamouring for his allegiance and telling him what he *must* be and feel.

The timid, short-sighted, unfairly punished little boy who, energized by images of heroic greatness, makes the decisive turn into the “low dark narrow corridor” leading to the Rector’s room, grows into the formidable (if still sometimes silly) Stephen of debate, daring, and aspiration, prepared in the name of a glimpsed future self to run the risk of making “a mistake, even a great mistake, a lifelong mistake and perhaps as long as eternity too.”

Shy young Willy Yeats transforms himself into the formidable public man who confronts the yelling demonstrators at the Abbey Theatre’s first performance of Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* and calls in the police to prevent the suppression, in the name of Irish freedom, of the free speech of art.

And, like the young Ursula Brnagwyn of *The Rainbow*, Lawrence himself copes with even more complex dangers and imperatives, including the imperatives of Nietzscheanism, in ways that enable him to avoid the impasses in which Nietzsche found himself and continue creating freely up until the end.

### III.16

If we especially cherish writers like Kafka, Beckett, and Rhys, it isn’t only because they discovered how psychological malfunctionings that stood in the way of making “normal” art (and of becoming a “normal” person) could themselves become subjects of art.

It is also because they show us, Kafka especially, what it means to live with potentially devastating dreads and double-binds and not be destroyed.

In Kafka’s “trickster” sketch, we have the build-up of the would-be dominance by the prime confidence trickster, with his sinisterly

snapping teeth, his smiling silence, his self-complacent sense of being part of an army.

And then comes the heartening release of, ““Caught in the act!” said I, tapping him lightly on the shoulder! Then I ran up the steps, and the disinterested devotion on the servants’ faces in the hall delighted me like an unexpected treat.”

In the sketch “Eleven Sons,” there is a Nietzschean tenor to the father’s complaints about the deficiencies of most of his sons that becomes explicit when he praises one of them for acting

With understanding; thoughtfully; brusquely; cutting across questions with satirical vivacity; in complete accord with the universe, an accord that is surprising, natural and gay; an accord that of necessity straightens the neck and makes the body proud.

### III.17

That is an ideal, of course; but for Kafka there are also realizable possibilities.

In “A Report to an Academy,” in which a clothed, erect, self-employed ape explains how he came to be what he is today, the ape’s shipboard cage after his capture in Africa is a real one; and a cage destiny seems at that point to be ineluctably awaiting him when the ship gets to “civilization.”

But by learning how to talk, he succeeds in making a “way out” (“without it I could not live,” he says) and achieving an uncaged way of life and a position of equality with, or superiority to, his lecture-hall audiences.

In the process of self-liberation that he describes, he displays impressive powers of observation, imitation, manipulation, and ruthless self-discipline; and the address itself is noteworthy for its analytical clarity.

It is not a *happy* address, let alone a boastful one, and there is no intimation that he is better off now, or happier, than when he was a free ape in Africa.

But he is far better off than he would be were he a caged ape in a zoo or a trained ape displaying the “insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal.”

And as he observes, “There is an excellent idiom: to fight one’s way through the thick of things; that is what I have done. I have fought my way through the thick of things.”

So did Kafka himself. That he could write so sustained and flawless a masterpiece as “Josephine the Singer” during the last dreadful months of his tuberculosis is one of the triumphs of the creative spirit.

### III.18

In these various victories we have examples of what Heidegger is talking about when he says that Nietzsche “ascribes to no thing a value unless it knows how to become form’... Nietzsche explains such becoming-form here in an aside as “‘giving itself up,’ ‘making itself public.’”

Which brings me back to the individual and the communal, and to the kinds of energizings and fortifyings that make possible a forward momentum; in effect, the will to plenitude.

### III.19

As I said earlier, we have heard a good deal about the inevitable non-satisfaction of desire; and about the seeming absurdity of desiring at all in a world in which values are not authenticated in transcendental terms.

Sartre, for instance, tells us how “Desire by itself tends to perpetuate itself; man clings ferociously to his desires. What desire wishes to be is a filled emptiness”—and how repletion always brings disappointment. The filled stomach will always empty itself and clamour or ache to be filled again.

And Camus offers us the parable of Sisyphus, interminably pushing the boulder up the hill, only to have it roll back down again.

### III.20

But it is curious that so much should have been said philosophically about desire, and so little about enjoyment, given the reality of enjoyment.

Enjoyment—enjoyment of the good seminar meeting, the glorious day’s outing to the coast, the great theatrical, or musical, or athletic event—may be temporary, and less frequent than we could wish, but it is there, and it is real, and we know what it feels like.

And the image of Sisyphus, with the absence of qualitative changes in his pseudo-progression, seems a remarkably inappropriate emblem for a good deal of actual living. It is hard to see in what sense the struggles and rewards of successful parenthood, or of work, that you enjoy (such as university teaching) can be considered Sisyphean and meaningless.

If it is true that, as Thomas Nashe says in “Adieu, farewell earth’s bliss” “All things to end are made,” and that “Worms feed on Hector brave” and “Dust hath closed Helen’s eye,” it would still be very odd to suggest that Mozart’s brief career ended where it began—ended in nothing.

It “ended,” if that is the word for it, in the whole corpus of Mozart’s music, just as the career of Napoleon ended in the Code Napoleon and a good deal else, and the career of Marx ended in Marxism and even greater social transformations.

### III.21

In “Among School Children,” Yeats poses a famous rhetorical question:

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap...,  
Would think her son, did she but see that shape  
With sixty or more winters on its head,  
A compensation for the pang of his birth,  
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?—

As Auden remarked in his elegy to Yeats, “You were silly like us,” and it’s really a pretty silly question when you stop to think about it.

Some mothers mightn't, but others very well might. It would depend on what kind of man the child had become.

### III.22

A “pure, will-free knowing” (I quote from Schopenhauer apropos of the contemplation of the beauty of nature) is not “the only pure happiness which is not preceded either by suffering or need, or ... followed by repentance, suffering, emptiness, or satiety.”

Nor do you have to be trapped in a reductive dichotomy in which the sincerity of the voiceless orgasm—the “truly” interior—is opposed to the brittle falsity of the social carapace.

Or to be dominated by the paradigm of desire as a moving-towards-orgasm *sexual* desiring; with the yearning imagination striving to transform everything, itself included, into the radiance of a perpetual shudder in the loins and a radically different mode of feeling.

### III.23

Collectively, the works that I have discussed in these lectures demonstrate the hollowness of talking about the “meaninglessness” of values in terms of a universal fictiveness and falsity, as if fictiveness and values were logically incompatible.

Behind such a challenge lies the same kind of craving for certainty that I spoke of apropos of *Heart of Darkness* and that Borges speaks of in “The Library of Babel” apropos of the quest for the key book, “the cipher and perfect compendium of *all the rest*.”

And the move involved is like saying that since all cuisines are conventional in the sense that there is no transcendent, revealed law as to whether sheep's eyes and raw grubs are delicacies, all cuisine decisions are therefore equally arbitrary and meaningless.

### III.24

We not only live among fictions, games, codes, we live *through* them, as the great Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga and others have pointed out.

And they have consequences—consequences, ultimately, for the body, as Oscar Wilde discovered during the torment of his plank

bed in Reading Gaol after he failed to take seriously enough the game of the law.

Games are *serious*; which is why we can, and do, and in a sense *must* play them with full commitment and an undivided consciousness, at least if we want to play them well.

When Nietzsche speaks, shorthand fashion, in *The Will to Power*, of “‘Play’, the useless—as the ideal of him who is overfull of strength, as ‘childlike’”, we know what he means.

There is no *need* for figure-skating competitions, and for those prodigies of care, and craft, and innovation that have gone into the performances of Torvil and Dean.

Or for the hours and hours of practice, week after week, that go into the supreme artistry of a snooker player like Stephen Hendry.

But when someone says dismissively that something, the writing of poetry maybe, is “just” a game, a false analogy may be involved.

