BEYOND THE FRAME: MODERNIST EKPHRASIS AND MUSEUM POLITICS

A dissertation presented

By

Frank Robert Capogna

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that the public art museum and its practices of collecting, organizing, and defining cultures at once enabled and constrained the poetic forms and subjects available to American and British poets of a transatlantic long modernist period. I trace these lines of influence particularly as they shape modernist engagements with ekphrasis, the historical genre of poetry that describes, contemplates, or interrogates a visual art object. Drawing on a range of materials and theoretical formations—from archival documents that attest to modernist poets’ lived experiences in museums and galleries to Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of art and critical scholarship in the field of Museum Studies—I situate modernist ekphrastic poetry in relation to developments in twentieth-century museology and to the revolutionary literary and visual aesthetics of early twentieth-century modernism. This juxtaposition reveals how modern poets revised the conventions of, and recalibrated the expectations for, ekphrastic poetry to evaluate the museum’s cultural capital and its then common marginalization of the art and experiences of female subjects, queer subjects, and subjects of color.

Analyzing the ekphrastic poetry of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, Marianne Moore, Siegfried Sassoon, H. D., and Melvin Tolson, “Beyond the Frame” asserts that these poets radically reconstitute the poetics of ekphrasis by locating their poetic speakers within museums and attending to their critical acts of looking at art on display. In the process, their ekphrastic poems convey aesthetic meanings—anti-heteronormative, anti-colonial, and anti-racist—that undermine the museum’s exclusionary framings of cultural history. Contributing to recent conversations in the New Modernist Studies on the public institutions that shaped the development of modernism, and in Historical Poetics on the synchronic and culturally contingent nature of poetic genres, I show modernist ekphrasis to be representative of the ways in which the
modernist literary field was constituted in unsettled relation to the forms of institutional authority and cultural capital against which it is often defined. “Beyond the Frame” thus offers a new perspective on the intersections among poetic discourse, visual culture, and cultural institutions in modernist poetry, and a context for historicizing turn-of-the-century public art museums through poems written in and about objects in their collections.
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Introduction

“Beyond the Frame: Modernist Ekphrasis and Museum Politics” is an inquiry into how six Anglophone modernist poets—working in disparate locales, at disparate times, and with disparate poetic commitments—responded to the public art museum and its practices of collecting, organizing, and displaying cultures, and did so through formal innovations in ekphrasis, the poetic description of a visual art object. Scholars and writers of poetry today typically trace the genealogy of ekphrasis as a branch of lyric poetry: the contemplation of an art object uttered by an undifferentiated, universalized lyric “I” who probes the representational differences between the arts of painting and poetry. In this formulation, the ekphrastic poem occurs within a spaceless and timeless aesthetic realm, turning inward to reflect on the particular stylistic resources of its own medium through comparison to the visual other. “Beyond the Frame” troubles the primacy and singularity of this lyric paradigm in poetic criticism by turning to the work of modern poets who take the conventions of ekphrasis in a different direction. That is, they bring this poetic mode into art museums, in order to attend to their poetic speakers’ local and critical acts of looking at works of art as they are put on exhibition in these spaces. In doing so, these poets reframe ekphrasis into a situation for interrogating then commonly marginalized issues of racial, class, and sexual difference in museum collections. For these diverse poets—from canonical modernists Marianne Moore and H. D., to fin-de-siècle lyricists Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper (who published collaboratively as “Michael Field”), First World War veteran Siegfried Sassoon, and the late modernist Melvin B. Tolson, whose esoteric practices straddle, and trouble, classifications by period and praxis—the poetic contemplation of the work of art becomes a context for institutional critique, for theorizing the cultural politics of aesthetic experience in the modern museum.
Attending to the curatorial, exhibitionary, and pedagogical practices of the twentieth-century public art museum is crucial for fully conceptualizing the cultural stakes of modernist innovations in ekphrastic poetry, and for understanding the ways in which modernist poets reshaped this poetic genre into a means of critically interrogating the museum’s role in defining the conditions for experiencing art and culture. Moving among the intersections of poetics, visual studies, and museum studies to historicize modernist ekphrasis in relation to the institutional conditions for seeing—and writing poetry about—art in the twentieth century, I argue that recognizing this previously unremarked genealogy of poetic innovation troubles the critical consensus defining modernism’s antagonistic relationship both to cultural institutions (such as the museum) and to established poetic practices (such as ekphrasis). Ekphrasis offered modern poets a site in which to negotiate their deeply held, often affective attachments to art objects in museums in relation to the gaps, fissures, and ingrained ways of seeing that define modern museum culture, its collecting practices, and its place in twentieth-century cultural life. This analysis brings recent, paradigm-shifting, but often isolated critical discussions between the fields of modernist studies and historical poetics into conversation in order to broaden our understanding of modern poetry’s formative engagements with twentieth-century institutional culture, emphasize the significance of established poetic modes to the formation of poetic modernism, and bring previously marginal writers (including Bradley and Cooper, Sassoon, and Tolson) toward the center of a modernist critical discourse on the art museum’s place in cultural modernity.

The historical development of modernist poetry has long been critically framed through its various affinities with, and antagonisms towards, visual art – its aesthetic modes, its institutions, and its practitioners. From pioneering studies by Charles Altieri and Marjorie Perloff
to more recent work by Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, Ellen Levy, and Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, criticism of modernist poetics has not strayed far from poetry’s so-called “sister art,” painting (or sculpture, photography, performance, and other visual aesthetic practices). Nor is there much reason for disjoining them: a number of prominent modern poets were also artists (including Wyndham Lewis, E. E. Cummings, Mina Loy, and Elizabeth Bishop), some collaborated directly with visual artists (such as Ezra Pound, Robert Creeley, and Frank O’Hara, not to mention poets who participated in multi-art movements such as Futurism, Vorticism, Dada, Surrealism, and the Black Mountain School), and many others were variously involved in social networks with eminent twentieth-century artists, critics, and curators. The advent and flourishing of the New Modernist Studies over the previous two decades, with its calls to contextualize modernism across conventional disciplinary, geographic, and theoretical boundaries, has only enriched the multidisciplinary critical resources for analyzing modernist poetry as it was written, circulated, and read within a broader twentieth-century art world that often gave pride of place to painting and sculpture. Given this multivalent backdrop for interpreting modernist poetics in relation to the visual, it seems improbable that we would still lack any substantive theory or history of modernist engagements with ekphrasis, the poetic genre that James A. W. Heffernan has summarily defined as the “verbal representation of a visual representation” (3). Yet, despite the tremendous efforts of scholars in the New Modernist Studies to debunk familiar narratives of modernism’s radical break from literary traditions (including


2 On the multidisciplinarity of the New Modernist Studies, see Mao and Walkowitz.
prior verse cultures), critical conversations have tended to overlook modernist appropriations of established poetic forms such as the ode, lyric, epithalamion, and, the focus of this study, ekphrasis. Indeed, as Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins caution in a survey of recent scholarly trends in modernist poetry, “it is important that issues of poetic form—so crucial to modernist texts—are not inadvertently sidelined in the current historicization of the discipline” (3). Meanwhile, critical scholarship on ekphrasis has neglected modernist experiments in this genre nearly entirely, with critics often leaping in chronology from nineteenth-century verse to the postmodernism of John Ashbery’s “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (1975) when charting the history of ekphrastic poetry.

“Beyond the Frame” proposes that modernist innovations in ekphrasis have remained so thoroughly illegible to literary criticism precisely because modern poets so radically shift the traditional subject of ekphrasis while nonetheless retaining a sense of an ekphrastic “tradition”—with formal conventions, canonical precedents, and interpretive protocols—to which they enjoined their poems on artworks (though often ambivalently so) and to which they responded. Nineteenth-century poems on art (in England, mostly those of Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite poets; in America, mostly of public-facing writers of the American Renaissance such as Lydia Sigourney and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) were integral to the construction of ekphrasis into a poetic genre with anticipated formal and thematic conventions, a process of genre formation

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4 See, e.g., Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis* (1994) and Hollander, *The Gazer’s Spirit* (1995) for two chronological studies of ekphrasis that almost wholly avoid discussions of modernism. Bergmann Loizeaux’s *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* is an important exception; however, though her study does seek to account for various historical manifestations of poetry about visual art in the twentieth century, it reproduces the commonplace notion of ekphrasis as a “subgenre of the lyric,” which I here aim to show to be not an entirely suitable category for considering modernist innovations in this poetic mode (1).
that originated in the turn-of-the-century literary academy. It was at this moment that literary historians, popular critics of verse, and authors of poetic handbooks and university textbooks first began to conceptualize ekphrasis as a subgenre of lyric poetry. This process and its ramifications, which I explore in significant detail below, were coextensive with what Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have termed “lyricization,” or the consolidation of disparate poetic modes within the totalizing genre of the lyric that began in the nineteenth century and was crystallized and institutionally installed by the New Criticism of the mid-twentieth.⁵ One of the many effects of this “longer history of abstraction in which various verse genres … were collapsed into a large, lyricized idea of poetry as such” has been the reification of a dichotomy between traditional “lyric” verse (rhymed, metered, prosodically regular, and generically orthodox) and formally innovative poetry (free verse or mixed prosody, self-reflexive, generically illegible or heterodox) (5). This has precipitated a relative neglect in the field of modernist studies of poetry that does not adhere to either of these classifications, such as formally experimental poetry that does not singularly reject generic conventions but that instead openly modifies, extends, parodies, reconstitutes, revalues, appropriates, or reimagines these conventions in pursuit of new representational possibilities. Recognizing these practices troubles not only the division between literary tradition and formal innovation, but also those chasms that separate high/low, center/peripheral, and socially engaged/socially autonomous modernisms, revealing that the process of making poetry “new” often occurred in ambivalent relation to whatever practices were constituted as “old.”

⁵ Jackson’s *Dickinson’s Misery* (2005) remains one of the most instructive studies in this history of lyricization. Jackson identifies a litany of verse practices, scenes of writing, and contexts for reading, including “songs, notes, letters, lists, postscripts, elegies, jokes, ads, dead crickets, valentines, stamps, Poetess verse, pressed flowers, ringed paper cut-out birds” as alternatives to “a singular idea of the lyric, or to an idea of the lyric as singular, or to poetry as we now tend to understand it” (235).
Underwriting this project, then, is a call for a more fluid and historically sensitive heuristic for interpreting how and what the act of composing a poem about an art object signified for poets working at different historical moments, in different places, and with different formal commitments. Accordingly, “Beyond the Frame” reconsiders modernist poetics within the social, cultural, institutional, political, and academic contexts for writing and reading poetry in the early twentieth century. These formations include the public art museum, which represented one of the most singularly determining influences on the conditions for seeing, interpreting, and writing about art in the period. I trace the museum’s multiple, overlapping, and contested modes of influence as those modes helped to shape the aesthetics and content of modernist poems about visual art objects. When bringing ekphrasis into the museum, the poets featured in this study each attend to the objects’ situatedness within a museum culture saturated with exclusionary ideologies, bourgeois forms of cultural capital, a deluge of information that encroaches upon the aesthetic experience, and reminders of the high economic value these objects commanded in the art world.6

Though the public art museum, which developed in Western countries across the nineteenth century, was nominally a civic space open to all, by the turn of the twentieth century its curatorial and display imperatives were designed largely to appeal to the gaze of an idealized Enlightenment subject: the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and educated male subjectivity around whose experiences cultural history would be organized. Modernist writers were among the final generation to receive their cultural educations during what Germain Bazin has termed the “Museum Age,” a period he dates from the Louvre’s opening in 1793 through the fin-de-

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6 This is not to say that nineteenth-century poetry entirely neglects bringing ekphrasis into the museum—we might think, for instance, of Keats’s “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” (1818) as well as the reality that many objects of ekphrastic poetry in this period were initially glimpsed in public museums—but rather that these poems do not share the same critical and revisionary relationship to museum culture that underwrites the later modernist innovations in this poetic mode.
siècle and which was defined by the unprecedented proliferation of new museums in cities such as London, Paris, Dresden, Berlin, New York, Chicago, and Boston. In the chapters that follow, I show that as modern poets sought to develop new formal practices for representing the experience of seeing art in institutional modernity, their innovations in ekphrasis regularly engage many of the museum’s by then ingrained exhibitionary and pedagogical practices, including the historiographical displays that organized its collections, the parenthetical labels that contextualized individual objects, and forms of public and artistic instruction such as docentry and gallery-copying. Moreover, for modern poets whose identities did not conform to that of the museum’s presumed seeing subject, locating ekphrastic poetry within the museum and representing their speakers’ critical acts of looking at objects in museum collections turned the genre into a context for representing aesthetic meanings—anti-heteronormative, anti-colonial, and anti-racist—antipodal to those then typically conveyed in the institution. Throughout this dissertation, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological studies of the art world, which offer crucial conceptual frameworks for understanding the art museum’s paradoxical status as a public institution predicated on the display of objects given highest social legitimation and distinction. As Bourdieu phrases it, “Museums could bear the inscription: Entry for art lovers only. But there clearly is no need for such a sign, it all goes without saying” (“The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic” 257). The tacit aura of social distinction that suffuses the museum space, Bourdieu’s work demonstrates, encourages visitors to approach works of art with a disinterested, impersonal gaze that privileges an object’s form over its content, and frames art as a socially autonomous and apolitical cultural domain. It is this “pure gaze,” in Bourdieu’s parlance, that the poets in this study challenge when they situate their poetic speakers in institutional spaces and attend to their
differences from institutional norms, as each emphasizes possibilities for seeing, feeling, and making different meanings from the museum experience.

Below I further expand on the cultural politics of the twentieth-century art museum, its collecting practices, and discourses on its function in modern society; first, however, I offer a capsule history of ekphrastic poetry as it has been practiced and as it has been theorized by literary scholars. This history foregrounds the significance for both the mechanisms of genre formation and for the poetic practices of modernist writers’ opting to look beyond the frame in order to evaluate the museological influences that shape their experiences of—and practices for writing about—visual art. Modernist experiments in this established poetic mode were shaped by their responses to modern museum culture; indeed, what follows historicizes modernist ekphrasis through its engagement with the particular conditions for composing poetry about visual art, and for seeing and interpreting actual works of art, in the twentieth century.

I. Historicizing Ekphrasis

With etymological origins in the classical Greek ἐκ (“out”) and φράζω (“explain”), poetic ekphrasis implies a situation in which a speaker provides voice to a mute visual object through aesthetic descriptions, imagined dialogue, or pantomime. Although the term “ekphrasis” has a divergent history in classical rhetorical theory as an elaborate oral description of an object meant to affect an audience, its contemporary literary meaning as the poetic representation of a visual object has a comparably extensive and complex etiology rooted in the classical epic, neoclassical aesthetic theory, and most centrally, the lyric poetry of the nineteenth century. John Hollander locates the earliest extant ekphrastic lines in Homer’s description of Achilles’s shield in Book 18

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7 On the ekphrastic poem as a mode of vocalizing the mute painting, see Hollander 90.
of *The Iliad*, a representative instance of what Hollander terms *notional* ekphrasis, or the poetic description of a purely fictional art object that serves a narrative function within the poem. Hollander contrasts notional ekphrasis with *actual* ekphrasis, or poems comprised wholly of a speakers’ meditation on an existing art object or a fictional object that is presented as though it might exist. Hollander’s distinction between notional and actual ekphrasis is as much aesthetic as it is historical, as he identifies notional ekphrasis primarily as a classical poetic figure and actual ekphrasis as an aspect of meditative lyric verse that originated with the many British Romantic poets who found poetic inspiration in the increasing availability of actual historical art objects for examination in museums and galleries across Europe.

The prevailing framework for interpreting ekphrastic poetry in literary criticism has in recent history been what Jane Hedley refers to as the “paragonal” theory, the tendency to consider ekphrastic poems “persistently in terms of mutually reinforcing binary oppositions” between the arts, beginning with the disparate expressive possibilities of the mediums of painting and poetry (24). The paragonal theory has its origins in G. E. Lessing’s *Laocöon* (1766), a broadly influential treatise on the formal limitations of painting and poetry in which Lessing argues for the supremacy of poetry as the foremost medium for imaginative representation. Central to Lessing’s *Laocöon* is the notion that poetry is a temporal art and painting a spatial art, aesthetic differences that artists working in either medium may seek to negotiate but can never overcome: in poetry “the action is visible and progressive, its different parts occurring one after the other in a sequence of time,” while in painting “the action is visible and stationary, its

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8 For instance, in the Homeric episode of the Shield of Achilles, the ekphrastic description of the art object is framed in the object’s production by a character within the story, Hephaestus, and serves a particular narrative function in the broader text.