### III.25

In the free-form games of childhood—Spacemen and Aliens, say—the rules can keep changing or be renegotiated (“‘Pow! You’re dead!’ ‘No I’m not, I’m only wounded!’ ‘Well, O.K., you don’t have to be dead.’ ‘Anyway, I don’t want to be an Alien.’ ‘O.K.’”); and you can leave the game at any point (“I don’t want to play any more”) or collectively terminate it at will.

The players are not “really” spacemen and aliens. Edward and Harry playing pirates in Richard Hughes’ *A High Wind in Jamaica* are not “really” pirates:

“I am armed with a sword and a pistol!” chanted Edward:

“And I am armed with a key and half a whist-le!” chanted the more literal Harry.

So that to say that poetry, or politics, is *only* a game carries with it the implication of pretence, of a disjunction between the emotions pretended to and the players’ “real” consciousnesses.

### III.26

But in games in Huizinga's sense, whether poker, or football, or the activities that go on in courts of law, the players are not pretending to be poker players or lawyers, they *are* poker players and lawyers.

And the games have rules which you cannot change while playing them.

Things lock into place.

It is indeed purely arbitrary whether an ace in a particular game figures as high or low, just as it is purely arbitrary that red signals "Stop" at a stop sign.

But you can make a tidy sum if you have an ace in your hand at the right time, just as you can smash up your car, and perhaps yourself, if you ignore the even more arbitrary red light (why not blue, or white, or green?) at an intersection.

In Camus' *The Outsider*, Meursault, while feeling the total arbitrariness of the verdict at his trial, notices how "from the moment the verdict was given, its effects became as tangible as, for example, this [cell] wall against which I was lying, pressing my back to it."

### III.27

Nor, having voluntarily entered a game, are you free to challenge the moral authority of the rules of the game. As Hans-Georg Gadamer observes, "A game partner who is always 'seeing through' his game partner, who does not take seriously what they are standing for, is a spoil sport whom one shuns."

And even the free-form "pretend" games of childhood have their own rules and moralities with regard to what is "fair" and "unfair," "proper" and "improper" in the agreements by which the games are set up ("But I was an Alien *last* time") and the way in which they are played.

### III.28

It is especially ironical that Borges should have been taken as proffering as a vision into the heart of things the fact that there *is*

no heart but only fictions and games, and that all fictions and games are equally arbitrary and weightless, and that all values too, being fictive constructions, are equally unread.

As I said earlier, he does indeed reject the idea of a “heart,” a single, secret (but discoverable) truth or system of truths like that presumed by its questers to inhere in the magic volume in the Library of Babel.

And he is indeed the modernist writer who has been the most fascinated with games, and the most ingenious in contemplating the logical implications of arbitrary or “absurd” postulates.

But games in Borges are not confined to the *jeux de quilles* of Pierre Menard (author of *Don Quixote*), such as transposing Valéry’s “Le Cimetière Marin” into alexandrines. They also include armed combat—warfare, duelling—in which flesh-and-blood men can die or disgrace themselves if they are not skillful, or committed, or brave enough.

And Borges takes the moral dimensions of such doings seriously. Cowardice and treachery are serious matters in his stories. As is the possibility of transcending them.

### III.29

Nor was Nietzsche himself merely “playing” in his What If speculations and his shiftings from mode to mode, some of them light ones.

He was not engaged in a nudge-nudge wink-wink game of professional self-advancement.

He was struggling obsessively to speak complicated truths and define complicated values.

And the struggle was heroic and ultimately tragic.

### III.30

Furthermore, if we structure reality in terms of games and codes, distinctions still persist between fictions and physical actualities.

For three-year-old Rachel in *A High Wind in Jamaica*, the marlin-spikes, rags, bits of oakum, and the like that she assembles aboard

the pirate ship do in a sense *become* her children, so that she is in agony when one of them plummets to the deck.

And when she metamorphoses other items on the ship—a windlass, a bosun’s chair—into household objects,

what she had marked as her property no one might touch—if she could prevent it. To parody Hobbes, she claimed as her own whatever she had mixed her imagination with: and the greater part of her time was spent in angry or tearful assertion of her property rights.

But when her siblings determine at one point that the lower parts of the ship’s deck “are” water and that you can only pass across them by making swimming motions with your arms, they are well aware—while scrupulously abiding by the rules—that they are not in fact in danger of drowning.

And Rachel too is aware of boundaries between fictions and physical realities. At one point, ten-year-old Emily, exasperated by Rachel’s refusal to take part in one of *her* fictions, comes at her with a piece of iron:

“Do you know what I’m going to do?” she asked in a strange voice.

At the sound of it Rachel stopped scratching and looked up.

“No,” she said, a trifle uneasily.

“I’m going to kill you. I’m turned a pirate, and I’m going to kill you with this sword!”

At the word “sword,” the misshapen lump of metal seemed to Rachel to flicker to a sharp, wicked point.

She looked Emily in the eyes, doubtfully. Did she mean it, or was it a game?

### III.31

And knowledge, “real” knowledge, *is* possible.

When the narrator Borges, in “The Aleph,” recoils back into the complexities, ironies, and lacunae of the real and non-Alephized world and the sets of relationships that constitute it, he does so

without any feeling that what he has there is less true or meaningful than what he obtained through the Aleph.

Likewise in *Heart of Darkness* we see Marlow indeed “knowing” something very well, namely how to navigate a steamboat up a treacherous river with the aid of the kind of seamanship encapsulated in Towson’s *Manual of Seamanship*.

He does not “know” the Congo River in the way that Mark Twain’s pilots, including Twain himself as a young man, came to know the Mississippi.

But the difference is only one of degree.

And there is nothing mystifying about the extraordinary, the really marvellous acquired knowledge and skills of the latter as described in *Life on the Mississippi*.

Or anything fictive about its dangerousness.

### III.32

The detailed anatomy of the Mississippi, as Twain explains to us, would indeed not be there for the riverboat pilots without their elaborate structures of acquired, transmitted, and changing knowledge.

Nor would Emily’s earthquake in *A High Wind in Jamaica* have been there for her *as* an earthquake had the name and some earthquake material not been available to her and her coevals.

But it wouldn’t on that account make sense to say that a riverboat sank with the loss of two hundred fictive lives.

Or that the reefs and snags that Mr. Bixbee avoided during his incomparable piece of night-time piloting were “really” as fictional as the reef-like wind-made ripple that panicked Twain as a cub-pilot. Or as the shoal water that Mr. Bixbee terrifyingly “created” for him, as an object lesson about knowledge, with the aid of false soundings provided by the leadsman.

The threat to Emily’s continued existence that is posed by the hurricane is unaffected by whether or not she can give a name to it.

And a concealed snag will rip the bottom out of a riverboat in complete indifference as to whether the pilot hadn’t known of its

existence, or had known but forgotten, or had been told but didn't believe it existed.

For that matter, a German Chancellor who served a French President sheep's eyes at a state banquet would be unlikely to escape a diplomatic crisis by talking philosophically about the equal conventionality of all cuisines.

### III.33

Nor are *roles* merely fictive and arbitrary, or strait-jackets or carapaces for the free, the *real* self.

Disjunctions occur, of course—ultimately the kind of disjunction that R. D. Laing observed in one of his schizophrenic patients:

By then the central issue for him had crystallized in terms of being sincere or being a hypocrite; being genuine or playing a part. For himself, he knew he was a hypocrite, a liar, a sham, a pretence, and it was largely a matter of how long he could kid people before he would be found out.

The kinds of Nietzschean escapes that I spoke of above—especially those in *A Portrait of the Artist*—involve a rejection of roles into which the hero cannot or will not fit.

As does the intransigent “perverseness” of Jean Rhys's heroines who cannot (even when they would partly like to) be either traditional “good” women or simply sensual “bad” girls.

And a novel like Conrad's *The Secret Agent* derives its comedy—its *serious* comedy—from role disjunctions and slippages.

Mr. Verloc is too *fat* (in the eyes of his embassy employer Mr. Vladimir) to be a secret agent.

The Assistant Commissioner, who is having trouble settling into his role as a Whitehall desk-wallah, outrages Chief Inspector Heat by refusing to abide by the tacit rules of the relationship between (nominal) superior and subordinate.

Heat feels “like a tight-rope artist might feel if suddenly, in the middle of the performance, the manager of the Music Hall were to rush out of the proper managerial seclusion and begin to shake the rope.”

### III.34

But the roles (and rules) on shipboard in Conrad's "Typhoon" are life-or-death ones, requiring an unquestioning and wholehearted carrying out of commands if the *Nan-Shan* is to come out on the far side of the appalling vortex.

And though the young sea-captain in his first command in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" has grave doubts—as does the one in "The Shadow Line"—about his ability to play his role successfully, by the end of the story he has entered deeper into it and, by an act of total concentration and fine-tuned observation, saved his new command from being carried upon the night-hidden rocks.

Moreover, for all three skippers, as for the young Mark Twain learning the art and craft of piloting, their work is where they can be most *fully* themselves.

### III.35

We have also had modernist reminders enough of the possibility of people being together, in enriching ways, inside more or less formal structurings, in which you can escape from your isolation and *increase* your identity, your being.

### III.36

In his 1909 sketch "Aeroplanes at Brescia," Kafka recalls that happy occasion when he and his two friends "jump into the aerodrome rather than walk, in this enthusiasm of all our limbs which sometimes suddenly seizes us, one after the other, in this country, under this sun."

And we observe the heroic ordered energies of a structured public occasion that provides a focal point for the cravings of the crowd in general and for the narrator's—Kafka's—participating self.

We see the possibility of single-minded and in a sense impersonal heroic doing that is at once intensely individual and collective.

When the great Louis Blériot is in the air,

Devotedly everybody looks up to him, there is no room in anybody's heart for anyone else. And everybody looks with outstretched neck at the monoplane, as it falls, is seized by

Blériot, and even climbs. What is happening? Here, above us, there is a man twenty metres above the earth, imprisoned in a wooden box, and pitting his strength against an invisible danger which he has taken on of his own free will.

The flyer is totally focussed on the craft of flying, his mind reaching out to the tips of his machine so that it becomes an extension of himself riding or “swimming” through the air.

He is doing something that serves both practical needs—the advance of flying technology—and the collective desire for self-transcending wonder and admiration.

And, admiring him, others partake of his being.

Including Kafka.

### III.37

Part of the thrill of recordings of great live performance of music comes from that kind of participation.

We are simultaneously *there* on the stage and in the audience with the Weavers in Carnegie Hall, and with Pete Seeger and Sonny Terry in Carnegie Hall, and with Yves Montand in the Théâtre d’Etoile (his greatest record), and with Edith Piaf and Judy Garland *passim*, and with the orchestra and choir and Colin Davis and that host of young people on the last night of the Proms ecstatically singing works like “Land of Hope and Glory” and “Jerusalem,” and going absolutely through the *roof* with joy during the final bow-takings.

And these sharings and empathisings are a sharing in complex cultural definings, given the stylistic and *variousness* of the works performed on each of those occasions, and the rich variety of cultural experiencings and values embodied in those works.

### III.38

Moreover, you can go beyond both the one-to-one relationship (whether of perfect communion or of dominance and submission) and the diffusion of self into the crowd.

As Dommick LaCapra, rebuking Sartre for his failure to see this, points out, there can be modes of relating that “mediate and

supplement human relations in ways that are ... simultaneously structured and open to contestation.”

It is noteworthy how little in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre says about face-to-face discourse—to-and-fro discourse, not simply an attending, or non-attending, to monologues.

And how, for that curious phenomenon Stanley Fish, academic discourse is simply an affair of one person trying to impose his or her “position” upon another, and not a process, part agonistic, part collaborative, in which each of you may learn from the other and modify what you had previously thought.

After watching him in action on one occasion, I remarked to a colleague that Fish’s role model appeared to be Jimmy Cagney in his gangster mode.

“No,” he replied, “it’s Leo Gorcey” (of the Bowery Boys).

### III.39

If our consciousnesses are permeated by games—as those of intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not—this is partly because games, when rightly played, epitomize the possibility of doing things with others in a public context with complete and non-destructive concentration.

In games you can be fully present in ways that eliminate the consciousness of a gap between the doing and the observing self.

As Heidegger says, bodily states can “lift a man out beyond himself.”

In games, as Lance Morrow observes of the Olympics, it is possible at times to see “something close to perfection; athletes utterly inhabiting the instant of the act.”

In such instants—and in the instants described by Eugen Herrigel in *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1948) and celebrated by Hemingway in his accounts of “good” bull-fights—, we have what the American psychologist Abraham Maslow calls

the Japanese concept of *muga*... the state in which you are doing whatever you are doing with a total wholeheartedness, without thinking of anything else, without any hesitation,

without any criticism or doubt or inhibition of any kind whatsoever.

That, it seems to me, is the true antithesis of nothingness. Nor is it confined to bodily doings.

### III.40

If we have had modernist assertions aplenty about isolation and the impossibility of communication (“We think of the key, each in his prison/ Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison”; thus T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*), we have also had an abundance of tacit counter-assertions and demonstrations.

Modernism has been an affair not only of heroic solitary endeavours in which, like Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, artists figuratively ride into the valley of death with the Six Hundred, or struggle to advance from Q to R (“On, then, on to R”).

It has also been an affair of groups—of Futurists, Imagists, Dadaists, Surrealists; of the Bloomsbury Group, the Black Mountain group, and so forth—and of collectively-created manifestoes, and collaboratively edited little magazines, and shoe-string experimental theatres.

### III.41

In Paris in the 1890s, Valéry recalls, a young writer

would go to one of those cafés—only a few have survived—that played such a great role in elaborating the countless literary schools of the period. A history of literature that failed to mention the existence or function of such establishments would be dead and valueless. Like the literary salons, the cafés were true laboratories of ideas, the scene of interchanges and collisions, the medium for groups and differentiations, in which the greatest intellectual activity, the most fertile disorder, an extreme liberty of opinion, clashing personalities, wit, jealousy, enthusiasm, pitiless criticism, laughter, insults, all contributed to an atmosphere that was sometimes intolerable, always stimulating, and strangely miscellaneous.

Some of the modernist groups had a lot of *fun* together, too, like the Surrealists exploring the music halls and the Grands

Boulevards in search of the marvellous, or the Bloomsburies giggling, and gossiping, and talking seriously and *freely* together, knowing each other's weaknesses of the flesh, and not seeking to take intellectual advantage of that knowledge.

We have had some memorable celebrations of friendship, too, in novels like *A Passage to India* and poems like Pound's "Exile's Letter" and Yeats' "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," and, for that matter, Beckett's signature play *Waiting for Godot*, abstracted from the work of the most enduringly and endearingly funny of the classic film comedians, those friends despite everything, Laurel and Hardy.

### III.42

So you can see why Virginia Woolf should have placed a dinner party at the centre of that quintessential modernist text *To the Lighthouse*.

If we again and again come up against a void in the Romantic, or Romantic-derived, philosophical-aesthetic formulations about pleasure and desire, it is because of the vagueness and crudeness with which such pleasures are conceived of and rendered.

In Pushkin's *Eugène Onegin*, it is obvious that those romantically yearning young men are yearning for a *blank* with respect to women.

And a good deal of disillusionment comes down the road once the idealized "beautiful soul" that can mingle with your own and become *one* with it, so that instantaneous perfect communication is possible, is replaced after marriage with a flesh-and-blood young woman of limited education and experience, who wants to talk about the drunken cook's misdoings and the children's need for new clothes.