9 Martin Meisel notes the influence of Lessing’s *Laocöon* on nineteenth-century aesthetic theory, writing that nineteenth-century academic theory in England seems to have taken seriously only two books in its library: Lessing’s *Laocöon* and Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses*” (qtd. in Steiner 27).
different parts developing in co-existence in space” (77). This delineation of painting as an inexorably spatial art and poetry as an inexorably temporal one underwrites Lessing’s claim that any individual work of art is successful when an artist works fully within the formal boundaries of his particular medium. As a riposte to the Horatian axiom of *ut pictura poesis*, a founding principle of ekphrasis predicated on sympathy and exchange between the arts, *Laocöon* calcifies these formal boundaries to call for the progression and refinement of painting and poetry within their separate domains. This formal distinction of poetry and painting as antagonistic and irreconcilable media has retained viability among contemporary critics of ekphrastic poetry, who often approach instances of this poetic mode in search of a range of other binary categories roughly along an axis of “othering”: masculine/feminine, familiar/exotic, domestic/foreign, outward/inward, and expressive/withholding. W. J. T. Mitchell, one of the foremost literary scholars on image/text relations, frames the central imperative of ekphrastic poetry as the “overcoming of otherness,” defining ekphrasis as a genre in which “texts encounter their own semiotic ‘others,’ those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or ‘spatial arts” (156). To Wendy Steiner, poetic ekphrasis is defined by the “paradox … in which a poem declares its aspiration to the eternal poise of the visual arts, and at the same time, as a temporal artwork, demonstrates its inability to achieve it” (122). Bergmann Loizeaux identifies the “given structure” of ekphrasis as “inherently dialogic,” so that, by “the staging of relation between words and images, poet and artist … [it] opens out of lyric subjectivity into a social world” (5). What each of these critics take to be the “given structure” of ekphrasis is a sense of disparateness: the default ekphrastic situation is one in which a poetic speaker interrogates the stillness and seeming silence of a work of art, attempting without success to reveal the hidden meaning it obscures. The art object comes to represent a withholding, quasi-sacred aesthetic
surface that the poet aspires to interpret, in a drama that seems to confirm a heroic vision of the role of the critic vis-à-vis his object.

This definitional framework is fundamentally rooted in the formal conventions of lyric poetry, in both obvious and tacit ways. Mitchell’s sense of the ekphrastic desire to “overcome otherness” and Bergmann Loizeaux’s of the “lyric subjectivity” at the core of ekphrastic practice echo the themes, structure, and emotional content of such canonical Romantic ekphrases as John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820), in which the poetic speaker despairs at his inability to make the sculptural “still unravish’d bride of quietness” disclose a meaning that is never articulated (ll. 1), and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s unfinished “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery” (1819), in which the awesome “grace” of the painting of the Gorgon’s severed head transforms “the gazer’s spirit into stone” upon first glance (ll. 9-10). Ekphrasis did become a central category in transatlantic poetry at this time, as Keats and Shelley were joined by William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Felicia Hemans, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Lydia Sigourney, and Emma Lazarus, among others, in authoring poems describing paintings, sculptures, architectural edifices, and other aesthetic objects. As a result, genre histories of ekphrasis today often both begin in the nineteenth century and give their most significant attention to that period.

Such was the case from the early moments in which ekphrasis first began to be critically recognized as a coherent genre with anticipated formal structures and thematic investments, in the literary academy of the turn of the twentieth century. At this time, literary histories, poetic handbooks, and university textbooks demonstrate relatively unprecedented and programmatic attempts to codify the expectations for how poems should respond to artworks around a remarkably consistent canon of nineteenth-century lyric poetry. In *History of Criticism and*
Literary Taste in Europe (1900), the popular English literary historian George Saintsbury organizes his account of the nineteenth-century surge in ekphrasis around the decadent art criticism of Walter Pater’s Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873), which Saintsbury argues introduced a “new doctrine” for writing poetry about painting “for all its voluptuous softness.” Saintsbury places Pater’s poetic prose at the center of a canon of ekphrastic practitioners, arguing that it represents “the way to judge Keats and Tennyson as well as Lionardo [sic]: nay, to judge poets of almost entirely different kinds, from Æschylus through Dante to Shakespeare” (546). This ekphrastic genealogy rectilinearly organizes poems about paintings around phenomenological modes of art writing that attend to the subject’s sensuous relationship to art; note, for instance, the primacy he gives among nineteenth-century writers not just to Pater but to Keats and Tennyson instead of Browning, who often embedded contemplations of art objects within dramatic monologues (instead of as utterances of a lyric “I”). In their American university textbook An Introduction to Poetry (1922), John Beaty and Jay Hubbell similarly expand on the “close kinship” between poetry and painting with reference to Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and the “picture quality” of poems on art by Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Rossetti (106-7). The lyricization of ekphrasis, and the concomitant emphasis on poets such as these in developing it, installed certain thematic and affective conventions (the semantic differences between the sister arts; the figure of a melancholic poetic speaker who fails to negotiate these differences), master-tropes (the encoding of poetry as temporal and masculine, and of painting as spatial and feminine), and stylistic forms and techniques (the sonnet; the ode; apostrophe) as primary generic markers for identifying and interpreting poems about art as belonging to a tradition of ekphrasis. These markers remain prominent in criticism today, the
means through which contemporary scholars frame their discussion of the history and practice of ekphrasis.

It is no coincidence that the rise in popularity of ekphrastic poetry was concurrent with the rise of the art museum across the nineteenth century. These new institutions, whose collections comprised objects formerly in the private collections of aristocrats and wealthy connoisseurs (and received in museums both through bequest and plunder), placed art and culture in contexts for public contemplation and, in doing so, offered a wealth of potential material for ekphrastic poetry. Moreover, the museum also produced epistemologies for aesthetic experience that dovetailed with the lyric contemplation of art, with its implication of an autonomous realm of art appreciation isolated in space and time. Although the art museum occupies a material institutional space, many have argued that its collection and exhibition of objects from disparate times and spaces also implies the institution’s detachment from the normative spatialities and temporalities that organize the world beyond its walls; Michel Foucault refers to museums as characteristic “heterotopias” because they embody the wish of “our modernity” to “contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place … a place of all times that is itself outside time and protected from its erosion” (182). This sense of the museum’s timelessness subtends critical framings of ekphrasis as a lyric practice. Stephen Cheeke, for instance, attributes the fashion for ekphrasis since the Romantics to “a certain stability or accessibility inhereing in the artwork as object, particularly the object in the museum or gallery, which makes it appear available to literary representation in a world of more general epistemological crisis and despair” (2). Heffernan identifies the origins of the “belief [in art’s transcendence]” that he associates with Romantic ekphrasis in “the birth of the public museum, which aimed at once to preserve the history embedded in works of art and to protect those works
from history, from the ravages of time” (93, emphasis in original). Latent in this intermeshing of
the museum and lyric ekphrasis is an understanding of both as apolitical, socially autonomous
cultural formations oriented only towards actualizing and/or conveying the pleasures of the
aesthetic through the exhibition of (or representation of the experience of) the beautiful in art.

What these approaches neglect, and what has made modernist experiments in ekphrasis
virtually invisible to this framework, is that while the museum consecrates art from the “ravages
of time,” it also circumscribes these objects within epistemological frameworks that condition
how a patron experiences both the object and the broader museological narratives of art and
cultural history in which that object is situated. That is, they neglect the museum’s cultural
politics, its role in adjudicating which objects, identities, artistic practices, cultures, histories,
experiences, beliefs, and values belong to the agora of high culture and which remain along its
margins or are kept entirely from receiving the sanctity of inclusion. While the presumption of a
timeless aesthetic experience in a lyric model for ekphrasis has hastened the relative avoidance
of museum politics in the work of literary scholars, these ideologies were not lost on modern
poets who developed a range of practices for writing about art—from note-taking and drafting
poems within actual museums, to setting these poems within museum space and locating the
poetic speaker as a member of a museum’s public, to reframing other poetic spaces into
imaginary galleries—that were rooted in their actual or imagined engagements with the art
museum and its cultural authority.

II. Museum Politics

To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community …
Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual – those who are most able to respond to
its various cues – are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum
ritual most fully confirms.

At the same time that experimental modernist art flourished in other institutional spaces—including salons, independent galleries, and special exhibitions like the Armory Show—the art museum was becoming secured as the primary institutional site for seeing historical art, and thus for receiving a traditional cultural education in the masterworks of Western history. The museum’s public continued to expand throughout the twentieth century through traveling Old Master exhibitions, educational programs, and the development of smaller municipal museums beyond major urban centers, and as it did, the poets of modernism were among those who acquired their cultural literacies in the galleries of public art museums. What they would have encountered in these institutions and their paradigmatic taxonomies, architectural features, tropology, and information technologies was a carefully scripted narrative of cultural history, what Carol Duncan refers to as a “dramatic field” that invited visitors to ritually perform—and thus confirm—an ideal of enlightened Western citizenship. At the same time, these institutions have historically been slow to incorporate the cultural productions of other identities, other histories, other aesthetic traditions, and other perspectives within their culturally sacral spaces. Rather, in its most conventional form, the art museum displays its objects to appeal to the gaze of a disinterested and undifferentiated ideal seeing subject trained to appreciate the formal properties of works of art (and the historical development of forms). Bourdieu refers to this as the “pure gaze,” a way of seeing acquired through privileges of education in, and regular access to, art, and which implicitly delegitimates other ways of seeing as those of unrefined subjects. Taken together, the routine absences in art museum collections, the historical narratives they construct, and the interpretive dispositions they promote among visitors construct the museum experience around dominant epistemologies of cultural history.
Despite its gatekeeping role, from its very origins the art museum was embedded in hopes to democratize culture for the purposes of public enlightenment. The Louvre, one of the first modern public art museums, was born of mass insurrection and aspirations for just such democratization. Installed in what was once a royal palace until the capture of Louis XVI during the French Revolution, the Louvre opened to the public in August 1793 to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the deposition of the Bourbon monarchy, exhibiting what was once the art collection of the ancien régime for the citizens of the new republic. However, the emergence of the Louvre museum amidst the ruins of the old order of things was only the most spectacular instance of a tremendous increase in the establishment of public museums of the arts, science, and industry across Europe and later in America, as private collections opened to the masses and museum galleries and storage rooms swelled both with donations and imperial plunder. In England, the British Museum—once a small and eclectic institution comprising mainly curiosities collected by Sir Hans Sloane and various manuscript collections—expanded in size and influence, and the National Gallery (1824), South Kensington Museum (1854, now the Victoria & Albert Museum), National Gallery of British Art (1897, now the Tate) and the Whitechapel Gallery (1898, though the site of annual exhibitions of paintings since the early 1880s) were founded throughout the century. In America, art museums began to open in emerging wealthy metropolitan centers later in the century, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (1870), Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1870), Philadelphia Museum of Art (1876), and the Art Institute of Chicago (1879). Many of these new museums drew

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10 Andrew McClellan argues that the museum’s “involvement in the political life of the nation was taken a step further during the Revolution, when … the Louvre museum became a sign of popular sovereignty and the triumph over despotism,” manifested in the possibilities for the “communal enjoyment of nationalized property in a palace that had once belonged to the king” (Inventing the Louvre 7).

11 As Anne Higonnet claims, these institutions embodied the nation’s emerging “global financial and political power” in terms of a new “cultural power” in order to claim “America’s possession of the
architectural and organizational inspiration from the Louvre, as they were built to resemble grand palaces and their missions were inspired by a commensurate interest in providing a democratized cultural education for the nation’s citizenry.\textsuperscript{12}

One ideological thrust precipitating this “Museum Age” was the belief that inserting art into the everyday lives of growing urban populations in newly industrializing cities could be a cultivating—and managerial—force for their “moral and intellectual refinement,” perfecting the moral consciousness, taste, and behavior of the masses (McClellan, “A Brief History” 8).\textsuperscript{13} Matthew Arnold, writing at the height of the “Museum Age,” describes the civilizing potential of culture as “the study of perfection”: “to conceive of true human perfection as a \textit{harmonious} perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a \textit{general} perfection, developing all parts of our society” (11, emphasis in original). This idea of a “general” culture that elevates “all parts of our society” resonates in important transatlantic museological texts of the period. We might see, for instance, that in \textit{Museums and Art Galleries} (1888), Thomas Greenwood’s advocacy for the public subsidization of museums turns upon comparable terms: “There can scarcely be a more pressing matter of importance at the present time than that of \textit{infusing into the minds of the people a high sense of the duties and privileges of citizenship}” (2, 19-20, emphasis added). That

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world’s cultural heritage” (139). Higonnet goes on to suggest that the American art museum was an emblem of American democracy, reflecting nationalist sentiments of the ethical superiority of its political and economic systems that “gave equal opportunity to all its citizens” by extending “public access to the institution of the Museum.”
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\textsuperscript{12} See Einreinhofer, who argues that the nineteenth-century American art museums sought to embody the democratic ethos of the nation in a way commensurate to the Louvre: it “symbolizes the triumph of American democracy, for it stands with its doors open, its treasures gathered for the benefit of all the people. In other words, it projects an image of what Americans want to believe and what they want to be. The concept of the American art museum along with most of what it symbolizes can be traced to France and to the Louvre Museum” (19).

\textsuperscript{13} McClellan writes that the “explosion of urban populations teetering on the edge of poverty, immorality, and anarchy prompted the need for new social controls and systematic education. The desire to control and civilize the masses was all the more pressing as successive political reforms gave voting rights to larger segments of society” (“A Brief History” 7-8).
the museum can elevate the populace through its encouragement of intellectual and cultural refinement took on special discursive status as a means of mitigating what was felt to be the principal threat of modernization, the irreparable fracturing of cultural foundations. T. R. Adam, the American progressive museum reformer, makes this point when he writes that “art becomes an instrument for the interpretation of the past” when placed within the museum, and as such “it assumes a functional place in the life of the ordinary man as a means of providing him with the sense of cultural continuity. The need for this type of security is widely felt at the present time when the modern man is finding more and more of his traditional roots destroyed by the rapid advancement of science and technology” (27).

The public art museum was a product of an ostensibly democratic ethos of aesthetic experience underwritten by the notion that historical art is both the literal and intellectual property of the people. However, this institution’s spatial organization, architectural motifs, and exhibitionary codes can have the effect of distancing a museum visitor from immanent relation to objects on display, circumscribing this relation within a carefully wrought epistemological and ideological field replete with performative scripts intended to align the interests and experiences of individual patrons with that of an elevated bourgeois citizenry.14 Visiting the art museum entails entering a space architecturally and atmospherically redolent of previous ecclesiastical and political regimes that organized society: as Duncan and Alan Wallach show, museums “built

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14 Duncan echoes this point when she writes that the public art museum addressed its visitor as a bourgeois citizen who enters the museum in search of enlightenment and rationally understood pleasures … Acting on behalf of the public, it stands revealed as keeper of the nation’s spiritual life and guardian of the most evolved and civilized culture of which the human spirit is capable. All this it presents to every citizen, rationally organized and clearly labeled. Thus does the art museum enable the citizen-state relationship to appear as realized in all its potential” (26). Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) is instructive of the socioeconomic implications of such a framework. Bennett writes that the “central message [of nineteenth-century museums] was to materialize the power of the ruling classes … in the interest of promoting a general acceptance of ruling-class authority” (109); drawing liberally from Foucault’s work on disciplinary institutions, his study focuses on the ways museums inhere the logic of political authority even while embodying an ostensibly democratic ethos of art’s belonging to the public.
during the first great age of museum building deliberately recalled past ceremonial architecture” such as “temples, palaces, treasuries and tombs,” architectural forms “meant to impress upon those who use or pass through it society’s most revered beliefs and values” (449). Once inside, visitors were kept at literal and epistemological distances from immanent contact with the objects on display, restricted from speaking to one another, and led to navigate predetermined paths through cultural history in the arranged galleries.\textsuperscript{15} Such museological codes encourage visitors “to read and see alike in the museum, which, as a setter of standards, heralds the advent of standardized existence,” as Barbara J. Black argues in her study of the museum in Victorian English society (35).\textsuperscript{16} This notion of a mass produced aesthetic experience is ingrained in the privileged arrangement of objects in most art museums, the historiographical displays that trace the development of art history from antiquity to the more recent objects in the institution’s collection. Such an arrangement immerses the visitor in a narrative of cultural progress that “was measured in terms of a single, universal ideal of beauty, an ideal toward which all societies presumably evolved” (Duncan 25).\textsuperscript{17} Architecturally, organizationally, and associationally, the art museum implies a rarified space for the experience of artistic beauty glimpsed in the steady evolution of aesthetic practices from the primitive to the perfected forms of the High Renaissance to the complexity of modern art. All this, as museum studies scholars have amply

\textsuperscript{15} On the museum’s techniques of behavioral management, see chapter 7 of Hooper-Greenhill, \textit{Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge} (1992) and chapter 1 of Black, \textit{On Exhibit} (2000).

\textsuperscript{16} Hooper-Greenhill notes that the very notion of the museum “visitor” is semantically charged with such ideologies of constrained aesthetic experience: “‘Visitors’ are present in a space by permission; they enter an alien space, akin to someone else’s home. The museum or art gallery has in the past been very much the territory of the professional staff, with the ‘public’ allowed in on sufferance, if their behavior was appropriate” (211).

\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, Greenwood emphasizes the possibilities for chronological hangs to function as a mode of cultural pedagogy legible to the average citizen: “the working man or agricultural labourer … cannot fail to come away with a deeply-rooted and reverential sense of the extent of the knowledge possessed by his fellow-men. It is not the objects themselves that he sees there, and wonders at, that cause this impression, so much as the order … which he cannot but recognize in the manner in which they are grouped and arranged” (26).
demonstrated, teleologically justifies the present-day social order as the final destination in a continuum embodied along the museum’s walls, ingrained in its architecture, and concentrated in the objects that compose its collections.