So too with those Romantic vapourings about contemplating landscapes without the assistance of structuring concepts (the names of flowers and trees, an understanding of the weather) or an *aim* to the looking (as in the hunter's or naturalist's walk through the woods).

And some of the Germanic vagueness about pleasure—and assertions about its delusoriness—was no doubt related to the inferiority of German cuisine to French.

### III.43

In literature, to speak again of “concreteness,” *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is of course still *the* great literary paradigm of conviviality.

It convincingly presents persons engaged in pleasurable collective doings on the hunting field and in the banqueting hall.

And it demonstrates how the ability to make fine discriminations in those doings, with the aid of shared codes of behaviour and a rich and precise vocabulary, can carry over into the more intimate negotiations of the bed-chamber.

Its richness shows up all the more the poverty of the doings and feelings available in *Paradise Lost* in the celestial court (“large but insufficiently furnished apartments filled by heavy conversation,” as T. S. Eliot acidly described them) and the supposed paradisiacal Garden of Eden.

And while “effectiveness” is clearly involved in conviviality (giving a successful party is very satisfying), the feeling of effectiveness, as with good sex or an enjoyable conversation, comes by way of giving *pleasure* to others.

Someone can be brought to full presence in the enjoyment of a dish or a joke, as well as in the moment of orgasm.

### III.44

There is another way, too, in which the successful party or discussion group is emblematic.

For a good while, one of the prime images of collective happiness for a good many intellectuals was the traditional jazz group, especially when improvising in jam sessions. The lead instrument, whether trumpet or tenor sax, was simply *primus inter pares*, and everyone contributed to the development of a theme. And there was such a lovely poetry of place and social interaction in what they played—“Darktown Strutter’s Ball,” “High Society,” “When the Saints Go Marching In,” “Royal Garden Blues,” on and on—

and such an abundance of tragic life in the blues, and such a plethora of gorgeous melodies, those greatest organizers of emotion.

Part of the happiness of a lively dinner party or seminar discussion in which people are *not* seeking to dominate each other in a neo-Nietzschean fashion or play politics is that you discover anew the created nature of values and perceptions, in a process that is in a sense disinterested. People are not primarily focussing on one another, though they are *attending* to what others say. They are focussing together on a common subject—on a current political scandal, or the metrics of Hardy’s “During Wind and Rain,” or whatever.

And if the image of the crime-caper has been so popular, it is not because the would-be bank robbers are all buddies. It is because they are working inside a structure of conventions, rules, and roles which, as in a sport’s team, or a ship’s crew, or a jazz band, or even (sometimes) an academic committee, makes it possible for people who may not like one another at all to co-operate for limited purposes and with respect for one another’s expertise.

### III.45

Furthermore, if we keep coming back mentally to Socrates in ways that we don’t with Aristotle, it is because the Platonic texts are *dialogues*.

In some of them, admittedly, such as the insufferable *Republic*, the dialogue-form is simply a rhetorical device—partly a way of avoiding the tedium of pure monologue, partly a specious way of giving “authority” to what is said.

It is *Socrates* saying these things (and we know how wise *he* is); and what he’s saying is made even wiser by his stooges’ unfailing agreement with him.

But the great dialogues, such as the *Gorgias*, are genuinely multi-perspectival and agonistic.

### III.46

And *the* reality that is demonstrated in them is not the hyperreality of the Ideas or Forms, or the alleged reality of a historical Socrates saying these things (with Plato there as his Boswell).

It is the reality of people—these speakers, other possible speakers—discoursing together.

It is these explorings, enterings into, openings-up, these sort-of-end-points reached in arguments, these moves and manoeuvres in wrestling-like power struggles.

And from them—again I am speaking of the best dialogues—we construct, or allow to emerge, the totality that we call “Socrates,” in all his textual gusto, curiosity, courage, trickiness; the man whose comportment when the jailer brings him the cup of hemlock still moves us profoundly.

This is the reality that gets most fully affirmed and demonstrated in the dialogues—not the reality of the Ideas.

And it is not undercut by the putative existence of the Ideas.

You have no inclination to say that all this is “merely” human and approximative, and that it doesn’t “really” matter whether Socrates recants and lives or drinks the hemlock and dies.

Any more than you do when reading in Boswell about the English Socrates, Samuel Johnson, and his always-hovering depression, and his lethargy (by his own account), and his heavy drinking at one point (by his own account), and his terror of death, and his hunger for companionship—and also his passion for truth, his love of argumentation, his courage, humour, insatiable interest in so many human doings, present and past.

### III.47

It is in and through discourse that our stabilizings occur, the stabilizings both of our “selves” and of our values.

We come alive (as we put it) when we lose ourselves happily in an unexpectedly enjoyable conversation with a stranger at a party.

A seminar discussion picks up momentum and draws us out of our dry-as-dust solitude, so that we suddenly discover that we *do*, after all, have things to say and feel about “During Wind and Rain.”

No irony is intended in Beckett’s *Happy Days* when Winnie, buried up to her waist in sand, and unable to see Willie, or to get more than an occasional few words of response from him,

exclaims: “Ah well what a joy in any case to know you are there, as usual, and perhaps awake, and perhaps taking all this in, some of all this, what a happy day for me ... it will have been.”

It is through that sense of an auditor that you reach forward—that you are *able* to speak and be.

We know what it means to be fully present in our words in the same way that we are fully present in the movements of a game; particularly in the intensifications of humour and indignation.

When Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, knitting a stocking for her son James, says, “‘Stand still. Don’t be tiresome,’ ... he knew instantly that her severity was real, and straightened his leg and she measured it.”

### III.48

It is an I/Thou stabilizing that we see in the prodigious letter-writing of authors like Lawrence and Woolf

They are engaged in an ongoing shaping, articulating, reaching forward.

While things are *happening* (a temporary blocking with a book, a row with a housemaid), they are already “talking” about them in their head, or feeling the shapes of a potential talking-about.

The stabilizing goes on, too, in the journal-keeping of Woolf and Mansfield and others.

It is a talking-about that is not simply a talking to yourself, but a talking fit to be overheard—or, at some future point *read*—by someone else, perhaps an ideal Other who sees what you are trying to do and is tolerant of your inadequacies.

It is what used to be available to people in prayer: “Sing ... Sing your song, Winnie.... No? ... Then pray.... Pray your prayer, Winnie.... Pray your old prayer, Winnie” (thus Beckett’s *Happy Days*).

### III.49

In a moving account of a brain-damaged patient who came “alive,” came *back* to himself in prayer, the neurologist Oliver Sacks

observes that “Memory, mental activity, mind alone, could not hold him, but moral attention and action could hold him completely.”

For many of us such stabilizings (like those of the confession box) are no longer available, at least in quantity.

But it is still in the act of communicating that the self can come to full presence and being; whether in the “private” intimacies of love and friendship, or in public debate, or good seminar discussions, or the right kinds of writing.

### III.50

And in poetry, particularly the poetry of address, we can still enter into I/Thou voicings, with no sense of seeing something *past*, as if through the wrong end of a telescope.

Those hanged men of François Villon’s great fifteenth-century ballade are there on that Paris gibbet addressing *us*, their *frères humains* (human brothers) and admonishing us not to scorn them.

Abraham Cowley’s grief still speaks to us from the seventeenth century in “On the Death of Mr. William Hervey” ( “My dearest Friend, would I had died for thee!/ Life and this world henceforth will tedious be”) as it did to Yeats, who took over Cowley’s stanza form for “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory.”

Rihaku’s eighth-century river-merchant’s young wife, as reanimated by Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, still tells him (and us) how

At fifteen I stopped scowling  
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours  
Forever and forever and forever

And the best of Hardy’s poems of love, and remorse, and an unsentimentalized self-forgiveness addressed to his recently dead wife in 1912 and 1913 are by general consent among the greatest twentieth-century poems in English.

### III.51

It is in discourse too—in the act of remembering, memorializing, celebrating—that we are given the most intimate public reminders

of where a species of immortality is to be found in a world without any supernatural transcendence.

Death may indeed, as Wallace Stevens says in “Death of a Soldier,” be “absolute.” Virginia Woolf gives us something of that absoluteness in the famous passage in *To the Lighthouse* in which we read how: “Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.”

But if death is absolute, it need not be (Stevens’ poem again) “without memorial.”

Mrs. Ramsay goes on living and working in the minds of others:

She lives on for Lily Briscoe, pondering her charms, her values and urgings (“One must get married!”), her mistakes in judgment

— lives on for her daughter Cam in the subliminal echoings of her comforting words when putting her to sleep as a child;

—lives on for Woolf herself writing the book that her sister Vanessa, as Woolf put it later in her journals, found “an amazing portrait of mother; ... has lived in it; found the rising of the dead almost painful.”

### III.52

I have touched a number of times on “incarnation”: on those processes by and in which ideas, values, possibilities are embodied in the physical—this child, that edifice, those modes of rule-governed behaviour at the meetings of groups.

It is in such embodiments—in Borges’ epitomizing moments, in Yeats’s “Character isolated by a deed/ To engross the present and dominate memory”—that values live for us.

As Sartre observes, “I can achieve an intuition of values in terms of concrete exemplifications; I can grasp nobility in a noble act.”

### III.53

I have also referred a number of times to the modern concern with recollecting and memorializing—in poetry, above all, in the work of Hardy and Yeats.

It is here, in the valuing of others, that we can escape the void of death, in contrast to the dreadfulness of feeling that when you go into the dark you will indeed cease to be—that like poor Jude in *Jude the Obscure* or George Gissing’s sad, failed, low-energy novelist Edward Reardon in *New Grub Street* (1891), you will soon be forgotten except as an “object” or a case. That you have *had* no effect.

And the process is a double one. The Yeats who revised his style so as to permit of particularity, and who immortalized Robert Gregory, and his mother Lady Augusta Gregory, and others in whom he saw certain values epitomized, also came to incarnate in himself some of the values, the modes of being, that he admired.

And he and those whom he celebrated live on for us. A gap closes here.

As Wallace Stevens puts it,

When Horatio says,

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

are not the imagination and reality equal and inseparable?

### III.54

In a well-known passage, F. R. Leavis observes of Lawrence (no stranger himself to the experience of negation) that his

‘insights’ were a matter of being able to see what was there as only genius can, and they went with an extraordinary power of relating insights, and not only of understanding situations comprising elements difficult to get at and recognize, but of understanding whole comprehensive and complete fields of experience.

I have been suggesting (with the austerity of those cold white peaks of art in mind) that the “full” is more challenging than the “empty.”

The formless, the unshaped, the uninviduated isn’t the *true* form of how things really are, any more than houses are “really” only bricks, and bricks are really only clay, and clay is really only—

well, whatever the scientists have to tell us about molecules, and atoms, and sub-atomic particles.

The circus in *Huckleberry Finn*, with its marvellous skills and elaborately incarnated fictions, is not less real than the squalid, low-energy Arkansas village outside. It is *more* real, in the sense of being more charged with meanings.

In that respect, *Huckleberry Finn*, with its constant enrichments, including the circus, the admired elegance of the Grangerford household, and the decencies of the Phelps' plantation, represents a journey *into* civilization and not a journey away from it.

And if writers like Mallarmé and Nietzsche allure and disquiet us, it is not because their *oeuvres* are like water in a bathtub endlessly swirling away down a hole into vacancy, but because of the rich and various individuations of “L'Après-Midi d'un Faune,” and “Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui,” and so on, and all the rich insights that come via the multiple languages of a book like *Beyond Good and Evil*.

When we value such writers, it is not on account of an absence which they have experienced or to which they point us.

It is on account of a presence, the rich presence of their art.

### III.55

Nihilism, nausea, the great denial are always there, they are always possible.

When Marlow was out in the jungle at night trying to persuade the fevered Kurtz to return to the steamboat with him,

“Don't you see [he tells his listeners] the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head—though I had a very lively sense of that danger, too—but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low.”

It is frightening to be reminded that, in one sense, values are indeed beyond the reach of argument, in that someone cannot be *argued* into empathy, and that in that sense there is indeed nothing *inevitable* about the human contract.

And “value”—a sense of the charged, significant three-dimensionality of things, and the possibility of moving forward in dialogic relationships with others—is always at risk.

### III.56

As R. D. Laing notes, we are only three or four degrees of fever away from the experience of derealization. And, when you gaze into it too long, the abyss may indeed gaze back at you—and swallow you.

There is a melancholy wisdom in Yvor Winters’ reference, apropos of a poem by Ben Jonson, to “one of the elementary facts of life: the fact that a middle-aged man of intelligence is often readier to die than to live if he merely indulges his feelings.”

It is always possible to find yourself sitting with Mrs. Ramsay at the dining-room table at the start of the dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*:

At the far end, was her husband, sitting down, all in a heap, frowning. What at? She did not know. She did not mind. She could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or affection for him. She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything.... It’s all come to an end, she thought....

When value, worth, meaning have drained away, it may be as hard to argue with yourself on their behalf—that is, to imagine a realizable future of significance—as it was for Marlow to argue with Kurtz.

Even Marlow’s “You will be lost, ... utterly lost” (which worked with Kurtz) may not be enough to save you. Ultimately Virginia Woolf loaded her pockets with stones and walked into the river.

### III.57

And creative momentum can be lost.

At one point, says the narrator of H.G. Wells’ *Tono-Bungay*, George Ponderevo, “I had a very bad time.... I suffered, I suppose, from a sort of *ennui* of the imagination. I found myself without an object to hold my will together.”

If spatial metaphors or depth and height and distance keep cropping up with respect to thought, whether the river of *Heart of Darkness*, or those chilly peaks (Swiss, no doubt) of Clive Bell, or Mr. Ramsay's sense in *To the Lighthouse* of making his way with increasing difficulty through the letters of the alphabet ("In that flash of darkness he heard people saying—he was a failure—that R was beyond him. He would never reach R. On to R, once more. R —"), it is because they accord with the experience of risk in any large undertaking whose worth and outcome you can't be sure of at the outset, and which you fear may be beyond your capacity to accomplish.

In Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths," the narrator suggests that "Whosoever would undertake some atrocious enterprise should act as if it were already accomplished, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past."

It is that kind of momentum, with its existential commitment, that nihilist irony, however masked with talk about "rigour," seeks to block and break when it intimates that all journeys are essentially the same, that all paths lead to the same goal, and that that goal, "the desolation of reality" of Yeats's "Meru," is already known.

After his visit to the English bookshop in Paris, and his enormous meal in the "English" restaurant, Huysman's Des Esseintes decides that he may as well give up his projected trip to London and return to the environment of fictions that he has constructed for himself in his country house.

### III.58

But art—including modern art—admonishes us not to accord the wrong kind of value to the demoralizers.

As Forster tells us of Helen's concert and those nihilistic imagined goblins in *Howards End*,

Beethoven chose to make all right in the end. He built the ramparts up. He blew with his mouth for the second time, and again the goblins were scattered. He brought back the gusts of splendour, the heroism, the youth, the magnificence of life and of death, and amid vast roarings of a super-human joy, he led his Fifth Symphony to its conclusion. But the goblins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely, and

that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things.

If we value Mrs. Ramsay, it is not because in her moments of aridity or terror she has seen through the veil to that *real* nature of things that we do our best to ignore.

It is because of how she refuses to give way to her feelings of fragility and impermanence, and continues living in a familial world of other consciousnesses and bodies whose feelings and doings matter—a world of consequences, and of obligations to intervene.

### III.59

The void is indeed there in Mrs. Ramsay's sense of flux and formlessness and the precariousness of her own identity.