Despite the aspirations for a democratization of culture, it is inarguable that the ability to comprehend the museological framing of art history—that is, to understand the significance of individual objects within gallery micro-narratives, and to understand the significance of these micro-narratives within the institution’s totalizing narrative—is coextensive with privileges of education and status. As Duncan frames it in the quotation I take for this section’s epigraph, there is a synergy between the museum’s posited ideal seeing subject and the class of individuals most prepared to experience it. This synergy is at the center of Bourdieu’s studies of social stratification in the museum, a site that he often returned to in his decades-long examination of the production and distribution of cultural capital. Bourdieu’s work calls attention to the cultural class dynamics that underwrite the experience of inhabiting museum spaces that “in the tiniest details of their morphology and their organization … betray their true function, which is to reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and for others the feeling of exclusion” (“Historical Genesis” 123). Bourdieu has shown that the patrons that claim to be most gratified by the practice of museum-going are those who enter the institution already in possession of an elevated degree of “artistic competence,” or formalized training in the “possible ways in which a universe of [artistic] representations can be divided into complementary classes” and the “interpretive schemata which are the conditions of appropriation of artistic capital, that is, the condition of deciphering the works of art” (Bourdieu and Darbel 39). Artistic competence is synonymous with a kind of museological literacy, representing one’s ability to appreciate and interpret art objects and to comprehend the unwritten logic of the museum’s organizational strategies. It is
accrued through a number of different institutions, forces, and resources, the access to which is contingent on class and social status, including regular exposure to artworks, educational opportunities, the leisure time to patronize local institutions, and the economic flexibility to travel to distant ones. While central to Greenwood’s claim of the public pedagogical value of the museum is his belief that any untrained visitor in the museum “cannot but recognize … the manner in which [the objects in its collection] are grouped and arranged,” in practice the individual outcomes of museum-going are thus largely predetermined by the visitor’s prior educational, economic, and social opportunities. To Bourdieu, the art museum further acculturates the possessors of cultural capital, those who have acquired an “eye” for art by mastering the privileged means of ordering and interpreting the art world. Meanwhile, those “who did not receive the instruments which imply familiarity with art from their family or from their schooling are condemned to a perception of a work of art which take its categories from the experience of everyday life,” a second order of aesthetic experience that traffics in particulars rather than the disinterested meanings accessed by the “pure gaze” of the connoisseur (Bourdieu and Darbel 44).

Bourdieu’s discerning critique is underpinned by awareness that this pure gaze, though cloaked beneath the veil of objectivity, indexes and reinforces already authorized modes of engaging culture. Baked into this way of seeing, and consequently into the institutional spaces that foster it, is the distinction made by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) between the disinterested aesthetic perception that makes the observer receptive to the beautiful, and “taste that requires an added element of charm and emotion for its delight, not to speak of adopting this as the measure of its approval, has not yet emerged from barbarism” (54, emphasis in original): the uncultivated subject in this framework is one whose aesthetic experiences are
informed by his personal, emotional, or desirous responses. The underlying logic of this division is that aesthetic experiences contingent on the particular experiences, beliefs, and identity of the observer are less valid than those drawn from the universal aesthetic truths to which only the real appreciator of art has access. Throughout the dissertation I will return to this stratification of modes of aesthetic perception, as it not only succinctly encapsulates the museum’s privileged optics but also foregrounds the cultural stakes of modernist transformations in ekphrasis that seek to individuate aesthetic experience within the museum. For when these poets attend to how elements beyond the frame determine their poetic speakers’ understandings and representations of works of art, issues of social, racial, sexual, gender, and class identity that would be obscured by a monolithic “pure gaze” are brought to the center of the museum experience.

III. Modernist Ekphrasis

Modernism emerged in the arts partially in response to the museum’s role in establishing and sanctifying official cultures, and many of its central artists, writers, theoreticians, and tastemakers expressed intense aversion to this institution and its social importance. For some, the museum seemed the apotheosis of an art world constrained by the influences of a global art marketplace, emerging forms of institutional accreditation, and an ingrained veneration of the art of the Old Masters, influences that they felt could only asphyxiate modern art.¹⁸ In the most

¹⁸ One of the inherent paradoxes of modernist anti-museum discourse is, however, the fact that this early generation of modernism has often been charged with the very orientation toward social autonomy, escapism, and a fetishistic relationship to cultural history that its writers attribute to the museum. In his groundbreaking study of high modernism’s ambivalence towards mass culture, Andreas Huyssen makes the point that “Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture” that “appeared in the guise of an irreconcilable opposition, especially in the l’art pour l’art movements of the turn of the century (symbolism, aestheticism, art nouveau) and again in the post-World War II era in abstract expressionism in painting, in the privileging of experimental writing, and in the official canonization of ‘high modernism’ in literature and literary criticism, in critical theory, and the museum” (vii).
impassioned and bombastic anti-museum salvo of the period, F. T. Marinetti calls for the absolute eradication of museums on just these grounds: “Museums: cemeteries! Identical, really, in the horrible promiscuity of so many bodies scarcely known to one another … To admire an old painting is the same as pouring our sensibility into a funerary urn, instead of casting it forward into the distance in violent spurts of creation and action … Turn aside the course of the canals to flood the museums!” (52-3). For the Italian Futurist, the museum embodied all that his version of modern art sought to destroy: tradition, decorum, order, and a feminized leisure class. Marinetti’s metaphor of museum as mortuary, a resting place for historical art that negates the vitality of the modern, runs throughout modernist anti-museum discourse. Ezra Pound echoes Marinetti in an essay in the short-lived little aestheticist journal *The Apple (of Beauty and Discord)*, in which he refers to the museum as “the pest of our age” because it displaces aesthetic beauty from the material world and into the unreal, circumscribed space of the gallery, such that “taste, which should keep the streets fit to walk, leaks away into the album, the portfolio, the plate-glass cabinet … we have lost the sense to perceive beautiful form until we are ready for the aesthetic tickle” (22). While Pound retains faith in “beautiful form,” which Marinetti would sideline for the violent angularity and (both aesthetic and actual) belligerence of Futurism, he echoes the Italian’s bombast in the belief that the museum denies the pleasure of aesthetic experience by bounding it within an insular and retrogressive institutional space. Although characteristically more temperate in his claims, T. S. Eliot picks up this thread in his influential “*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*” (1923), an essay instrumental in theorizing the modernist “mythic method,” or the literary usage of historical and mythological motifs for the purpose of “controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama and futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177) – a practice that is certainly redolent
of the museological organization of discrete objects to structure knowledge of the past. A number of scholars have indeed noted the evident affinities between high modernist literary aesthetics in the Eliotic tradition—such as textual fragmentation, and the collection and display of found cultural materials in the text—and foundational museological practices of object curation and exhibition. Yet in “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” Eliot actually distinguishes the successful modern writer who constitutes a living relationship with the art of the past from the dilettante who turns “away from nine-tenths of the material which lies at hand and selects only mummified stuff from a museum.” The museum is framed as a space antithetical to staging meaningful relations between the work of art and the contemporary viewer, a place in which the modern writer will only encounter things that have been laid to rest.

Such assumptions pervade modernist writing across traditional coterie boundaries and aesthetic commitments. I might have substituted for Marinetti, Pound, and Eliot the French symbolist Paul Valéry, who refers to the art museum as a “domain of incoherence” with collections that only point to their etiology in “an irrational civilization, and one devoid for the taste of pleasure” (203); the expatriate writer, patron, and salon-keeper Gertrude Stein, who claimed that either “you can be a museum or you can be modern” (qtd. in Rabaté 188); and even the Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno, who in “Valéry Proust Museum” (1967) acknowledges that “the German word, museal [museumlike], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the

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Jeremy Braddock indeed initiates Modernism as a Collecting Practice with the remark that “A study of the central role of the collection within modernism might simply start by observing how many modernist artworks themselves resemble collections. We could begin by pointing to the citations and quotations that mark Ezra Pound’s Cantos and T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land…” (1). Black draws upon Eliot’s fragmentary modernist aesthetic (without remark) in the title for the first chapter of On Exhibit: Victorians and Their Museums, “The Museum Crowd: Fragments Shored against Their Ruin” (21), a testament to how deeply the logic of the modernist poem as textual museum has suffused literary criticism.
process of dying … Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture” (175). Adorno’s critique, however, underscores the inevitability of this neutralization of culture in the museum, as “the procedure which today relegates every work of art to the museum, even Picasso’s most recent sculpture, is irreversible.” Moreover, this historical process is not wholly undesirable to Adorno, for though it circumscribes art to a fixed location the museum provides the serious patron space in which to “treat works of art with the same deadly seriousness that characterizes the world today”: that is, it is a space that, if the visitor desires a more meaningful experience from museum-going than the ritualistic enactment of bourgeois citizenship, enables her to attend to the aesthetic in a way that can harvest its social, political, or intellectual potential (185). The complexity Adorno admits in his assessment of the museum’s place in modern social life attests to the institution’s vitality and undeniable allure as a site for seeing and experiencing art and as a locus for discourse even amongst those modernist figureheads who refute its influence.

Indeed, a singular attention to modernist negativity towards the museum masks all that this institution offered the experimental writers of the twentieth century: a ready availability of art and culture, epistemological frameworks and practical methods for ordering history, and an institutional space in which to theorize the present’s relationship to the past. From high modernist epic poems such as Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922) and Pound’s Cantos (1915-62) to the primitivism of modern artists and writers such as Picasso, Stein, and Vachel Lindsay, and from the collage aesthetics of synthetic Cubism to the alternative gallery spaces curated by the Parisian Surrealists, the museological desire to collect, organize, and elicit meaning from recovered cultural fragments underpins many of the defining formal innovations of modernism.
As recent historicizing modernist scholarship has shown, much of what seemed radically innovative about modernism was shaped by an indebtedness to and embeddedness in the twentieth century’s museum culture. Catherine Paul, in one of the few critical works to extensively treat the relationship of literary modernism to the museum, has demonstrated that art and natural history museums lent modern poets a range of strategies for presenting objects to best reach and affect audiences: “museums provided [modernist] writers an entire epistemological framework that uses objects to convey meaning, that considers the relationship between objects and texts, and that creates assemblages from objects and texts that have meaning beyond any individual objects and texts” (6). Similarly, in Collecting as Modernist Practice (2014), a study of the interlocking acts of collecting and instructing in twentieth-century avant-garde aesthetics, Jeremy Braddock writes that “what might be broadly named a ‘collecting aesthetic’ can be identified as a paradigmatic form of modernist art. And yet to isolate the collection as an available form for art obscures the constitutive role of the collecting practices that the works invoke: archiving, ethnography, museum display, anthologization” (2, emphasis in original). What these works together demonstrates is that the museum paradoxically endowed literary modernists with resources for constituting aesthetic practices that were often aggressively opposed to traditional cultural forms. In “Beyond the Frame,” I draw on and extend the ramifications of this seeming contradiction by attending to how the institutionalization of art and culture in museums shaped not only the radically new aesthetic practices of modernism, but twentieth-century engagements with established literary conventions as well. For while a chorus of critics—including Paul, Braddock, Ramazani, Bergmann Loizeaux, Frances Dickey, and others—have mined the museological underpinnings of such innovative literary practices as the transcultural epic, collage, bricolage, primitivism, portrait poetry, and imagist verse, the
museum’s commensurate influence on how modernist poets engaged with the central poetic figure for responding to the visual arts, ekphrasis, has yet to receive adequate consideration.

My present analysis situates ongoing critical conversations in the field of modernist studies in relation to the genre history of ekphrastic poetry and recent theoretical work in museum studies to demonstrate how modern writers reconstituted ekphrasis into a situation for engaging the art museum and its practices of collecting and defining cultures. In describing these developments, I seek to account more fully for what made the museum seem at once so thrilling and constraining for poets who were mindful of the fact that their access to and knowledge of works of art were ineluctably mediated by museological collecting philosophies, display strategies, and determinations of aesthetic and historical value. Several interlocking histories arise: a literary history of ekphrastic poetry in the twentieth century; an aesthetic history of modernist cultural intervention; and a social history of the modern museum told from the perspective of its public, a public that included the poets of modernism. Modernist ekphrasis brings us to many of the greatest spectacles and controversies of the “Museum Age,” including the plundered Elgin Marbles in the British Museum, socialist and suffragette protests that were staged in museums, the bombing of the National Gallery during the London Blitz, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s failed exhibition on the African American experience, *Harlem on my Mind* (1969). Yet it also attests to the significance of local experiences of inhabiting museums and encountering—at times with wonder, and at times with a critical edge—their exhibitionary and epistemological norms. Although the poets discussed in the chapters to follow approach the question of the museum’s influence on modern poetics from quite different subject-positions and backgrounds, each of them shares a consistent vision of the possibilities for
ekphrastic poetry to register the intimacies of aesthetic experiences, the cultural politics of the art museum, and the potential for the former to disrupt the univocity of the latter.

“Beyond the Frame” begins in the decadent literary circles of the fin-de-siècle, with a slim volume of ekphrastic poetry that appeared in English bookstalls in 1892 titled Sight and Song. Although attributed to the authorship of “Michael Field,” Sight and Song was actually the product of two female British writers: Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, an aunt and niece, lovers, and collaborative poets and dramatists. Bradley and Cooper studied Italian Renaissance art under the tutelage of the art historian Bernard Berenson, were devoted readers of academic and popular art history, and thought of themselves as amateur art connoisseurs. The Sight and Song poems—which almost exclusively engage with Renaissance paintings—were the product of the poets’ two museum-intensive tours of the European continent in 1890 and 1891, and as their shared diaries from this period reveal, many of these ekphrastic poems were either first drafted directly in museums or were largely drawn from the poets’ gallery notes on Old Master paintings. Many of the poems in this collection acknowledge and grapple with the site-specificity of the poets’ writing practices, variously providing glimpses of observers lingering beyond the paintings’ frames and of poetic speakers who express erotic, often homoerotic attachments to these paintings’ subjects. In the process, Bradley and Cooper reinterpret artistic depictions of masculine conflict into scenes of homosexual intimacy, apostrophize anonymous female models in Italian Renaissance portraits rather than celebrate their male portraitists, and narrate their speakers’ erotic attachments to female religious icons. Moreover, the poets also reproduce the museological contexts for seeing such works of art by turning the material text of Sight and Song into a space that recalls the museum gallery: the volume’s paratexts replicate museum labels, the poets deploy speech-acts that evoke the language of museum guide literature and docentry, they
anticipate readers’ familiarity with an archive of high cultural references, and present their poems as the product of a singular and authoritative masculine voice, “Michael Field.” Yet in their representation of queer and feminist meanings in the museum, Bradley and Cooper turn the poetics of ekphrasis into a means of disturbing the assumed singularity of a disinterested, objective gaze in just these institutional spaces.

Chapter Two moves from modernism’s peripheries to its near center, from Bradley and Cooper’s radical art historical reinterpretations to expansions of the subject of ekphrasis in the verse of American modernist Marianne Moore. In her unpublished poem “Museums” (c. 1918-25), Moore refers to these institutions as “good things, never wholly barren, superficial, ignorant,” and the facts of her life bear out this evaluative premise: she was an ardent museum-goer; moved in a social network that included eminent twentieth-century critics, curators, and artists; was a reader of museological theory; and authored several ekphrastic poems that engage with objects she had seen in museums and galleries. The many ekphrastic poems that Moore composed during her long career denote the influences that her regular patronage of museums and encounters with museology had on her aesthetic practices: these poems are often peripatetic, depicting poetic speakers gazing upon and serially representing aesthetic objects as if they resided along a gallery’s walls or in its glass cases. This chapter argues that Moore consciously reimagines ekphrasis as a curatorial practice while positioning the act of curation itself as a creative practice. Moore’s speaker’s determinations of which museum objects to describe are organized around the speaker’s particular values and predilections, what in “When I Buy Pictures” (1921) she refers to as those “things that give me pleasure in my average moments.” In the process, these poems draw on Moore’s knowledge of early twentieth-century curatorial theories and methodologies, knowledge gained not only through her regular exposure to both
traditional (the Metropolitan) and progressive (the Brooklyn Museum) art museums but also through her attentive reading of Benjamin Ives Gilman’s *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (1918). For while Moore was conversant with Gilman’s philosophy of the “aesthetic museum,” a tremendously formative theory in American museology that posited that museum education is most efficiently accomplished through display practices that promote an observer’s disinterested and depersonalized aesthetic experience, her ekphrastic poetry invokes this discourse only to redefine it in pursuit of a poetics that frames curation (including her own acts of poetic curation) as a creative practice rooted in the familiar and the personal.