There are gulfs and gaps between the characters. They misunderstand one another, fail to say what they feel, are puzzled by one another. They threaten each other with their being: demand responses, are so powerful themselves (like Mrs. Ramsay) that someone like Lily Briscoe must fight to preserve—and value—her sense of her own identity.

But people come together as well, in the ongoing doings of the day and in the larger patterns of their relationships. Talk matters, quality matters (whether in a book or the triumphant boeuf-en-daube at the Ramsays' dinner party), things and doings always have *value*.

### III.60

And when (to arrive now at my own final closure) Mrs. Ramsay overcomes her sense of weariness, aridity, and alienation, and gradually transforms those around her, the party becomes, like the boeuf-en-daube, a triumph, and a permanent part of our consciousness—our *modern* consciousness:

Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment while they were all talking about boots) just now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily,

solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought, looking at them all eating there, from husband and children and friends; all of which rising in this profound stillness (she was helping William Bankes to one very small piece more, and peered into the depths of the earthenware pot) seemed now for no special reason to stay there like a smoke, like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt, carefully helping Mr. Bankes to a specially tender piece, of eternity; as she had already felt about something different once before that afternoon; there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures.

## Sources

Here is a list of the works that I've quoted from.

The roman numerals indicate which of the three lectures a quotation appears in.

The Arabic numerals adjoining them indicate the sections in the lectures. The italicized numerals refer to pages in the works themselves.

Where a work is quoted from more than once in a section, I have followed the sequence of the quotations. Since sections are short and I always name the authors in the text, it is reasonably easy to identify the sources.

In one or two instances, where I've used question marks, I was unable to make my way back to the source.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Allen, Woody**, "The Condemned," *Side Effects* (N.Y., Random House, 1980). I/1, 9.

**Amiel, Henri-Frédéric**, *Amiel's Journal; the Journal Intime of Henri Frédéric Amiel*, introd. Mrs. Humphrey Ward (London, Macmillan, 1889). I/37. 9, 50, 61, 132.

**Arendt, Hannah**, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd enl. ed., Meridian Books (Cleveland, and N.Y., World, 1958), I/15, 81.

**Auden, W.H.** "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," *The English Auden; Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London, Faber, 1977). III/21, 242.

**Auden, W.H.**, "September 1, 1939," *The English Auden*. I/3. 246.

**Baudelaire, Charles**, *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies*, trans., ed. and introd. Jonathan Mayne (Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Books, 1956). II/18. 69.

**Baudelaire, Charles**, “Les Sept Vieillards,” Angel Flores, ed., *An Anthology of French Poetry from Nerval to Valéry in English Translation with French Originals*, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958). I/21, 307-308; trans. Barbara Gibbs, “The Seven Old Men,” 34-35.

**Baudelaire, Charles**, “Le Voyage,” in Angel Flores, ed., *An Anthology of French Poetry*. I/20, 315-319; trans Barbara Gibbs, “The Voyage,” 45-50.

**Beckett, Samuel**, *Happy Days, Collected Works* (N.Y., Grove, 1970). I/1, 54. III/47, 34 III/48, 48.

**Bell, Clive**, *Art* (N.Y., Capricorn Books, 1958). II/3. 31

**Benjamin, Walter**, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, trans Harry Zohn, ed. and introd. Hannah Arendt (N.Y., Schocken, 1969). I/19, 184-5.

**Blanchot, Maurice**, quoted by Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*. II/24, 69.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**, “The Aleph,” *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969*, ed. and trans Norman Thomas di Giovanni, in collaboration with the author (N.Y., Bantam, 1971). II/20, 14, 10-11.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**, “Borges and Myself” (1956), *The Aleph and Other Stories*. III/3. 99.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**, “Death and the Compass,” *Ficciones*. II/45, 138.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**, “An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain,” *Ficciones*, ed. and introd Anthony Kerrigan (N.Y. Grove, 1962). I/15, 75.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**. “Funes, the Memorious,” *Ficciones*. II/49, 114.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” *Ficciones*. III/57, 92-93.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**, “The Library of Babel,” *Ficciones*. III/23, 85.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**, “A Note on (towards) Bernard Shaw,” *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, pref. André Maurois (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982). II/50, 249, 251.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” *Ficciones*, II.46. 25, 28.

**Borges, Jorge Luis**, with **Adolfo Bioy-Casares**, “The Immortals,” *The Aleph and Other Stories*. II/48, 110

**Boswell, James**, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 2 vols. In one, vol.1 (London, Oxford U. P., 1946). I/7. 315.

**Bradbury, Malcolm** and **James McFarlane**, “The Name and Nature of Modernism,” in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976). I/2, 51, 26. I/5, 50. II/44, 328.

**Broch, Hermann**, introd. to **Hugo von Hofmannsthal**, *Selected Prose*. I/48. xi.

**Buchan, John**, *The Three Hostages*, in *The Four Adventures of Richard Hannay* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1930). II/ 16. 1104.

**Burroughs, William S.**, “Deposition: A Testimony Concerning a Sickness,” *Naked Lunch*, Evergreen Cat Edition (N.Y., Grove, 1966). I/11, *xli*.

**Byron, George Gordon**, Canto VII, *Don Juan*, ed. T.G. Steffan, E. Steffan, and W.W.Pratt, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984). I/17, 296.

**Camus, Albert**, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (N.Y., Knopf, 1961). II/6. 57.

**Camus, Albert**, *The Outsider [The Stranger]*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, introd. Cyril Connolly (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1961). III/26, 108-9.

**Cary, Joyce**, *The Horse’s Mouth*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1948). I/63. 119-120. III/291.

**Céline, Louis-Ferdinand**, *Death on the Installment Plan*, trans. John H.P. Marks (Boston, Little, Brown, 1938). I/7, 17.

**Conrad, Joseph**, “Heart of Darkness,” in *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer*, ed. and introd. Franklin Walker (N.Y., Bantam Books, 1971). I/12. 119. I/57, 75, 77. III/55. 112.

**Conrad, Joseph**, “Typhoon,” in *Heart of Darkness and Typhoon* (London, Pan, 1976). I/8, 110.

**Conrad, Joseph**, *Nostramo* (London, Dent, 1950). I.22. 497-500.

**Conrad, Joseph**, *The Secret Agent* (London, Dent, 1947). I/56. 265. III/34, 116.

**Cowley, Abraham**, “On the Death of Mr. William Hervey,” *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1918*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch, new ed., (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1939). III/50, 387.

**De Man, Paul**, *Blindness and Insight; Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (N.Y., Oxford University Press, 1971). II/16, 18.

**Dostoevsky, Fyodor**, "Memoirs from a Dark Cellar," *A Gentle Creature and Other Stories*, trans. and introd. David Magarshack (London, Lehmann, 1950). I/15, 115. III/7, 253.

**Dreyfus, Herbert L.**, "The Dasein as a whole" (review. of Heidegger), *Times Literary Supplement* (Sept. 17, 1982). III/4, 1011.

**Eliot, T.S.**, "Blake," *The Sacred Wood; Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London, Methuen, 1928). III/43, 157.

**Eliot, T.S.**, "East Coker," *Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (N.Y., Harcourt Brace, 1952). I/36, 126

**Eliot, T.S.**, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Complete Poems and Plays*. I/61, 4.

**Eliot, T.S.**, "The Waste Land," *Complete Poems and Plays*. I/61, 42. II/38, 39. III/40, 49.

**Fenollosa, Ernest**, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, with a Foreword and Notes by Ezra Pound (London, Stanley Nott, 1936). I/59, 26, 33.

**Fitzgerald, F. Scott**, "Handle with Care," *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (N.Y., New Directions, 1945), I/12, 75.

**Fitzgerald, F. Scott**, letter in 1925, quoted by Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Scott and Ernest; the Authority of Failure and the Authority of Success* (N.Y., Random House, 1978-79). I/35, 29.

**Flores, Angel**, ed., *An Anthology of French Poetry from Nerval to Valéry in English Translation with French*

*Originals*, new rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Books, 1958).

**Forster, E.M.**, *Howards End*. (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1941). II/15. 32-33. III/58, 33.

**Forster, E.M.**, *A Passage to India* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984). I/11, 147. II/15. 147. III/7, 147.

**Fraser, John**, "Borges and the Chivalric," in Janet E. Goebel and Rebecca Cochran, eds., *Selected Papers in Medievalism, I-II*, 1986/7 (Indiana University Press of Pennsylvania, 1988), vol.1. II/50, 31.

**Frost, Robert**, "The Most of It," *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1951). I/50. 368.

**Gadamer, Hans Georg**, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans., ed., and introd. David E. Linge (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1976). II/26, 229. III/27, 41.

**Graff, Gerald**, *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970). III/4.10.

**Greville, Fulke**, Lord Brooke, "Sonnet XXIX," in Yvor Winters and Kenneth Fields, eds., *Quest for Reality* (Chicago, Swallow Press, 1969). I/21. 32.

**Hardy, Thomas**, "Afterwards," *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (London, Macmillan, 1976). I/50, 553

**Hardy, Thomas**, *Jude the Obscure*, introd. Terry Eagleton, notes P.N. Furbank, New Wessex Edition (London, Macmillan, 1974). I/33. 305.

**Heidegger, Martin**, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (N.Y., Harper and Row, 1962). I/ 395.

**Heidegger, Martin**, *Nietzsche*, Vol. I; *The Will to Power as Art*. I/36, 141. II/4,90. III/18, 118.

**Heidegger, Martin**, *Nihilism, Nietzsche*, Vol. IV: trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, ed. David Farrell Knell (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1982). I/5, 221

**Hemingway, Ernest**, "Soldier's Home," *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (N.Y., Charles Scribner's, n.d.). I/11, 147.

**Hemingway, Ernest**, *The Sun Also Rises* (N.Y., Random House Modern Library, 1926). I/23. 245.

**Hofmannstahl, Hugo von**, *Selected Prose*, introd., Hermann Broch, trans. Mary Hottinger and Tania and James Stern, Bollingen Series XXXIII (N.Y., Pantheon, 1952). II/10. 130. II/ 21, 133-135.

**Hopkins, Gerard Manley**, "No worst, there is none," *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, 4th ed., rev. and enl. (London, O.U.P., 1970). I/21, 100.

**Hopkins, Gerard Manley**, "The Windhover," *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. I/50. 69.

**Hopkins, Gerard Manley**, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. I/42. 54.

**Hughes, Richard**, *A High Wind in Jamaica* (St. Albans, Herts, Triad/Panther, 1976). I/9.18, 19-20. I/10, 29. I/29. 25. III/25, 97-98. III/30, 98,126.

**Hulme, T.E.** "Romanticism and Classicism," *Speculations; Essays, on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London, Kegan Paul, 1936). I/47. 132.

**Jacobsen, Jens**, *Niels Lyhne* (N.Y., Collier, n.d.). I/16, 41. I/17. 41.

**James, William**, "Bergson and His Critique of Intellectualism," *The Writings of William James; a Comprehensive Edition*, ed. and introd. John J. McDermott (N.Y., Modern Library, 1968). I/38. 573. I/59. 498.

**James, William**, "Hegel and His Method," *The Writings of William James*. II/28, 517.

**James, William**, "Monistic Idealism," *The Writings of William James*. I/59. 498.

**James, William**, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in *The Writings of William James*. II/3, 6. III/13. 8.

**James, William**, *The Writings of William James*. III/7, ?

**Jefferies, Richard**, *Bevis: the Story of a Boy*, intro. Henry Williamson (London, Everyman's, 1966). I/53, 288-9.

**Joyce, James**, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1960). I/55, 10. III/15, 247.

**Kafka, Franz**, "The Aeroplanes at Brescia," *The Penal Colony*. III/36, 301, 306-307.

**Kafka, Franz**, "Children on a Country Road," *The Penal Colony; Stories and Short Pieces*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, (N.Y., Schocken, 1961 [1948]) I/55, 22-23.

**Kafka, Franz**, "Conversation with the Suppliant," *The Penal Colony*; I/13. 14.

**Kafka, Franz**, "A Country Doctor," *The Penal Colony*. II/41, 137.

**Kafka, Franz**, "Eleven Sons," *The Penal Colony*. III/16. 166

**Kafka, Franz**, “A Fratricide,” *The Penal Colony*. II/41, 169.

**Kafka, Franz**, “The New Advocate,” *The Penal Colony*. II/42. 135.

**Kafka, Franz**, “A Report to an Academy,” *The Penal Colony*. III/17, 184, 183.

**Kafka, Franz**, “Resolutions,” *The Penal Colony*. I/25. 28-29.

**Kafka, Franz**, “Unmasking a Confidence Trickster,” *The Penal Colony*. III/11, 26-27. III/16, 27.

**Kafka, Franz**, “The Wish to be a Red Indian,” *The Penal Colony*. I/25, 39. II/41, 39.

**Kermode, Frank**, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1979). II/1, 145.

**Koestler, Arthur**, *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1964). III/6, 166.

**Kojève, Alexandre**, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, assembled by Raymond Queneau, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols (N.Y., Basic Books, 1969). II/28. 33.

**LaCapra, Dominick**, q. **John Weightman**, “Summing Up Sartre,” *NYRB*, Aug 13, 1987. III/38. 45.

**Laing, R.D.**, *The Divided Self; an Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965). II/11, 90. II/27, 25. II/29, 144-5. II/45, 140. III/33, 124.

**Lawrence, D.H.**, *The Trespasser* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1960 [1912]). I/28. 43. III/9, 75.

**Leavis, F.R.**, *The Common Pursuit* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1952). I.20, 266.

**Leavis, F.R.**, *D.H. Lawrence, Novelist* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1955). III/54, 309.

**Leavis, F.R.**, *English Literature in Our Time and the University* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1969). III/13, 15.

**Leavis, F.R.**, “Memories of Wittgenstein,” *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, ed. G.Singh (London, Chatto and Windus, 1982). II/10. 139.

**Lermontov, Mikhail**, *A Hero of Our Time*, tr. Paul Foote (Harmondsworth, 1966). I/17, 180.

**Lessing, Doris**, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (Frogmore, St. Albans, Herts, Panther, 1973). II/16, 188-189.

**Mallarmé, Stéphane**, “Brise Marine,” Angel Flores, ed., *An Anthology of French Poetry from Nerval to Valéry in English Translation with French Originals*, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958). I/20, 369; trans. Kate Flores, “Sea Breeze,” 147-148.

**Mallarmé, Stéphane**, q., Robert Gordon and Andrew Forge, eds., *The Last Flowers of Manet* (N.Y., Abrams, 1986). I/46, 20

**Maslow, Abraham**, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (N.Y., Viking, 1971). III/39, 253.

**Matisse, Henri**, quoted by John Russell, introd. to Sasha M. Newman, ed., *Bonnard; The Late Paintings* (Washington, D.C., Phillips Collection, 1984). I/32. 10.

**Moore, George**, *The Untilled Field*, (London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1903), q. **Paul Groarke**, “The Fear of Being and the Decorum of Ideas; the Short Stories of George Moore” (Dalhousie University M.A. Thesis, 1987). I/34, 90-91. II/18, 50.

**Morrow, Lance**, *Time*, Jan. 7, 1985. III/39, 14.

**Nashe, Thomas**, "In Time of Pestilence," *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1918*, ed. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, new ed., (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1939). III/20, 207.

**Nesbit, E.**, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958). I/19, 196.

**Nietzsche, Friedrich**, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (N.Y., Vintage, 1969). I/14, 130. II/12. 96.