While the ekphrastic poetry of Bradley, Cooper, and Moore emerges from—and expresses—the poets’ unabashed enthusiasms for visual art and public art museums, Siegfried Sassoon’s satirical poetry of the 1920s approaches the institution’s place in modern society with an ambivalence that can be traced to his briefly held role as public intellectual in the British Labour Party. Chapter 3 explores a series of Sassoon’s parodies of museum going as an empty ritualistic expression of social status, with focus on four poems that were included in his 1926 volume *Satirical Poems* (1926). These poems primarily critique bourgeois museum patrons whose yearnings to experience highly valued art objects impede the efforts of his poetic speakers to appreciate—and compose ekphrastic verse about—exhibited works of art. For his speakers, the museum functions as a space for the reification of high cultural capital, thus transforming aesthetic experience into a signifier of wealth and class status. Though scholars of Sassoon’s work habitually dismiss *Satirical Poems* as a tepid exercise in the leftist cultural politics with which the poet dabbled but to which he never earnestly committed, this chapter proposes that Sassoon’s satirical work nonetheless engages with a conceit at the heart of modernist ekphrasis: that composing ekphrastic poetry in the early twentieth century must necessarily negotiate the
institutionalization of art in museums. For Sassoon, ekphrasis provided a poetic outlet for articulating a socialist critique of a commercialized museum culture that could only isolate the observer from the kinds of meaningful aesthetic experiences that are the substrate for ekphrasis. His parodies of the ekphrastic situation retain the structure of lyric ekphrasis—the poetic speaker interrogating a visual art object—but recontour it in a way that calls attention to the interpretive contexts, aesthetic discourses, and class distinctions that predicate aesthetic experience in modern museum culture.

Chapter 4 shifts from the post-war verse of this heralded World War I poet to the ekphrastic poetics of H. D.’s Second World War writing. Throughout her career, much of H. D.’s work was inspired by art objects and artifacts she had seen exhibited in museums, from her early imagist verse that draws on Greek friezes she famously encountered while working in the British Museum Reading Room with Pound and Richard Aldington to the syncretic mythmaking of her late epic poems that curate—and synthesize—multiple pre-modern religious iconographies in a manner commensurate to the comparative frameworks that define how museums represent ancient civilizations. Though indebted to experiences in museums and galleries, experiences that H. D. often returned to in her private writings and memoirs of her expatriation to Europe, H. D.’s poetry also registers and reevaluates the gendered calculus of seeing and interpreting art in these spaces. Her epic of the London Blitz, Trilogy (1944-6), begins with the modern city in ruins and blown-open buildings resembling glass cabinets displaying “rare objects in a museum.” Trilogy recapitulates the familiar mausoleum rhetoric of modernist anti-museum discourse, but charts the path towards cultural rehabilitation through a new museology: by developing enlivened, affective means of seeing, organizing, and engaging culture. Her poetic speaker negotiates a constraining cultural climate predicated by authoritative male voices that can only stultify aesthetic objects
through overwrought linguistic descriptions of them, and joins a counter-public of female artists who together constitute a new audience for aesthetic experience. This counter-public conjures a previously worshipped female god from culture’s ruins through alternative, phenomenological, and anti-imperialistic acts of poetic description. In *Trilogy*, ekphrasis becomes a means not of superficially describing an object but of conveying the observer’s sensorial experience of it, a strategy that for H. D. emerges in opposition to hierarchical practices of cultural taxonomization such as those that organize museum collections.

“Beyond the Frame” locates the ways in which modernist ekphrastic poetry offered writers a means of locating and remediating different modes of institutional exclusion in the museum, and its final chapter focuses on one of the most conspicuous and constitutive imbalances in the museum industry: that of representations of race and racial history in the museum of art. Chapter 5 examines the late modernist poet Melvin B. Tolson’s epic poem *Harlem Gallery: Book One, The Curator* (1964) in conversation with activist efforts throughout the 1960s to integrate and decolonize the art museum—from the artist coalitions that mobilized in response to the Metropolitan’s *Harlem on My Mind* exhibit to the founding of the first major African American art museums—to show that Tolson’s project invests ekphrasis with the potential to represent not just a long history of black aesthetics rooted in the African Diaspora, but also to convey the urgency of alternative institutional spaces dedicated to the conservation and furtherance of this history. In *Harlem Gallery*, Tolson, like Moore, radically expands the subject of ekphrasis: the poem’s protagonist contemplates an imagined museum’s entire collection of objects of black art and culture, from pre-modern Africa to modernist paintings produced by black artists. Moreover, Tolson’s speaker compares this rich aesthetic history to the ways in which such cultural objects were typically put into discourse in the twentieth-century art
world, in both the artistic practices of white artists working in the style of primitivism and in ethnological collections such as that of New York’s Museum of Primitive Art. *Harlem Gallery* contests the primacy of a Western gaze on the cultures of the African Diaspora, infusing black aesthetic and linguistic forms into the “official” cultural spaces both of the museum and of the ekphrastic poem. In doing so, *Harlem Gallery* constructs a poetic space for the preservation and representation of racial history in the modern art world through the ekphrastic contemplation of an imagined institution dedicated to just these ends.
Chapter 1

Site, *Sight and Song*: Placing “Michael Field”

The aim of this little volume is … to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate.

— Michael Field, Preface to *Sight and Song* (1892)

We have written the queerest little book in the world.

— Katharine Bradley, “Works and Days” 5: 11 May 1892

In the summers of 1890 and 1891, the English poets Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper—aunt and niece, lovers, and collaborative writers who published under the masculine alias Michael Field—set off to the continent in pursuit of aesthetic experiences. More precisely, the poets intended to view Italian Old Master paintings *in situ* in some of Europe’s most renowned museums and galleries to prepare for the volume of ekphrastic poetry they would publish as *Sight and Song* (1892). *Sight and Song* contains ekphrases of over twenty of the paintings Bradley and Cooper saw during their continental tours to Paris, Florence, Verona, Milan, and Bologna in 1890 and to Dresden in 1891, along with poems after many other Old Master paintings that were on exhibit in English museums and galleries. The interest in representing cultural artifacts underpinning *Sight and Song* is not unique in Field’s corpus, as much of their work engages explicitly with historical material: the early work, such as the

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1 For parenthetical citations from Bradley and Cooper’s shared journals, which the poets’ titled “Works and Days,” I will provide both the notebook number and the date of entry. Hereafter, “Works and Days” will be abbreviated “W&D” in all citations. Though these notebooks are archived at the British Library, I express gratitude to the Victorian Lives and Letters Consortium (http://tundra.csd.sc.edu/vllc/) for their work digitizing “Works and Days” and making it freely available for scholarly use.

2 A note on my use of names: throughout this chapter, I refer to Bradley and Cooper by their given names when describing their personal activities and private writing, and to “Michael Field” when describing their published co-authored work. In doing so, I acknowledge that the male poet’s name was a generative site of cultural activity for Bradley and Cooper, and that their collaborative writing and editing practices make it nearly impossible to objectively assign authorship of any given work to either aunt or niece. For discussions of Bradley and Cooper’s construction of “Michael Field” and its meaning in both their public and private lives, see, e.g., Leighton; Prins, “A Metaphorical Field”; and Lysack.
Sappho-inspired *Long Ago* (1889), often turns to Greek themes, and the later, after the poets’ conversions to Roman Catholicism in 1907, to an eclectic mix of sources from Biblical, Greek, Roman, and English history. What sets the *Sight and Song* project apart, however, is that in it Bradley and Cooper draw specifically on the field of art history, and the pleasures they associated with the high arts and museum-going.

In *Sight and Song*, Victorian popular interests in art criticism, travel writing, and museums conspire with a *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism to engage with some of the central debates of nineteenth-century aesthetics, including the objective or subjective basis of aesthetic knowledge, the centrality of the Italian Renaissance in art history, and the social value of art criticism. *Sight and Song*’s central contribution to these discussions, as a number of critics have noted, comes from placing questions of gendered representation and aesthetic response at the crux of its art interpretive project. Bradley and Cooper’s private writings, for instance, reveal that the ekphrastic act itself was bound up in a concern for their embodied—and gendered—responses to art. Cooper writes in one entry in “Works and Days” that “to be happy woman must be serving creation – slow, quiet development of germs to organisms. They are more of the Earth than men are – They must be mothers in body or brain … The Child or the Poem!” (“W&D” 3: 24 August 1890); at another moment, she turns to comparable imagery of conception and childbirth to record her reaction to seeing Piero di Cosimo’s *Death of Procris* (c. 1495) in London’s National Gallery and her production of the ekphrasis that was to result from this experience: “I set myself before [it] + feel that as I learn the power + value of the picture a poem will be born” (“W&D” 4: 23 November 1891, emphasis mine). Impelled by such gendered rhetoric, a spate of critical studies over the previous decade have been anchored by feminist and queer approaches to the embodiment of aesthetic experience in *Sight and Song*. Much of this follows from Ana I. Parejo
Vadillo’s foundational reading of the book as a poetic “manifesto” for an “autonomous and sexualized observer” who seeks to escape from masculine discourses of disinterested aesthetic experience in order to feel a feminized “subjective jouissance” when looking at art (24-5). 3

Recent scholarship on the volume by Brooke Cameron, Jill Ehnenn, Hilary Fraser, Krista Lysack, and Kathy Psomiades (among others) has largely taken as a given Vadillo’s premise that *Sight and Song* models a phenomenology of aesthetic experience that emerges from embodied and gendered aesthetic responses.

This premise is at the core of my own reading as well, but in drawing from it I will complicate how such critical approaches to the volume have tended to arrive at that premise. Many of these readings tacitly characterize *Sight and Song* as a utopian poetic space where feminist and queer energies circulate free not only from the shackles of repressive heteronormative codes, but also from the institutional contexts of their production – namely, the European museums Bradley and Cooper toured. *Sight and Song* has been described by one critic as “removed from [Bradley and Cooper’s] means of production, that is, from the context of the original paintings and museum spaces from which they were textually curated” (Lysack 936-7), and by another as an “entire collection [that] amounts to an imagined gallery, une musée imaginaire” (Fraser 554). What this fruitful line of inquiry neglects is the relationship of *Sight and Song*’s gendered ekphrastic poetics to the robust turn-of-the-century museum culture of the moment of its production. This chapter suggests, instead, that *Sight and Song* not only revises then contemporary gender codes but museological codes as well, and in the volume these two

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3 A number of subsequent approaches of *Sight and Song* have followed from Vadillo’s argument by examining how, for instance, Bradley and Cooper remap the interrelations of artistic creation and authority by investing agency in the female subjects of paintings rather than in the male artists that paint them (Cameron; Psomiades) or provide space for the circulation of lesbian pleasure between observers and objects beyond masculine networks of commodity exchange (Lysack).
modes of institutional engagement are mutually grounded and mutually sustaining. Returning to Cooper’s description of their gallery work—“I set myself before [it] + feel that as I learn the power + value of the picture a poem will be born”—I focus on the term that critics have been liable to disregard, taking the gendered rhetoric inherent in the poem’s being “born” from aesthetic experience to bear importantly on how this rhetoric is primed by the poets’ acts of setting themselves “before … the picture” in the gallery space. Placing Michael Field back in the museum entails stressing the ways the poets turn this very Victorian institution into a site for queer experience. The particular affordances of ekphrasis—as both an established poetic mode replete with expectations of tone, content, and method, and as a compositional context shaped for the Fields by the particular conditions for art experience in the late nineteenth century—enabled the poets’ placement of subversive meanings at the center of their museum experiences.

By resituating Sight and Song in the museum culture that facilitated its production, I pursue several questions that are integral to considering the interpretive spaces the genre of ekphrasis opened up for poets like Bradley and Cooper as the nineteenth-century “Museum Age” began to crest. How does the volume’s stated claim that the poets will “objectively incarnate” the inner poetry of paintings exhibited in museums accord with the nineteenth-century museum’s missions of public instruction and cultivation? What does it mean for Bradley and Cooper’s project that they traversed the continent in order to see these Old Master paintings *in situ* in museums, art galleries, and royal palaces when reproductions of most would have been available

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4 In suggesting a more expansive and institutionally-grounded critical framework for reading the feminist and queer content of Sight and Song, I follow the precedent of writers like Yopie Prins, Christina Walter, and Erik Gray, who consider the poetry of Michael Field against a wide range of historical and cultural contexts. Gray examines recent criticism on Field to claim that scholarship on Victorian poetry tends to operate within a “bounded field” that is “more interested in learning how [Victorian] poets relate to each other than how they relate to other periods of literature or art” (467). This tendency is certainly visible in queer readings of Sight and Song that construct it as an autotelic imaginative space; by returning it to the broader cultural matrix of the nineteenth century and situating Michael Field as a precursor to modernist museum engagements, I propose one such way of reading their work.
to them, or that they took hundreds of pages of notes and even composed the first drafts of a number of the *Sight and Song* poems directly in museum galleries? I argue that the gender and museological revisions enacted in *Sight and Song*—and Michael Field’s acts of looking askance at the intertwined gender and museological assumptions that required those revisions—place their critique at the very center of the art historical canon as then constituted, namely, the Old Master tradition.

This chapter’s subtitle, “Placing ‘Michael Field,’” signals two ways in which it contributes to critical discourse on the intersections of poetics, institutional culture, and identity politics that “Beyond the Frame” traces from the *fin-de-siècle* and into the modernist period. First, placing the poetry of Michael Field back within the contexts of its production demonstrates the ways in which ekphrastic writing offered Bradley and Cooper a generic context for inserting a queer poetics within the culturally sacral space of the art museum and its assumptions of an ideal—and thus heteronormative—viewing public. Given that “Michael Field” is also a collaborative textual construction, this highlights some of the contexts through which the “Field” identity was made and the institutions within which it permitted Bradley and Cooper to participate. The singular male identity “Michael Field,” much like the cultural identity of the museum, presumed a level of authority and authenticity for the ekphrastic project that dual-female authorship would, or could, not.

However, by exploiting both the alias “Field” and museums as sites for negotiating queer desires through the medium of the Old Master canvas, the

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5 Although, as Emma Donoghue notes, by the time *Sight and Song* was published the collaborative female authorship behind Michael Field had become “an open secret in literary circles,” the poets still doggishly policed public reference to their identities (40). She postulates that the poets feared that such reference might “put off” a readership less inclined to take seriously writing by “authors [who] were female and plural,” and identifies at least two occasions when Bradley and Cooper censured friends—Robert Browning and Vernon Lee—for speaking openly about Field’s true identity.
poets also disavow their continuities with poetic and cultural orthodoxy, eliding the coherence of an individual and fully legible gender identity.

Second, by beginning this dissertation on modernist poetry with a discussion of two late Victorian poets, I unearth in the fin-de-siècle the roots of a modernist ekphrasis that reflexively attends to poetic speakers’ local and critical acts of looking within institutional spaces. Following Carol T. Christ in *Victorian and Modernist Poetics* (1984) and subsequent critics interested in the interconnectedness of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary cultures, I work against high modernist claims of a radical break from the Victorian era and modernism’s association of it with traditions of realism, sentimentality, and mass market literature to emphasize that the influence of Victorian aesthetics reaches into the early twentieth century and prepared fertile ground for modernist innovations. By resisting the museification of conventional literary periodization and the still lingering reluctance (with several notable exceptions) in Modernist Studies towards placing poetry written in traditional verse forms in revised modernist canons (particularly verse by women poets such as Charlotte Mew or Edna St. Vincent Millay), this chapter adds Bradley and Cooper to the panoply of their contemporaries who are more commonly thought to anticipate the spirit of modernist formal and thematic innovation, including Pater, Wilde, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Field’s legacy lingered well into the twentieth century: not only did new poetry and dramatic works written under the “Field” penname continue appearing in print until Bradley’s death in 1914, but as Christina Walter notes, an entry on Michael Field was included in the *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1916), selections from their poetry were included in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), and their work was known to such modern writers as W. B. Yeats, H. D., and Roger Fry (Walter 35). The publishers of *Sight and Song*, Elkin Matthews and John Lane at
Bodley Head, were known for printing protomodern and modernist texts, including the decadent journal *The Yellow Book* and work by Yeats, Pound, James Joyce, and Robert Bridges. Moreover, *Sight and Song* engages with a number of the central aesthetic problems commonly associated with twentieth-century poetic modernism: the relationship between the individual poet(s) and a received artistic tradition; the personality or impersonality of the modern writer; and the interactions between the high arts and cultural institutions, including the museum.

The following section demonstrates that *Sight and Song*’s composition history and its preface, a brief theoretical treatise on how the observer’s personality factors into acts of interpretation (including ekphrastic writing), grapples with discourses on the art museum’s social and pedagogical purposes that were central to this institution’s formation and spread throughout the nineteenth century. Placing *Sight and Song*’s composition history and the poets’ theoretical writing against then contemporary theories regarding the potential for habitual art experience to elevate the minds and spirits of the English masses foregrounds the discursive contexts Bradley and Cooper negotiated while composing ekphrases deeply invested in, and invested in revising, the constitutive aesthetic ideologies of modern museum culture: particularly, the assumption of an undifferentiated, universal aesthetic experience that can account for the responses of the whole of a nation’s citizenry that might enter the museum. I then turn to a series of *Sight and Song*’s ekphrastic poems, poems that engage with and complicate the conditions of museum-going and the presence of the museum’s public—and of the gendered bodies of interpreters (and ekphrastic writers) whose aesthetic experiences fall beyond the conventional discursive parameters of nineteenth-century art criticism—to show that the poets shaped *Sight and Song* not so much to break from institutional culture as to create within it a space where their own queer poetics could function and thrive.
I.

With a degree of economic stability and consequent social capital afforded them through the lucrative career of Katharine’s father and Edith’s paternal grandfather, Birmingham tobacco merchant Charles Bradley, the poets were free to dedicate their lives to three pillars of English aestheticism that underwrite the *Sight and Song* project: Hellenism, the arts, and a sensuous phenomenology of aesthetic perception. In this way Bradley and Cooper were very much of their moment, for as Stephen Cheeke notes, “the very idea of the ‘aesthete’ as a social or cultural stereotype is stuck in [the 1890s] … The [doctrine of aestheticism] grew out of Victorian writing for art and was nourished in the age of the gallery and museum” (97). Though this locating of the “aesthete” squarely in the 1890s is certainly hyperbolic, the high arts and their institutions were indeed central to Bradley and Cooper’s private lives and their social network: they considered themselves art connoisseurs, were habitués of art historical lectures in London and at Oxford, and counted among their friends and acquaintances a number of the preeminent artists and art critics of the time, including Bernard and Mary Berenson (who joined the poets for their trip to Dresden in 1891), John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, Selwyn Image, Charles Rickets, and Charles Shannon.

With *Sight and Song*, Bradley and Cooper place their own ekphrastic art writing among the work of such eminent art historians and philosophers as Berenson, Ruskin, and Pater by producing a volume that, though composed in verse, partakes of the then central practice of art criticism: translating one’s aesthetic perceptions into words. As demonstrated by Hilary Fraser, art criticism, like so many of the *belles lettres* fields, had become a highly specialized discipline in Bradley and Cooper’s late nineteenth-century England. Though earlier in the century the art and travel writing of women authors such as Anna Jameson and Elizabeth Rigby was widely
read—even if, as Chloe Chard points out, such writing had to deflect cultural suspicions that women’s susceptibilities to effusiveness would cloud their critical judgments (62)—the transformation of art criticism into a professional discipline and area of university study by the *fin-de-siècle* gave influential educated male art critics disciplinary primacy and excluded women writers from its official modes and media of discourse. Fraser suggests that such a disciplinary realignment forced nineteenth-century women writers like Bradley and Cooper to locate alternative modes for their art critical writing beyond the genre of nonfiction prose criticism that was standard for the Ruskins and Berensons of the art world, and instead to turn to genres such as travel guides, literary fiction, and poetry. Indeed, as a series of verse interpretations of Old Master paintings, *Sight and Song*—and the genre of ekphrasis—presented Bradley and Cooper with a literary context for bringing their own kind of art writing into print.

Accordingly, a number of the critics mentioned earlier have placed Field’s project—with its goal, announced in its preface, being to “translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves” (Field v)—in conversation with mainstream Victorian aesthetic discourse on the origins of an artwork’s meaning (in the intentions of the artwork’s creator, the observations of the seeing subject, or materially in the canvas). The poets’ emphasis on ekphrastic poetry as an objective mode of art criticism that authentically “translates” the visual sign into language has been taken as an ambivalent riposte to Pater’s interest in the sensorial basis of the aesthetic experience (Vadillo) or a continuation of Berenson’s “belief in [the necessity of] entering fully into the tactile properties of a painting” when writing of it (Vicinus 335).⁶ These critics and others have identified *Sight and Song*’s

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⁶ Both Saville and Walter also locate the importance of Pater’s aesthetic theories to *Sight and Song* by examining the influence of Pater’s 1890 Oxford lecture on Prosper Mérimée, for which Bradley and Cooper were among the audience at the London Institute, on Field’s poetics. Vicinus, in accounting for Bradley and Cooper’s motives for writing *Sight and Song*, suggests the volume was intended partly to
central contribution to such nineteenth-century theories to be its gendering of art interpretation; though we are told in the preface that the poems are “refine[d] … of subjective enjoyment,” such arguments conclude that these translations nevertheless disclose the markings of their translators’ embodied responses to art objects. Whereas Pater would correlate the “scholarly consciousness” of his aesthetic phenomenology with the experiences of a male observer—an idea with which both Bradley and Cooper expressed discomfort in “Works & Days”—and Berenson presupposes an unmarked and undifferentiated seeing subject at the center of his interpretations, in Sight and Song the very notion of aesthetic experience is bound up in a matrix of gender, sexuality, and the somatic responses of an embodied observer. Though it is invoked in the volume’s preface to claim the text’s interpretive objectivity, even the practice of literary translation too implies notions of female intellectual work. Lorna Hardwick notes that an “upsurge of interest in Greek culture led to an increase in demand for translations” first in the 1820s and later in the 1860s, an upsurge that created “opportunities for translators from outside traditional aristocratic and academic fields to publish their work,” including female translators such as Anna Swanwick and Augusta Webster (181). Thus while not every poem in Sight and Song grapples explicitly with questions of gender and sexuality, the volume itself interlocks art perception, aesthetic production, and the particular qualities of ekphrasis with the embodied experiences of a differentiated, gendered interpreting subjectivity.7

please Berenson, their new friend, whom the poets paid for art lessons and to whom Cooper expressed an intense sexual attraction during the heat of their friendship in 1892. However, the assumption that Sight and Song was meant for the consumption of the male gaze—and Berenson’s artistically refined gaze specifically—is unsatisfying not least because the poets were referring to plans for a “song-book with the Italian poems” in their notebooks months before their infatuation with Berenson would begin in earnest in the summer of 1891 (“W&D” 4: 12 January 1891).

7 For the nexus of Victorian and Greek sexual ideologies bound up in the nineteenth-century translation and reception of ancient Greek texts, see also Linda Dowling, Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian England (1994); Cassandra Laity, H. D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence
Such a gendering of art perception is facilitated through the museum experiences that were formative to the volume’s production, experiences that have largely slipped from notice in criticism on *Sight and Song*. Bradley and Cooper’s notebooks from the years 1890-92 contain gallery notes for nearly all of the paintings treated ekphrastically in *Sight and Song*, in addition to dozens more that weren’t, and the poets often transferred lines from these notes directly into their poems. To take just one of many instances, we can see how the poets transformed Cooper’s notes on Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*—“sidelong, historical, implicating eyes, smile that makes velvet cushions of the cheeks, + leads the calm lips upward” (“W&D” 3: 8 June 1980)—into verse for the opening lines of the poem “La Gioconda”:

Historic, side-long, implicating eyes;

A smile of velvet’s lustre on the cheek;

Calm lips the smile leads upwards (Field 8)

By transposing the first two words of the gallery notes and shortening “historical” to “historic” in the poem’s first line, the poets establish the iambic meter that “La Gioconda” loosely follows, and the revision of “velvet cushions of the cheeks” to “velvet’s lustre on the cheek” is made to appeal doubly to the ear and the eye: it both sounds more poetic than the original and is more closely involved with the poetic mode of phanopoeia, what Pound would define a few decades later as the “use [of] a word to throw a visual image on the reader’s imagination” (*ABC of Reading* 37). What this single example demonstrates is that the poets’ notes taken directly within the museum galleries offered not just inspiration, but also direct source material for the *Sight and Song* text. Until now the role of Bradley and Cooper’s gallery note-taking in the volume’s formation has only figured anecdotally in critical approaches to *Sight and Song*; its site-situated

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production, however, has much to reveal about the interconnectedness of modern ekphrastic poetry, aesthetic experience, and the institutionalization of art in museums, including some of the central museological practices of the time.

Beyond signaling their social, cultural, and economic capital, Bradley and Cooper’s European tours and their composition of notes and poems directly within museums, galleries, and royal palaces recall the then nearly ubiquitous art pedagogy of gallery copying and the educational philosophy that supported it: the belief that copying masterworks directly in museum galleries was an essential tool for training art students in established artistic styles. Like student-copyists at work in gallery spaces, Bradley and Cooper frame their ekphrases in the *Sight and Song* preface as verse replicas of artistic masterworks rather than as unique artistic products in their own right; yet *Sight and Song* also dismantles the masterwork/copy hierarchy by using ekphrasis to emplace transgressive poetics within the art historical canon.

Although gallery copying would steadily decline in popularity in the twentieth century when the rise of modernism brought with it an upsurge in pictorial abstraction, nonrepresentational aesthetics, and an institutionalized animus against academic art, this pedagogy was at its height during Bradley and Cooper’s own cultural educations in the Victorian era. The homology between gallery-copying and literary translation, which, as I discussed above, was often coded a feminine practice, is evident in the relation of the creating subject to the text: each implies the subject’s subordinated position to the original “master.” However, gallery copying, by its very nature, was a distinctly more public practice. Not only did copyists occupy a hyper-visible space in galleries when at work, but also throughout the nineteenth century many museums reserved entry several days a week for student-copyists to work without being encumbered by a supposedly less committed museum public. (As mostly male students were
admitted to the Royal Academy, this also meant a comparably homogeneous group working in the museum.) The museum thus became a crucial facilitator of artistic training during the century largely due to the desirability of its collections as instruments for art instruction.⁸ It was at this time that public museums became affiliated with national art academies, and museum administrators took up the bureaucratic role of sanctioning students in training—most of whom were expected to provide credentials certifying their enrollment in such established institutions as the Royal Academy and the École des Beaux-Arts—to copy exhibited paintings so as to hone their own skills after the classical aesthetic styles of the Old Masters.⁹ Pierre Bourdieu argues that this centering of art pedagogy around the museum had the effect of reifying extant aesthetic hierarchies by associating art study squarely with the already-privileged aesthetic practices exhibited in museums, so that art students “never completely escape from the École’s grasp, the necessity of which they deeply internalize through subjects … which have submission to the academic institution as an underlying principle”:

Trained in the school of copying, instructed in the respect of present and past masters, convinced that art arises from obedience to canons, and especially to the rules which define legitimate topics of painting and legitimate ways of treating them, the academic painters, when given the choice, direct their research more towards literary content than

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⁸ See Hooper-Greenhill, who traces this phenomenon’s realignment of prior forms of art instruction: “The training of artists was radically altered [by the develop of the museum in the late eighteenth century]. Previously, artists had worked as apprentices … in the studio of a master. Now the ‘museum’ took the place of the master, and students worked in the galleries, faithfully following the master painters step by step” (182).

⁹ As McClellan notes, upon the opening of the Louvre, the first public museum of art, in 1792, student artists gained privilege access to the collection: “One further public conscientiously served by the Revolutionary Louvre was practicing artists, who, together with tourists, were given privileged access to the museum for the purpose of copying the Old Masters. The study and selective imitation of past art had been a cornerstone of artistic theory and training for two hundred years and this practice was institutionalized at the Louvre and other museums. Art schools were often associated with and build near art museums well into the twentieth century” (“A Brief History of the Art Museum Public” 6).
towards pure pictorial invention. (“Manet and the Institutionalization of Anomie” 242, 243-4)

As a pedagogical device, gallery copying shored up the aesthetic status quo, affirming the value of that which has already been valued, specifically the Old Master painters enshrined at the top of the museum’s aesthetic hierarchies, and equated academic and professional success with an artist’s ability to master these established artistic styles. As a result, students trained through gallery copying entered the art world prepared to produce aesthetic objects that confirm its defining values.¹⁰

However, if the emplacement of the “copying” artist within the museum space has been conventionally coded as a conservative rehearsal of received aesthetic practices, for Bradley and Cooper, working within the gallery space allowed them to invoke—and repurpose—conventional museological tropes in their own ekphrastic writing. Not purely affirmative or antagonistic towards the museum’s values, drawing on the act of gallery copying and its attendant association with a master/student framework enabled the Sight and Song ekphrases to situate transgressive verse interpretations within the dominant framing of art history.

The preface to Sight and Song, written in the hybrid voice of Michael Field, signals the volume’s intervention into the field of art critical writing and the poets’ status as deferential—and certainly uncontroversial—copyists when they announce an intention to use ekphrasis as a

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¹⁰ Of course, the idea of copying as a form of art training carries with it the suggestion that the student gains proficiency in replication rather than novel aesthetic production: it constructs the art world as a tautological and self-referential sphere that, in its ideal functioning, endlessly reproduces the practices, values, and beliefs that prop it up by training artists in the privileged styles of their museum-exhibited forebears. As Bourdieu notes, artistic training through practices such as gallery-copying privileges a “cult of technique treated as an end in itself,” which leads to the “icy perfection and the indistinguishable unreality of works which are too skillful – both brilliant and insignificant by dint of impersonality” (244). When Bourdieu designates the works of artists in this institutional climate as both aesthetically sound but determinately impersonal, he poses academic art against the aesthetic forms and practices that exist beyond its boundaries, art that may communicate ideas about subjectivity and experience rather than a devotion to received artistic ideals.
means of letting Old Master paintings “sing in themselves” in written language. The poems are presented as objective translations, or copies, of these paintings’ intrinsic poetry into lines of verse, with “poetry” defined not as a compositional form but instead as the term conveying the imaginative qualities of art irrespective of medium. Their ekphrases are thus framed as linguistic presentations of the poetry that plays upon the surface of Old Master canvases. The preface begins:

The aim of this little volume is, as far as may be, to translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves; to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate. Such an attempt demands patient, continuous sight as pure as the gazer can refine it of theory, fancies, or his mere subjective enjoyment. (Field v)

This framing ambivalently rehearses the basic terms of ekphrasis drawn from Lessing’s *Laocöon*. Field at once establishes a dualistic relationship between the arts of painting and poetry, reinforcing their disparate formal resources (paint and words, respectively), and compromises Lessing’s delineation of their expressiveness by suggesting that poetry can “objectively incarnate” a painted image. By framing the ekphrastic act as an ethereal poesis that works interstitially between painting and verse, Field imply that the original painting and the resulting ekphrasis should be understood as autotelic aesthetic objects, pointing to the possibilities for an autonomous aesthetic experience: that an ekphrastic poem about a real work of visual art can be parsed fully from the experience that precipitated the poem. Yet such a construction of aesthetic autonomy—that is, that the painting can be isolated from all social contexts of aesthetic experience—is repeatedly, and generatively, complicated throughout *Sight and Song*, as the conditions of Bradley and Cooper’s visits to museums to see these artworks in
situ are inextricable from their poetic texts. So how can we account for this seeming contradiction between the volume’s stated commitment to objective interpretation and the realities of their deeply affective, erotic verse?

I propose that Michael Field draw on the cultural authority of the museum in ways that suggest that their queer reframing of art history sought not escape from the institution, but rather a place to legitimize their own subject-positions and subjective experiences of art within it. When *Sight and Song* first appeared in bookstalls in 1892, homosexuality was still criminalized in England, the censorship of Baudelaire’s lesbian poems in France was a recent memory (and especially for such devoted readers of his work as Bradley and Cooper were), and Oscar Wilde would be put to trial for “gross indecency” in just three years. By framing their homoerotic interpretations as objectively locatable elements of Old Master paintings, the poets suggestively mitigate what might be taken as assumptions of social subversion in their ekphrases. The poets are, after all, no more than translators of the painting’s inherent poetry. Such framing deflects in advance suspicion of an affective oversaturation in the aesthetic experience, a sentiment that Chard points out was particularly essential for nineteenth-century women seeking to negotiate institutional authority:

in order to claim any form of masculine authority, the subject of feminine responsiveness needs to demonstrate several closely related qualities that are marked as manly: simplicity, sincerity, and restraint … One particular variety of affectation is defined especially frequently as a threat to the subject’s authority to describe and comment: the effusiveness that oversteps the bounds observed by sincere, manly emanations of emotion. (61)
The preface to *Sight and Song* defers responsibility for the emotional content of the poetry to the Old Master painting, securing interpretive authority for their poetic voice by associating it with just those forms of aesthetic response that Chard suggests were coded as masculine: “simplicity, sincerity, and restraint.” Moreover, the volume’s claims to interpretive authority is also achieved through the poets’ repurposing of standard museum practices such as gallery copying and, as I will argue below, museum labeling, into contexts for placing the volume’s homoerotic meanings within the bounded field of museum culture.

The preface’s apparently deferential rhetoric enacts a much more complex logic of the poets’ relationship to the museum and its artistic canons. When Michael Field claim in the preface to *Sight and Song* that the poems, produced through direct study of paintings, are objective translations of the inner “poetry” these paintings “sing in themselves,” they construct their relations as artists to the cultural field in a way comparable to the relations gallery-copying pedagogy establishes between students and the Old Masters. The preface assures readers that Michael Field are obedient students of art history, observers both sensitive to the unique qualities of esteemed masterworks and interested only in reproducing these qualities in ways that affirm the extant values of museum culture. The poets go so far as to designate their practice in *Sight and Song* as a “method of art-study,” underscoring the situatedness of their ekphrastic poet as a student within the hierarchical organization of the cultural field (v). The preface, then, suggests that *Sight and Song* reifies these institutional values: by neutralizing the impressions and desires of the ekphrastic poet in pursuit of an objective aesthetic sight, the poets emblazon their status as initiates of museum culture upon the very first page of *Sight and Song*.

However, the volume’s relation to museum culture is thornier than this passage seems at first to reveal. The objective basis of the “method of art-study” is complicated later when the
poets speak more expansively about the possibilities that are latent in a “pure” aesthetic experience: “Yet the effort to see things from their own centre, by suppressing the habitual centralization of the visible in ourselves, is a process by which we eliminate our idiosyncrasies and obtain an impression clearer, less passive, *more intimate*” (vi, emphasis mine). The revisionary cultural work performed throughout *Sight and Song* is captured in the definitional tensions inherent in this notion of objective sight. The preface initially suggests that in the volume’s method of art study, the traditional hierarchies of artists, aesthetic practices, and interpretive paradigms that define museum culture will be sustained, but this assertion is revised as the notional objectivity of aesthetic experience is brought into relation with other agents in the cultural field: studying an artwork objectively opens the possibility for a relational, “intimate” engagement with it. This superficial contradiction—how can one have both an impersonal and intimate relation to an art object?—locates the ekphrastic poet, their ways of seeing and interpreting, within the space of the museum and the ideological firmament of museum culture. In doing so, it creates space for ekphrastic poetry predicated both on the disinterestedness of the student copyist and on the affective, private relations between observer and object.