**Nietzsche, Friedrich**, *The Will to Power*, trans Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (N.Y., Vintage, 1968). I/51, 527. II/2, 538, 528. II/13. 13. II/28, 544. II/29, 236. III/3, 339. III/24, 419.

**Novak, Michael**, *The Experience of Nothingness* (N.Y., Harper and Row, 1970). I/6, 12. II/5, 52.

**Nussbaum, Martha**, "Sex in the Head," *New York Review of Books*, Dec. 18, 1986. I/41, 49.

**Pascal, Blaise**, *Pensées*, trans. and introd. A.J. Krailsheimer, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966). I/16. 235.

**Plato**, "Phaedo," *The Dialogues of Plato*, 2 vols., trans B. Jowett, introd. Raphael Demos (N.Y., Random House, 1937), vol I. II/1. 474-5.

**Pound, Ezra**, "The River Merchant's Wife; a Letter," *Collected Shorter Poems* (London, Faber, 1952). I/59, 140-141

**Pushkin, Alexander**, *Eugene Onegin*, trans. Charles Johnston, introd. John Bayley, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979). I/15, 177, 127.

**Rilke, Rainer Maria**, “Da stieg ein Baum, O reine Übersteigung!,” *Ahead of All Parting: the Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (N.Y., Modern Library, 1995). I/60, 410-411.

**Rhys, Jean**, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971). II/11, 41.

**Rhys, Jean**, *Good Morning, Midnight* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969). III/9, 10.

**Sacks, Oliver**, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat; and Other Clinical Tales* (N.Y., Harper and Row, 1987). III/4, 38.

**Sartre, Jean-Paul**, *Being and Nothingness; an Essay in Phenomenological Analysis*, special abridged ed., trans. and introd. Hazel E. Barnes (Secaucus, N.J., Citadel Press, 1977). II/22, 154, 153. III/19, 77. III/52, 69.

**Sartre, Jean-Paul**, *Nausea*, tr. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963). II/49, 190.

**Schlegel, A.W.**, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, First Part, First Lecture, in A. Leslie Willson, ed., *German Romantic Criticism*, fore. Ernst Behler, The German Library, vol. 21 (N.Y., Continuum, 1982). I/42, 183.

**Scholem, Gershom G.**, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (N.Y., Schocken, 1969). II/13, 27-29.

**Schopenhauer, Arthur**, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, vol I (N.Y., Dover, 1969). I/34, 322. I/48, 178. II/28, 321. III/22, 321.

**Senancourt, Etienne de Pivert**, *Obermann*, 2 vols., vol. II (Paris, E. Droz, 1931). I/17, 147.

**Sheppard, Richard**, "The Crisis of Language," in Bradbury and McFarlane, eds., *Modernism*, II/44. 328

**Simmel, Georg.**, I/19, ?

**Smith, Stevie**, q. Rosemary Dinnage, "Joys of Desolation," *New York Review of Books*, June 25, 1987. II/7, 27.

**Stevens, Wallace**, "Esthetique du Mal," *Collected Poems* (N.Y., Knopf, 1961). I/1, 320.

**Stevens, Wallace**, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, sel. and ed., Holly Stevens (N.Y., Knopf, 1981). I/46. 356.

**Stevens, Wallace**, "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad," *Collected Poems*. I/11, 96.

**Stevens, Wallace**, *The Necessary Angel; Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London, Faber, 1960). III/53, 24.

**Stevens, Wallace**, "The Snow Man," *Collected Poems*. I/3. 10.

**Stevens, Wallace**, "Sunday Morning," *Collected Poems*. II/60, 70.

**Todorov, Tzvetan**, "Connaissance du vide," *Figures du vide: Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse*, numéro 11, printemps 1975. II/31, 145-154.

**Tolstoy, Leo.**, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," trans. Aylmer Maude, *Russian Short Stories* (London, Faber, 1943). I/16, 185.

**Turgenev, Ivan S.**, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. Constance Garnett, introd. Herbert J. Muller (N.Y., Modern Library, 1950). II/15, 61, 129.

**Valéry, Paul**, "Le Cimetière Marin," in Angel Flores, ed., *An Anthology of French Poetry*, I/60, 433-436; tr. Barbara Gibbs, "The Cemetery by the Sea." 272-276.

**Valéry, Paul**, “Degas Dance Drawing,” *Degas Manet Morisot*, trans. David Paul, Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Bollingen Series XLV-12 (N.Y., Pantheon, 1960). II/12, 38.

**Valéry, Paul**, “Literary Reminiscences,” *Leonardo Poe Mallarmé*, trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler, Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Bollingen Series XLV-8 (Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1972). III/41, 232-233.

**Valéry, Paul**, *Moi*, tr. Marthiel and Jackson Matthews, Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Bollingen Series XLV.15 (Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1975). I/40, 28.

**Valéry, Paul**, *Monsieur Teste*, trans. and introd. Jackson Matthews, Collected Works of Paul Valéry Bollingen Series XLV.15, vol 6 (Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1973). II/12, 55.

**Villon, François**, “Freres humains qui après nous vivez,” *The Poems of François Villon*, trans. and introd. Galway Kinnell, new ed. (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1982). III/50, 208.

**Wells, H.G.**, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962). II/29, 107.

**Wells, H.G.**, *Tono-Bungay*, London, Macmillan, 1909. III/57, 248-9.

**Winters, Yvor**, *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Form of the Short Poem in English* (n.p., Alan Swallow, 1967). I/7, xiii. II/25, xviii. III/56, 70.

**Woolf, Virginia**, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III, 1925-30, ed. Anne Olivier (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982). III/51, 135.

**Woolf, Virginia**, *To the Lighthouse* (N.Y., Harcourt, Brace, 1927). III/47, 45. III/51, 194. III/56, 125. III/60, 157-158.

**Yeats, W.B.,** “Among School Children”, *Collected Poems*, 2nd. ed. (London, Macmillan, 1950). III/21. 244.

**Yeats, W.B.,** “The Circus Animals Desertion,” *Collected Poems*. III/52. 392.

**Yeats, W.B.,** “Meru,” *Collected Poems*. III/57. 333.

**Yeats, W.B.,** “The Second Coming,” *Collected Poems*. I/60. 210-211.

## About the Author

JOHN FRASER is the author of *Violence in the Arts* (1974), *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (1982), and *The Name of Action; Critical Essays* (1985), all published by Cambridge University Press, and of numerous articles in journals, among them the *Partisan Review*, *Southern Review*, *Yale Review*, *Cambridge Quarterly*, and *Studio International*. He did the article on 20th-century American and British poetics in the 1964 edition of the Princeton *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. His website, [www.jottings.ca](http://www.jottings.ca) contains the equivalent of several more books, including the major revisionist anthology *A New Book of Verse*.

He was born in North London, educated in a provincial grammar school, and, after his two years of National Service in the R.A.F. (clerical), entered Balliol College, Oxford, as an Exhibitioner (junior scholar). Subsequently he obtained a Ph.D. in English at the University of Minnesota, with a Philosophy minor, including classes from Alan Donagan and Wilfred Sellars. He taught for thirty years at Dalhousie University, retiring as George Munro Professor, of English, and in 1991 gave the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto. He was married to the artist Carol Hoorn Fraser. He is in Wikipedia as [John Fraser \(critic\)](#).

Critics found his widely-reviewed *Violence in the Arts* “both scholarly and extraordinarily interesting” (*New Republic*), “compellingly readable” (*Film Review Annual*), “continuously stimulating” (*Economist*), “profoundly illuminating” (*Psychology Today*), “brilliant” (*Los Angeles Times*), “an extremely agile and incessantly active mind which illuminates almost every subject it touches” (*Spectator*).

A senior reviewer of *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* in the *Yearbook of English Studies* called it “a brilliant and utterly absorbing work. There are not many learned books which have the unputdownable quality of a thriller; this is one of them.... None, I think, can read his book without profit, and certainly nobody will be bored.” The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* found its documentation “awesome.”