Following the contours of the preface’s argument brings readers to the center of museum culture only to muddle its discursive functioning: we follow a thread from impersonality to intimacy, from the museologically sanctioned mode of “art-study” to one predicated on desires beyond its scope. Taken together, these rhetorical moves frame the poets as active participants within the cultural field. Museums, then, gave these poets a space within which to negotiate aesthetic meanings through the embodied encounter between the observer and the Old Master (and his painting). Interpreting artworks in the museum space for *Sight and Song* registered as a deeply affective practice grounded in bodily experience for Bradley and Cooper, a dynamic we
might see in Bradley’s description of their gallery work during their 1891 trip to Dresden: “We have … slipt [sic] back into a delicious life, feeding, feeding our eyes, watching the flicker of firelight over the room, smelling the late, autumnal apples, + stretching in our thoughts toward certain pictures in Dresden + Frankfurt that have given up to us their dead” (“W&D” 4: 9 October 1981). This brief passage offers a constellation of provocative images, all of which orbit around the intimate and somatic nature of their gallery work. Bradley here describes their museum experiences as accumulating sensorial responses towards a synesthetic gestalt that registers unambiguously in the observer’s body. A synthesis of what would ostensibly be discrete responses in other contexts, this description of aesthetic experience invokes at once visual, haptic, olfactory, and gastronomical associations; it is both centripetal and centrifugal, absorbing the observer into the canvas but yet needing her active participation to bring the represented figures to life. What matters to the aesthetic experience is less the painting itself than its effects on this observer, who is framed as a necessary recipient of its offering of the “dead.” Gallery work is reinscribed as an embodied, private creative act, though carried out in a public space, and throughout Sight and Song it is the contact between otherwise discrete forms of aesthetic experience—institutional and private, objective and affective, impersonal yet personal—that turns museum experience into a queer ekphrasis. The placement of this intimate phenomenology of aesthetic experience against the museum’s structuring practices and dispositions attends to the disparities and differences in gendered experiences and representations in the museum space, and particularly in its most hallowed ground, the Old Master painting.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} Francis Haskell has traced the enmeshment of Old Master exhibitions with contemporary social politics in his history of this exhibition type. Haskell observes that from its beginnings in the Royal Academy’s 1813 exhibition of Sir Joshua Reynolds’ work, the modern Old Master exhibition has been used to signify, variously, the strength of a natural culture, diplomatic relations between nations, or the primacy of particular institutions in a globalized art culture. Though Haskell’s focus is on temporary exhibitions, what he derisively “ephemeral museums,” his framework is more widely applicable to the display of Old
To argue that *Sight and Song* reframes the museum as a space that can stimulate and sustain such a (re)interpretive free play of transgressive meanings cuts against what many scholars today identify as the primary thrust behind the museum’s rise in the nineteenth century: turning art experience into a form of social management meant to inculcate bourgeois moral and cultural standards on a growing mass public, to mitigate popular dissent, and to turn visitors into ideal citizens in the image of the state (an ideal subject that includes the heterosexual subject of conventional family structures). Jonah Siegel, for instance, describes the governing imperative of the nineteenth-century museums as “bringing people together and managing their desires” (4): as I discussed earlier, the idea of the museum as a normalizing institution relies on an Arnoldian notion of culture (and the museum) as a homogenous force that transcends class divisions for the potential restoration of a sense of unified English supremacy.  

Throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, museum administrators, curators, and reformers routinely stressed the institution’s imbrication with ideals of national citizenship, arguing that the museum reflects the interests of a singular national culture and has the potential of raising the whole of its citizenry to such ideals. As contemporary museum studies scholars routinely note, in practice such cultural homogeneity was sought through techniques of visitor management that turned upon the central paradox of the modern museum: art objects, the conventional purview of the upper classes, were made imminently available to the masses in the public art gallery. Through the establishment of rigid codes of conduct that policed visitor’s dress and openly discouraged behaviors such as

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12 See also Bennett; Duncan; Duncan and Wallach; and Hooper-Greenhill. Siegel cites the French Revolution as the most formative political context for the nineteenth-century museum’s nascent disciplinary function in England. He writes that following the Revolution and subsequent belief that “a new general level of culture was called for” among the English political elite to “manage a “fear of the crowd” and “educate it into a grouping of responsible and productive political subjects free from the dangerous passions of the mob” (4).
eating in the gallery space, conversing with one’s companions, or even bringing one’s umbrella into the museum on a rainy day, the Victorian museum was imagined as a space that could integrate the “unruly” masses into the social, cultural, and behavioral proprieties of the upper classes. An anti-participatory distancing of the visitor from immediate contact with the objects on display marked the Victorian museum’s political utility: assent induced through interpolation, by bringing the public into highly controlled contact with the ideas and objects that were typically the purview of the upper classes. Siegel’s claim that the museum functions by managing desires is apt: in this nineteenth-century model of museology, the interests of individuals were to be aligned within the ritualized intellectual habits of an imagined collective of bourgeois citizens.

Still, while such an experience surely represents a desired outcome for some individuals who visit museums as a means of signifying or elevating their cultural capital, it nevertheless leaves open the ways that a visitor’s use of the museum space might be able to revise, repurpose, or resist its ideological effects. Indeed, as Thomas Greenwood argues:

Pictures, again, not only give us the records of the past and the present, but help us to gain an intimate knowledge of some of the best lives lived by men and women. As a third point, there may be given the fact that there is always something more to be learned from a picture than the picture itself can tell us. Pictures and other works of art cultivate the wholesome habit of finding out information for ourselves, and so we become accustomed to follow out the suggestiveness conveyed to our minds by the picture. Pictures thus

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13 See, e.g., McClellan, who argues that the “socially conscious museums, supported by the state and the rich” in Victorian England were intended to “do their share to avoid anarchy and promote the graduate assimilation of the working classes into the bourgeoisie” (“Art and its Publics” 7).
become powerful aids in education, as well as giving pleasure and restfulness to the
mind. (10)

While Greenwood is not exactly interested in the potential for such interpretations to destabilize
institutional hierarchies—the museum is here meant to put the masses in contact with the “best
lives” lived in England’s past, and his *Museums and Art Galleries* is an extended entreaty for
public subsidy for these institutions—he nevertheless associates the most instructive outcomes of
a museum visit with interpretations that run in excess of “the picture itself,” meanings the public
locates privately and personally (“for ourselves,” “to our minds”).

In *Sight and Song*, this notion of interpretive excess is the threshold through which the
volume’s queer poetics are actualized. Moreover, in this book such interpretive excess is
intertwined with the particular generic resources of ekphrastic poetry as an interpretive space for
making (queer) meanings from paintings and a literary context for placing these meanings within
conventionalized traditions of representing aesthetic experience in verse. Of course, critics have
routinely conceptualized the poetics of ekphrasis in gendered terms. As James A.W. Heffernan
puts it, the genre has typically been defined as “a literary mode that turns on the antagonism—
the commonly gendered antagonism—between verbal and visual representation”: between the
masculine poem (temporal, rhetorical, penetrative) that tries, and most often fails, to get at an
indeterminate meaning embedded in the deep structure of the feminine art object (aesthetic,
withholding, unknowable) (6-7). We see this dynamic in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which
has been taken as paradigmatic of this critical tradition, when its poetic voice peppers the visual
object—the “still unravish’d bride of quietness”—with inquiries into its fundamental meaning
that never definitively resolve. W. J. T. Mitchell’s formative reading of ekphrasis follows the
view that it unfolds within a matrix of gendered difference, coding the speaker’s experience of
the visual object as an “overcoming of otherness” that sutures “dominant gender stereotypes into the semiotic structure of the imagetext, the image defined as feminine, the speaking/seeing subject of the text identified as masculine” (156, 181).14

However, a different critical framework, less reliant on such binarisms, is necessary for fully grasping the dynamic of gender difference in the ekphrases of *Sight and Song*. Field’s poems seek not to over-master the image in a phallic drama of epistemological penetration. Rather, as the preface puts it, they mean merely to “translate” what plays upon the image’s surface. This intention differentiates Field’s ekphrastic poetics from an ekphrastic tradition that has largely been shaped around the work of canonical male poets. The seemingly innocuous framing of these ekphrases as translations rather than penetrations suggests that it is contact with, rather than conquest of, the image that permits the surfacing of other interpretive meanings. This framing of the ekphrastic act as translation rather than conquest doesn’t suggest that the *Sight and Song* poems are any less significant as creative acts, for as James Merrill reminded us over a half century after Michael Field, translation is as much about the new meanings that can be found, not just lost or transferred, when knowledge moves from one domain to the next: “all is translation / And every bit of us is lost in it / (Or found…)” (10). In the following two sections, I consider what such acts of ekphrastic translation enabled Michael Field to find in the museum.

II.

While the true authorial identity behind *Sight and Song* was obscured in the volume’s production, Bradley and Cooper’s actual experiences in museums and galleries figure into a

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14 Mitchell does concede, “this would look quite different, of course, if my emphasis had been on ekphrastic poetry by women” (181). He offers no framework for what a female ekphrasis might look like in practice, but nevertheless eliding this dualistic structure altogether approximates the gender fluidity and ambiguities attendant to the ekphrastic poetic voice in *Sight and Song*. 
number of the ekphrastic poems that are attributed to the singular “Michael Field.” The voice of their ekphrastic translator is often embodied, particularized, and grounded in space and time, and the paradigmatic ekphrastic situation of the speaker’s contact with a visual object is staged within the material conditions of viewing art in nineteenth-century museums. In some poems, these conditions are explicitly manifest in the text, while in others—such as those I consider in this section—they are incorporated into the poem’s representation of the diegetic space of the Old Master canvas. This locational particularizing of the volume’s ekphrases transforms the traditional teleological framework of a museum experience that confirms received institutional epistemologies by “managing [the visitor’s] desires” into a literary context for emplacing queer meanings in the art historical record. In Bradley and Cooper’s ekphrasis of Pietro Perugino’s Apollo and Marsyas (c. 1495, fig. 1.1), which has remained largely unexamined despite the recent wave of scholarly interest in Sight and Song, museum ideals emerge notionally in the poem’s thematization of the novice’s musical performance before the master artist. “Apollo and Marsyas” brings together a number of the poetic energies that mark the ways Sight and Song conjures, only to disturb, the discursive center of nineteenth-century museum culture: the relationship between artistic authorities and ostensible amateurs, the encoded (homo)erotics of this relationship, and the spatial mapping of the amateur’s aesthetic production at the feet of the Old Master.

In conventional retellings of the mythological competition of musical prowess between Apollo and Marsyas, the Muses declare Apollo to be the victor and grant him the right to Marsyas for his precocity in challenging the God: Apollo flays Marsyas alive and publicly exhibits his skin. Perugino’s painting depicts a moment in the contest before its violent culmination, the only two figures occupying the canvas being the nude Marsyas, who is playing
his aulos, and Apollo, who casts a condescending glare in Marsyas’s direction, against an expansive pastoral landscape defined by a medieval turret. The *Sight and Song* ekphrasis of this painting recasts the violence of the myth into a narrative of artistic influence and instruction that points to the Master’s precedent in academic art. The poem begins:

**APOLLO AND MARSYAS**

PERUGINO
The Louvre

Fair stands Apollo,
Magnanimous his figure sways:
He deigns to follow
The brutish notes that Marsyas plays;
And waits in haughty, vengeful peace,
One hand on his hip,
While the fingers of the other quietly slip
Round a staff. He does not raise
His eyes, nor move his lip. (Field 87)

The poem emphasizes the disparity in skill between Apollo, the master artist, and Marsyas, the novice who has yet to refine his techniques. The “brutish notes” register that Marsyas’s aesthetic production lacks the “finish”—the aura of being a well-wrought object—that has long been a defining quality of high art and, as Bourdieu has shown, since the seventeenth century has been tied specifically to the academicization of art instruction in national academies.\(^{15}\) Apollo is contrastingly defined as himself a finished, perfected aesthetic form who stands in “peace” and with poise, silent and still, his body a masterwork much like the music he performs on his lyre. Moreover, when Apollo performs music, his performance attracts crowds: “Mortals must admiring stand / Simply for awe of it” (89). Apollo is both invested with the cultural authority of an Old Master painting and is himself an Old Master—indeed, one of the oldest. In contrast, we can productively read the Marsyas figure as a surrogate to Field’s self-situatedness as amateur

\(^{15}\) On the significance of “finish” in academic art, see Bourdieu, “Manet and the Institutionalization of Anomie” 248-9.
“copyists” within the artistic field: that Marsyas, with his “brutish notes,” is considered a lesser artist than Apollo evokes the poets’ rhetorical depreciation of *Sight and Song* in its preface as “this little volume” in relation to the Old Master paintings that inspired it, and the consequent reduction of the poet’s role as mediator in the ekphrastic act. Field’s ekphrasis itself, with its varying meter and alternation between paratactic and longer hexameter lines—a dynamic that can be observed in lines 6-7 above, for instance—further suggests the poets’ identification with Marsyas: as a poem, “Apollo and Marsyas” too lacks the veneer that a consistent, harmonious prosody, and its associations with traditional poetics, would provide. Rather, like Marsyas’ song, the poem registers its artists’ distance from aesthetic conventions while yet bringing them into relation.

In “Apollo and Marsyas,” this relation between masters and novices is a queer relation, as depicted both in Field’s description of each of Perugino’s painted figures and in the poem’s larger framing of the master-novice competition. We might remember here Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s important recovery in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) of a tradition in English letters of triangulating male homosocial (and homosexual) desire through competition for the female other. Though “Apollo and Marsyas” is a purely homosocial composition in that there is no ostensible feminine fulcrum present to facilitate their competition, what does stand in as the third term that animates the poem’s enmeshed homosocial and homosexual desires is art itself. Art, and specifically music—another kind of song, commensurate to the poetic song invoked in the volume’s title—mediates the homoerotic energies exchanged between Apollo and Marsyas, much in the same way that ekphrasis, in its interpretive function, harvests such energies across artistic media. The poem calls attention to Apollo’s *contrapposto* posture—“One hand on his hip,” in an indented line that mimics the god’s
own pose, one common to Italian Renaissance depictions of feminized male bodies—and lingers on Apollo’s hand wrapped around his staff: “the fingers of the other quietly slip / Round a staff.” The enjambment here foregrounds the encoded erotics of Apollo’s grasp on his staff by calling attention to the line’s sonic properties: the pursing of the lips created by the bilabial /p/ in “slip” followed by the literal rounding of the mouth to articulate the alveolar /r/ and diphthong /au/ in “round” accentuates the materiality of the poetic “song” and leads a reciter to perform with his mouth the act of “slip[ping] / Round a staff.” Aurality and orality coalesce in the poem’s erotic transcription of sight into song, reinscribing into poetic discourse the painting’s visual suggestion of Apollo’s staff as phallic—a sign of his artistic mastery—and its function as a displaced correlative to the aulos, another phallic object that is set between Marsyas’s lips and which in Perugino’s painting occupies the same horizontal plane as Apollo’s genitalia. Whereas most artistic depictions of the contest between Apollo and Marsyas focus on Marsyas’s punishment for losing the battle, in this ekphrasis the queer erotics of the contest are instead foregrounded.\(^{16}\)

There is only a single explicit reference, and a sidelong one at that, in the poem’s tenth stanza to Apollo’s flaying of Marsyas: “he will whet / A knife and without comment flay / The immodest faun” (Field 91). That the violent culmination of the episode figures at all in the ekphrasis suggestively undoes the preface’s promise of autotelic interpretation of the aesthetic object, as it projects a future beyond the frame that is assumed by but not literalized in the composition. It does so hesitantly, though, without full commitment to representing Apollo’s assault at all, as in addition to the brevity of this reference, the suggestion that Apollo flays

\(^{16}\) For some notable examples of typical depictions of the contest between Apollo and Marsyas, see Titian’s *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1570-76) and Antonio Corradini’s sculpture *Apollo Flaying Marsyas* (1658-1752). James Merrill’s poem “Marsyas” in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1957) uses the contest as a metaphor for an oedipal-inflected battle with an older, more successful poet, and highlights the flaying.
Marsyas “without comment” implies an action that occurs beyond the ambit of the poem’s representation of *sight* into *song*. Moreover, the poem’s identificatory commitments are divided: though Field’s poetic voice is associated primarily with the Marsyas figure, the final stanza empathizes with Apollo’s remorse over having to punish Marsyas—and carry out the received mythological script—at all:

There is a sadness
Upon the lids, the mouth divine

... that the offender callous, unalert
To contempt or threatening sign,
So grossly must be hurt

The poems’ ambivalent cross-identification is made all the more complex when we know that just a few months before writing “Apollo and Marsyas,” Bradley composed an unpublished occasional poem on the myth after receiving a heavily-edited version of a poem in the post from an unidentified editor: in this rehearsal of the myth, she places herself in the subject-position of Apollo flaying the editor, noting in the final line that “poets + gods are outrageous, if crost [sic]” (“W&D” 3: 10 March 1890). The tonal disparity between this poem and the *Sight and Song* ekphrasis points to what “Apollo and Marsyas” is not: not, that is, a meditation on the impropriety of transgressing the authority of the Old Master, but rather a poem on the queer energies that structure the contact between master and novice artist. By distributing their identifications to both Apollo and Marsyas, Field resist the moralization that routinely accompany depictions of the violent flaying (that Marsyas either deserves his fate for challenging the god, or Apollo represents the dangers of a totalitarian authority), such as in the
unpublished occasional poem; instead, the ekphrasis secures an interpretive framework that brings queer intimacies to the surface of the canvas.

In working out the homoerotic energies of “Apollo and Marsyas” through the master/novice relationship, the poets may have been influenced by the enmeshment of masculine desire in tutorial education, a comparable master/novice pattern in nineteenth-century elite academic cultures. As Richard Dellamora and Linda Dowling have noted, in the homosocial circles that gathered in Victorian Oxford, a renewed attention to Hellenic ideals turned effeminacy and male love into civic virtues and mapped tutorial relations around strong erotic attachments between young men and their teachers. Bradley and Cooper would have been familiar with this social framework of male desire, as they were devoted readers of decadent and aesthetic works in which such desires often found literary expression, and were acquaintances of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, two writers whose works were central to the reemergence of Hellenic models of same-sex intimacy in Victorian literary circles. However, the queer content of “Apollo and Marsyas” doesn’t perfectly cohere with such a Hellenic homosociality, which was traditionally played out by upper class white men who had the leisure of pursuing lives of the minds and senses. Marsyas certainly does not fit this identity construction: instead, he is queered in the more expansive sense of the term. The only physical description of Marsyas given by the poem emphasizes his racial otherness as a “brown, inferior man,” accentuating Marsyas’s difference from Apollo, the phallic artist who signifies the prevailing values, artistic practices, and discursive authority of the cultural field. The ekphrasis thus accentuates Marsyas’s multifaceted difference from Apollo, the phallic artist who signifies the prevailing values and

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17 For a fuller discussion of Oxford Hellenism, see chapter 3, “The Socratic Ethos” in Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*. Dowling argues that the Hellenic spirit that Benjamin Jowett’s reform efforts instilled in the university curriculum associated male love with civic virtue, and as a result provided a justifiable cultural history for intense male friendship.
practices of the cultural field, while still locating this “difference” within the space of the Old Master canvas.

By deemphasizing the flaying of Marsyas in favor of the erotics of the competition, Field lessen the minatory, punitive resonances of the Apollo and Marsyas narrative—which in conventional retellings can be interpreted as a cautionary tale against transgressing authority—to locate artistic possibilities, including their own, in queer artistic productions that resist perfectly reproducing traditional centers of cultural authority. “Apollo and Marsyas” exploits a spatial and associational correlation between Perugino’s depiction of Marsyas and Apollo and gallery-copying pedagogy. Not only does Marsyas’s positioning, producing art while kneeling below the Old Master, recall the spatial location of the copyist in a gallery, but the poem’s emphasis on the disparity of their skills bears the marking of the student “performing” before the Master in the gallery space. With this in mind, the racial encoding of Marsyas takes on a more transgressive valence, especially when we consider the parallels between the poem and the institutional practices it suggests: the novice artist does not adhere to the dominant identity construction represented in the museum space, that of the white, heterosexual male whose experiences and worldview the museum traditionally reflects back at their visitors. Moreover, canceled lines in an earlier draft of the poem confirm this reading of Marsyas’s radical incorporation within high culture. In the early draft, the poem’s speaker indicates that Marsyas’s most grievous error was not in challenging Apollo, but instead in not showing reverence for the Old Master’s work, that he “did not fetch a sigh / To [Apollo’s] rich-wrought heptachord” (“W&D” 5: n.d.): Marsyas errs in insufficiently appreciating the aesthetic productions of the master artist. Marsyas does indeed exist within the frame of Perugino’s Apollo and Marsyas, but the poem “Apollo and Marsyas”

18 For the centrality of the white male subject in museum exhibitions, see, e.g., Duncan 8; Porter; and Hein. This issue is taken up in greater depth in chapter four of this dissertation.
emphasizes his particular distance and difference from the artistic practices that might be associated with these Masters. The poem places several different constructions of difference (skill, artistic practices, race, sexuality, etc.) in play, and the transgressive elements of *Sight and Song* manifest partly in how the volume allows such differences to circulate within the cultural field.

If we take the representation of the Marsyas figure involved in an act of aesthetic creation at the feet of the phallic Master artist to correlate to Bradley and Cooper’s own experiences in museums and galleries, then the production of *Sight and Song* for which the poem is a kind of synecdoche can be understood as a poetic location of Otherness within the hegemonic field of high art culture, situating difference in the museum. This active manipulation of museum practices and imagery to carve a participatory space resonates down into the volume’s paratextual arrangement, before the reader even encounters a single line of poetry. Each poem of *Sight and Song* is arranged consistently: the poem’s title (which in most instances is either directly taken from the painting’s title or is a simplification of the original title) in large type is centered at the top of the page, followed by the name of the painter and the location of the gallery where it is on display, and finally by the ekphrasis itself (fig. 1.2). The inclusion of the gallery name on the printed page seems to contradict the preface’s claims of pure, unmediated aesthetic experience. It instead concedes the painting’s status as institutionally located, and thus a component of a larger cultural field. Moreover, this paratextual arrangement more dramatically signals the situated nature of viewing paintings in museums by drawing from, and revising, a familiar institutional device: the museum label. While Walter reads the paratext of *Sight and Song* as a play on the museum guidebook, instructing readers/“visitors” what and how to see
when touring galleries, I think that these elements more closely simulate a museum’s descriptive label. Indeed, the paratexts of *Sight and Song* spatially replicate the content and organization of gallery labels, and the volume’s presentation as a series of discrete poetic objects places primacy on attentive looking at each object without instruction on how to navigate between them (a common focus in nineteenth-century tourism literature, as in that same genre today).  

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19 Walter makes her convincing argument that *Sight and Song* reads like a museum guidebook on the grounds that their printed pages contain the same contextual information one would often find in a
In art museums from the nineteenth century to the present, gallery labels have characteristically offered visitors a relatively stable set of information: the painting’s title, artist’s name, the painting’s provenance, and (more recently) a brief exegetical passage that interprets the object’s meaning, the identities of figures, objects, or environments represented, and/or the object’s historical significance. These materials present what might appear to be objective information, but the act of labeling an object also limits the interpretive possibilities available to museum patrons by producing an interpretive framework to shape their aesthetic experiences, a framework that can also predicate judgments of what objects deserve attentive looking and which are only minor objects in the art historical canon. Greenwood, for instance, expresses a contemporary’s concern that overly didactic or too intrusively placed labels might inhibit a visitor’s experience: he cautions that museum administrators should apply parenthetical information “with the greatest facility” such that the “artistic effect is preserved from the ludicrousness that often attends the introduction of labels” (76). Though the museum label ostensibly provides visitors with objective information about exhibited objects necessary both to learn about the individual object and understand its place within the museum’s taxonomies, the label can also overdetermine a patron’s experiences of objects and of the museum space.

The paratext of the *Sight and Song* poems reproduces the substance of the museum label but resists fully confirming its spirit. On the printed page, each poem is prefaced by identifying information about the painting that inspired it—the painting’s title, an attribution to the artist, and its institutional location—but in the context of *Sight and Song* these elements are

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20 See, e.g., Hooper-Greenhill, who writes that the inclusion of “explanatory texts” in museum galleries was among the practices developed as “the ‘museum’ attempted to fulfill its function of transforming the population into a useful resource for the state” (182). See also Cushman, who reads the dating on objects of museum labels as an institutional reification of “Western modernity’s concept of tradition” (119).
transformed from ostensibly objective bits of information to micro engagements with authoritative museological epistemologies. With the inclusion of each painting’s institutional home, the paratext both signals the situatedness of the volume’s ekphrastic poetics and calls attention to the imbrication of labeling and institutional authority. By acknowledging each original artwork’s institutional home in their paratexts, that is, the poems read less as ekphrases just of paintings (as if they were ethereal things that lacked spatial specificity), and more as ekphrases of paintings as they inhabit specific institutional spaces and, thus, are components of a broader art world. This bit of information serves the same ostensible purpose to the paratext as does an object’s bequest on conventional museum labels: it signals how the object came to its present site. Indeed, the regular inclusion of provenance on museum labels signifies the institution’s rightful possession of the object, the authenticity of the object, and the institution’s intellectual authority to construct a narrative of its history and meaning. On the page of Sight and Song, however, the “provenance” implied by the inclusion of the museum’s name makes the painting’s verbal presence on the printed page its final destination, and thus transforms the object’s interpreter—the Sight and Song poet—into its owner. This paratextual act authorizes the ekphrastic interpreter as a meaningful agent in the cultural field in a way that anticipates Marianne Moore’s notion of “imaginary possession” (discussed in Chapter Two). The significance of these paratextual revisions resonates in the actual poems themselves, which in their placement on the page below the title, the artist’s name, and the gallery space, serve a function commensurate to the interpretive passages on museum labels. But while the ekphrastic poem is situated on the page as spatially and functionally correlated to the institutionally sanctioned interpretations provided on museum labels, the poem has a significantly different relationship to institutional discourse, registering meanings marginalized in the turn-of-the-
century cultural field. Labeling Old Master paintings against the grain of institutional traditions literalizes these other modes of aesthetic experience as meaningful ways of seeing and feeling in the museum.

This tension between the ostensible univocity of institutional display technologies and the potential multiplicity of patrons’ object experiences is operative from the very first poem of the volume, “L’Indifferent,” after Jean-Antoine Watteau’s painting of the same name in the Louvre’s permanent collection. Watteau’s work bookends Sight and Song: the volume’s final poem is an ekphrasis of his L’Embarquement pour Cythère (1717). As the only painter included who did not work in Italy during the Renaissance period, Watteau is both a national and temporal other to Sight and Song. Given the volume’s paramount focus on High Renaissance painting, this placement of Watteau ekphrases at beginning and end is a conspicuous framing device: Watteau, a prominent member of the French Royal Academy and celebrated practitioner of the then privileged neoclassical style, puts the institutional structure of art culture in the reader’s mind in the book’s first poem, continuing from the preface’s description of the volume as a “method of art-study.” Sight and Song begins with an ekphrasis of a painting by a more recent “Master” as an entrée into the Renaissance, the period often cited in nineteenth-century art historical texts as the pinnacle of artistic achievement, and which Watteau would have himself studied closely during his training. That Watteau’s presence in the volume should resonate with the institutionalization of the art historical canon is made explicit by the placement of the ekphrasis of L’Embarquement pour Cythère, the painting Watteau used as his reception piece for the Royal Academy, as the volume’s concluding poem. Opening and concluding the volume with Watteau, then, suggests that Sight and Song engages explicitly with establishment artistic values and practices. Watteau’s chilly reception during the French Revolution is enough to attest to his
association with the artistic establishment: as the painter Pierre Bergeret recalls, “[Watteau’s] painting on the *Departure from Cythera*, which is today in the museum, was then in the study halls of the academy; it served as target practice for the bread pellets of the draftsmen and for the clay pellets of the sculptors … one day, a student of the primitive sect, carried away by his antipathy for Watteau’s painting, raised himself upon his bench and vigorously punched the painting to destroy it so that ‘Philipot [then a curator at the Academy] took down the unfortunate painting and put it in the attic’” (qtd. in Grasselli and Rosenberg 398). Bradley and Cooper’s foregrounding of Watteau in a volume otherwise dedicated to Renaissance Old Masters draws upon his historical association with a high cultural aesthetic, as a painter of French aristocratic scenes, the *fête galantes* of the eighteenth-century’s leisure class, and the frivolity and opulence of the Rococo aesthetic, it draws reader’s attention to the high cultural capital of visual art and, particularly, of art that has been given institutional legitimation. Field reshape these received cultural associations of Watteau with the puerility and insincerity of a bourgeois pure aesthetic in their ekphrasis of *L’Indifferent* (1716), Watteau’s portrait of a carefree young man privately dancing in a field, where high art culture’s distance from the larger social world is invoked only to be compromised, and the painting is placed within a field of viewers whose presence is crucial to the volume’s queer reinterpretive project.

“L’Indifferent” begins in a direct, descriptive mode, characterizing the pose of the young man and his seeming weightlessness:

“L’INDIFFERENT”

WATTEAU

*The Louvre*
He dances on a toe

As light as Mercury’s:

_Sweet Herald, give thy message!_ No,

He dances on; the world is his;

The sunshine and his wingy hat (Field 1)

The invocation of the mythological messenger-god Mercury in the second line immediately locates the representation of the young man in a textually constructed, typological continuum: that is, he calls to mind mythic rather than realistic types. He seemingly exists as autonomous from the social world, an interpretation that draws on his representation in Watteau’s canvas as a solitary figure set against a nondescript rural landscape. However, the poem produces this sense of his autonomy dialectically against a field of others that occupy a space beyond the frame. This is made explicit by the inclusion of italicized commands from beyond the frame that are directed at the figure: “Sweet herald, give thy message!”; “Gay youngster, underneath the oak, / Come laugh and love!” (2). Jill Ehnenn reads the young man’s unresponsiveness to these questions as a sign of his sexualized autonomy, a preference to dance alone rather than offer a “mating dance” for a field of others (126). While this interpretation frames the young man’s indifference as a radical act of resistance against a heterosexual matrix, and hears the voices as representative of dominant social ideologies, inverting Ehnenn’s framework permits a quite different interpretation of “L’Indifferent,” one that re-situates the transgressive dimensions of _Sight and Song_ within the institutional culture that houses the painting. The very title of “L’Indifferent” ought to problematize notions of the young man’s radical social autonomy. The idea of “indifference” implies an indirect object: one can only be indifferent _to_ something beyond oneself, and here, that outside manifests as the public beyond the frame that peppers the figure
with questions. Indeed, each of the italicized questions and commands directed at the young man seeks to compromise his independence by bringing him into a larger social framework: to disclose his secret “message” and to join these voices “underneath the oak” (2, emphasis in original).

This dialogic structure between object and public defines the poem’s prosody: each of its two stanzas begins with two trimeter lines followed by eight (mostly) iambic tetrameter and dimeter lines. The trimeters, both of which describe the young man’s dancing (“He dances on a toe / As light as Mercury’s”; “He dances in a cloak / Of vermeil and of blue”), join an amphibrach and anapest (in line 2, a dactyl) to mimic the weightlessness, frivolity, and aleatory nature of his movements:

21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>He dances</th>
<th>on a toe</th>
<th>He dances</th>
<th>in a cloak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As light as</td>
<td>Mercury’s (ll. 1-2)</td>
<td>Of vermeil and of</td>
<td>blue (ll. 11-12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This arrangement is disrupted – literally and prosodically – in the third line of each stanza, when an italicized voice intervenes in iambs:

*Sweet he rald, give thy mess age!* No, (ll. 3)

*Gay young ster un der neath the oak* (ll. 13)

Though these italicized intrusions are brief, the iambic meter infuses the rest of each stanza until its concluding lines. The poem thus intimates metrically the idea of relational and reinterpretable aesthetic experience that Field present throughout *Sight and Song*. The opening three lines of each stanza model the contact between an autonomous art object (the dancing young man in unitalicized, paratactic lines) and an observing public (the italicized interjections), those same actors that are put in play in the framing of aesthetic experience as “art-study” in the volume’s

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21 It merits noting, too, that the amphibrach is a foot most closely associated with light verse and ballads, a prosodic subtext that reiterates the frivolity of the scene.
preface. The divide between them is dramatically augmented in line 3 above, where the caesura in the fourth foot and the hard accent on “No” (punctuated by the nasal consonant produced by the “N” sound) accentuate the young man’s refusal to enter the social world. However, after this initial moment of contact the apparent difference between artwork and observer dissolves, and the rest of the ekphrastic “translation” of the painting takes on the metrical shape of the external voice’s iambic interruption. What is intimated metrically in these lines is the fact that what is outside the frame is necessary to sustain the very claims of autonomy for that which is within: that is, the autonomy of the aesthetic experience can only be sustained in relation to its opposite, a social world interested in seeing and interpreting art. The voices “woo” “in vain,” as the boy offers “No soul, no kiss / No glance nor joy!” that can definitively fulfill their wants, echoing the eternally suspended desires of the young couple in Keats’s own timeless ekphrastic object.

“L’Indifferent” signals the possibilities of a social ekphrasis while foreclosing its literalization: the young man, enshrined both within the frame and within institutional hierarchies, can never fully enter the field of others. But by framing their ekphrastic interpretation of the painting as dialogic rather than univocal—as an aesthetic experience generated through a public’s engagement with an artwork—the poets resist wholly confirming the discourses of objective aesthetic experience the preface seems to invoke: “L’Indifferent” does not represent the autotelic interpretation of the painting, but rather details the moment of an experience, replete with voices that speak from beyond the frame. If the museum label is recognized as an imposition of a univocal epistemological index, privileging certain knowledge as crucial for one’s experience of an artwork and thus what other knowledge is trivial, the ekphrastic “label” of L’Indifferent provides coordinates for a revised idea of aesthetic experience that acknowledges the presence and significance of a field of observers who, if they don’t
completely dislodge the relative autonomy of the museum-exhibited object, still re-situate it within and restore it to a larger social context.

In “L’Indifferent” the affective relations between observers and artworks are held in suspension only to be actualized metrically in the ekphrastic text. A similar poetic effect defines the ekphrasis “A Pietà,” a take on Venetian painter Carlo Crivelli’s tempera of this familiar Biblical tableau (1476). Though it would later be sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Crivelli’s Pietà was then in the private collection of William Ward, 1st Early of Dudley and was seen by the poets when it was lent to an Old Master’s Exhibition at the Burlington House in January 1892. The poem’s speaker registers the effects and affects of her experience of Crivelli’s canvas—which depicts the slack body of Christ and a weeping Virgin, Magdalene, and St. John in the artist’s characteristically dramatic, ornamental style—and gestures towards her desire for immersion in the represented scene.

The first of the poem’s six thirteen-line stanzas begins with a relatively straightforward description of the composition, “A mother bent on the body of her Son, / Fierce tears and wrinkles around her eyes,” but almost immediately shifts into a more speculative mode, with the poetic speaker conjecturing some alternative readings of the scene beyond the familiar Biblical narrative of Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection: “Almost it seems that the dead has done her wrong, / Almost it seems in her strife / Of passion she would shake the dead to life” (106). The anaphoric repetition of “Almost” qualifies the ekphrastic interpretation as speculative and indeterminate. It is not an authoritative replication of the canvas’ narrative, so familiar in the cultural imagination both from scripture and from any of a number of famous artistic Pietas, but rather a space where the meaning of the representation is negotiated through the observer’s
aesthetic experience. In the third stanza, the situatedness of the ekphrasis as a product of this observer’s perception is more immediately foregrounded:

Yet there is such subtle intercourse between

The hues and the passion is so frank

One is soothed, one feels it good

To be of this little group

Of mourners close to the rank,

Deep wounds, as to tend their unclean dead they stoop. (108)

This emphasis on the “one” who “is soothed” by the painting draws attention to the somatic resonances of the experience, which registers both emotionally and physically with the observer. Feeling and experience are mutually sustaining in the ekphrastic text, a coalescence that allows the poetic speaker to imagine herself to be an active participant in Crivelli’s composition, another figure in the retinue that surround the dying Christ. Field invoke aesthetic discourse by shifting attention to the painting’s form (“the hues”), but this description is only relevant to the ekphrasis insofar as it contributes to the painting’s primary affective charge (“passion”): the emotional content of the piece is not sacrificed in pursuit of formal analysis, but instead is reassigned to enable the speaker’s immediate affective participation in the diegesis. As in “L’Indifferent,” the ekphrasis brings artworks and observers into relational contact, with an additional focus here on how an aesthetic experience might allow an observer to participate in the production of the composition’s affective resonance.

In “Apollo and Marsyas,” “L’Indifferent,” and “A Pietà,” the conditions of museum experience surface in the poetic text both to confirm and complicate the volume’s stated program of objective “art-study.” In each of these poems, an other that exists outside the boundaries of the
Old Master tradition—figuratively, Marsyas, the other to the “Old Master” Apollo; and literally, the poetic voices that engage with Watteau’s and Crivelli’s canvases—is essential to preserving and communicating the cultural status of the Old Master and the prevailing values of the museum, even as it dismantles the univocity of such values. By incorporating interpretative alternatives and alternative voices within the ekphrastic scene, Field legitimate them as agents in the cultural field: there would be nothing to remark on in the museum without a perceiving public, whose desires and responses are not so easily negated. In these poems and throughout Sight and Song, institutional experiences light the way to aesthetic responses that signify personal, affective meanings beyond the customary dispositions of museum culture. The objectivity of “art-study” enables the subjectivity of feeling and passion; the experience of interpreting art within the museum allows for the articulation of otherness.

III.

The elements of embodiment and affect that define the ekphrastic project of Sight and Song solicit the active involvement of the interpreter in the transcription of sight into song, and throughout the volume intimations of an interpreting public beyond the frame of the Old Master painting (such as we see in the harrying voices of “L’Indifferent” and differentiated speaker of “A Pietà”) indicate that although this “method of art-study” revises institutionalized discourses of disinterested aesthetic experience, it does so from within conditions of modern museum culture. In many of these poems, the transgressive content produced in the ekphrastic act eludes the normalized meaning associated with a male gaze that, as museum scholars argue, is the implied optical subject in the museum. By resisting a hierarchical subject/object dichotomy of art interpretation in favor of a poetics that locates the meaning of the art object in the interactions
among the object, its public, and a poetic voice attuned to ideas of otherness, the very project of *Sight and Song* tacitly challenges (masculine coded) conventions of art interpretation. For while the entire volume might read in sequence as a poetic take on the portrait gallery, and its ekphrases exclusively represent paintings created by male artists, the ekphrastic act itself makes space for the volume’s reinterpreting project by offering a literary context for negotiating transgressive meanings through the public display of art. In other *Sight and Song* poems, however, this notionally feminist poetic methodology is joined with explicitly feminist challenges to the patriarchal underpinnings of modern museum culture. These poems explore the conditions for aesthetic experience and ekphrastic writing in the museum by pointing to the revisionary possibilities inherent to art interpretations that resist rehearsing the institution’s hermeneutic rituals: possibilities, that is, of locating notions of female sexual empowerment in the gallery space. In “A Portrait,” an ekphrasis of Bartolommeo Veneto’s allegorized portrait of an unidentified woman (fig. 1.3), the dialectical interplay between the institutional and experiential, the intentions behind the aesthetic act and the outcomes of public reception, and received and interpretive knowledges expose the masculine-normative structures of art perception that are bound up in the institutional display of aestheticized female bodies in museum galleries. The ekphrasis draws the ingrained structures of museum culture to the poem’s surface only to undo or dissolve their linkages to any meaning of the painting or of the observer’s experience of it. Like “L’Indifferent,” “A Portrait” develops through irresolvable tensions between the relative autonomy of the artwork in the gallery and the subjectivity of the observer’s interpretation. Here, however, the ekphrasis explicitly wrestles with heterosexist traditions of male artistic creation; the poetic interpretation of Veneto’s woman as an empowered subject paradoxically frees her individually from a masculine consumptive economy by splitting
her subjectivity from the pictorial representation on display within a phallocentric museum culture.

“A Portrait” begins by imagining the woman’s interior thoughts and actions as she willingly and willfully prepares herself for the aesthetic act, offering to the reader a series of what at first appear to be tantalizingly decodable symbols that, upon scrutiny, remain in ambiguity:

**A Portrait**

**Bartolomeo Veneto**
The Städel’sche Institut at Frankfurt

A crystal, flawless beauty on the brows
Where neither love nor time has conquered space
On which to live; her leftward smile endows
The gazer with no tidings from the face (27)

The unresolved ambiguities attendant on the subject’s appearance—a gem with no indication of its origins, the “leftward smile” with no causal explanation of what elicited this response—resist resolving into a hermeneutic that would commit the portrait subject’s identity to familiar representational typologies as, say, an honorable woman or a dissolute prostitute. The poem rather secures her independence from such designations by leaving these seemingly available aesthetic markers of identity, relation, or type undeciphered. The aesthetic is invoked in the poem’s first line in the form of the “crystal, flawless beauty” that rests on her “brows,” directing attention to the fact that the subject has been ‘done up’ for viewing. We reach for interpretations that the poem places just beyond our grasp: what does this gem tell us about her identity, sexual and familial attachments, or intentions? But what this gem in fact signifies is the woman’s freedom from a scopic sexual economy: the ornament adorns a space, the female body, that has not been “conquered.” Similarly, as the poem traces a path downward along her body from the gem on the forehead to her mouth, it refuses to provide any sense of her interiority for the reader. Field hint at, only to refuse, the traditional expectation that portraits seek to reveal the inner character of the sitter through her outward appearance. As Frances Dickey notes, in traditional portraiture “character traits were conveyed by a system of conventional symbols, including pose and lighting as well as accessories and clothing. Even in the mid-nineteenth century it was an
article of faith that the portraitist’s task was to plumb the depths of the sitter’s soul” (6). While Field’s poetic *blason* catalogues visual attributes of Veneto’s subject, “A Portrait” refuses the artistic flourish of reading any discernible traces “of the sitter’s soul” in the portrait itself. Her “smile” is rather an empty gesture in the sense that it gives “no tidings” to the “gazer,” who, the poem nevertheless acknowledges, lingers beyond the frame. In this poetic space, the linguistic portrait may exist in relation to a public (the reader) much as the actual portrait did on the walls of the Städel Museum when Bradley and Cooper visited in 1891, but definitive interpretations of its meaning are unavailable.

The rest of “A Portrait” is divided into two balanced sections that take up distinct temporal moments. Stanzas 2-4 describe the model’s preparations for the portrait’s creation, while stanzas 5-7 focus on the painting’s later public existence in an art gallery-space and the masses that gathers before it. While Field resist the inward/outward interpretive continuity Dickey associates with traditional portraiture, “A Portrait” glimpses the identity of the sitter through imagining a narrative prior to the portrait’s creation; her interiority is accessed not through Veneto’s aesthetic depiction of her, that is, but through Field’s collaborative recreation of her active control over how she was to be depicted. What we receive in the poem’s first movement is an image of a woman cognizant of her aesthetic beauty—“She saw her beauty often in the glass, / Sharp on the dazzling surface, and she knew / The haughty custom of her grace must pass” (27)—and capable of anticipating and manipulating the male gaze to her advantage. She consents to being painted as a means of preserving her appearance against time: “She will be painted, she who is so strong / In loveliness, so fugitive in years” (28). This notion of the interconnectedness of the model’s appearance in a single moment of time and the possibilities of permanence in artistic representation draws from a poetic conceit familiar from the early modern
English sonnets of Shakespeare and Sir Philip Sidney, but “A Portrait” inverts the representational syntax of this tradition: if in its conventional deployment this conceit is articulated by a poet determined to preserve the beauty of the beloved in aesthetic form, in “A Portrait” it is the model who commits herself to artistic representation. She is both conscious of the conventions of aesthetic representation, as we see in her acts of self-adornment, and able to manipulate them to realize her aspirations to permanence. Though the poem may begin with a description of the portrait, the primary subject of representation in the ekphrasis is not necessarily the portrait subject as she appears in Veneto’s pictorial composition, but rather the model whose thoughts and actions cannot be perfectly reconciled to her iconological appearance on canvas. The concluding stanza of the first movement leaves us with the model’s final preparations, underscoring her active role in determining the conditions and outcomes of her representation on the canvas:

Next on her head, veiled with well bleached white
And bound across the brow with azure-blue,
She sets the box-tree leaf and coils it tight
In spiky wreath of green, immortal hue;
Then to the prompting of her strange, emphatic insight true,
She bares one breast, half-freeing it of robe,
And hangs green-water gem and cord beside the naked globe.

Again eliding Lessing’s discrimination between the arts and their aesthetic limits, the ekphrasis introduces time and agential narrative in its depiction of what is, by necessity of medium, a static representation on canvas: “Next,” “She sets,” “coils,” “Then,” “bares,” “half-freeing,” “hangs.” These lines go some way toward framing the model as an agential, kinetic subject during her
preparation for actualizing her own internal “insight true” by being subjected to pictorial representation.

The poem’s thematization of the model’s transformation into an art object, played out in the shift from the first to the second section of the poem, is constituted formally by the associations of the verse structure of “A Portrait,” a series of seven rhyme royal stanzas. The doubling of sevens (seven seven-line stanzas) ties the act of aesthetic “creation” narrated in the poem’s first movement to the seven days of Creation in the Old Testament, both of which resolve in a period of “rest” (in “A Portrait,” with the finished portrait’s status as exhibited in a gallery “for centuries”). The use of rhyme royal stanzas in the ekphrasis points to yet another Shakespearean intertext: the narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* (1592), perhaps the best known English poem written entirely in rhyme royal, and certainly the most widely read rhyme royal work written after the Medieval period. Like “A Portrait,” *The Rape of Lucrece* treats the transformation of the female body into a symbol for male visual consumption: after Lucrece’s suicide, the public display of her body in Rome galvanizes political revolution against the Tarquins. Field’s rhyme royal sequence similarly tells of the transformation of the model’s body into a sign that is eminently available to interpretation by a masculine public sphere. Beginning with the fifth stanza, the poem shifts consideration from the portrait’s creation to its institutional reception:

So she was painted and for centuries

Has held the fading field-flowers in her hand

Austerely *as a sign*. O fearful eyes

And soft lips of the courtesan who planned

To give her fragile shapeliness to art, whose reason spanned
Her doom, who bade her beauty in its cold
And vacant eminence persist for all men to behold! (29, emphases mine)

The public exhibition of her pictorial representation is framed as the inevitable outcome of the model’s desired escape from mortality: as a portrait subject, she is now figured as an autotelic aesthetic object vacant of any remnant of living passion, with “no memories save of herself” transformed into “a fair, blank form, unverified by life.” The poem signals the act of aesthetic creation as a deferral of the model’s identity, from an original reality marked by her desire and agency into that of an impenetrable, austere aesthetic form. What were earlier presented as acts of female aesthetic self-determination are transformed into symbols that circulate within the strictures of a masculine scopic economy, “her fragile shapeliness” now exhibited “for all men to behold.” Although “men” may signify here as a synecdoche for humankind, as the referential conventions of the time of its writing would dictate, the ekphrasis’ imbrication in then contemporary poetic strategies for representing a constraining male aesthetic gaze—we might think of, most famously, Christina Rossetti’s “In an Artist’s Studio” (1865)—stresses that “A Portrait” should nevertheless be read in relation to questions of gendered art perception and creation.

However, like the model’s identity, “A Portrait” resists resolving the institutional exhibition of her representation into one determinate meaning. In the final stanza, Field return to the issue of the model’s initial desire to reach immortality through her aestheticization:

Thus has she conquered death: her eyes are fresh,
Clear as her frontlet jewel, firm in shade
And definite as on the linen mesh
Of her white hood the box-tree’s somber braid,
That glitters leaf by leaf and with the year’s waste will not fade.

The small, close mouth, leaving no room for breath,

In perfect, still pollution smiles – Lo, she has conquered death!

The poem dwells upon the fact that the subject is, now, no longer among the living, though her image is now placed on display for the masses: no breath is drawn through her mouth (closed as it is in that indecipherable smile) and her flower will forever be suspended in bloom. The refrain “she has conquered death” repeated in this stanza’s first and final lines explicitly inscribes her willed aestheticization as a sign of her victory over mortal life. But the second and final iteration of this phrase—“Lo, she has conquered death!”—returns us to the painting’s institutional exhibition, but with a difference that complicates what might initially seem a neat divide between her intentions (aesthetic autonomy) and the outcome of the aesthetic act (an audience of men gazing on her form). The inclusion of the interjection “Lo,” an abbreviation of “Look,” returns us to the painting’s appearance before a field of others: it signals that the poetic speaker’s observation that the model has “conquered death” is communicated, seemingly victoriously, to an interlocutor encouraged to “Look” upon her successful resistance of the male gaze.22 This utterance tacitly acknowledges that the poem’s concluding realization is yet another interpretation that has been produced by an observer engaged in looking upon the canvas. This voice represents an “other” to the cultural field, as her interpretation of the subject’s achieved autonomy sharply contrasts with the proclivities of beholders largely interested in glimpsing her body, but yet this voice is nevertheless rhetorically located as one among the museum public. This ekphrastic interpretation of the painting as a symbol of female autonomy from the male

22 We might understand this utterance to be directed to the other poet who joins the speaker within the identity of “Michael Field,” yet another way of reconstructing the dialogic poetics at the heart of the Sight and Song project.
gaze is articulated in and against the public exhibition of Veneto’s canvas in the institutional space of the museum: though the model has been transformed into an iconological symbol in the form of a portrait subject, the meaning of this symbol is nevertheless available for interpretation.

This idea of the painting’s relative autonomy—its being self-contained but yet available for public experience and interpretation, including those interpretations that run against the grain of conventional institutional knowledge—is a crucial component of *Sight and Song*’s art critical project: the ekphrastic act enables the poetic speaker to recover and reveal radical content otherwise buried within the confines of the cultural field. In the poem “The Sleeping Venus,” an ekphrasis of Giorgione’s painting of the same name (c. 1510, fig. 1.4), the female figure’s autonomous status is used to unsettle conventional discursive dualisms of male sexual activity and female receptiveness, harvesting transgressive potential in a female sexual autonomy that is purely bodily and unites the female icon, not with a man within a heterosexual economy, but with a feminized natural world. Though most of this sequence of nine inverted sonnets (a form I

![Giorgione, *The Sleeping Venus* (c. 1510). Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.](image-url)
discuss in further detail below) describes Giorgione’s depiction of Venus lounging in an open field, the first and final stanzas of “The Sleeping Venus” ambivalently compromise her autonomy by situating the painting within a field of observers who occupy an interpretive space beyond the frame. As in “L’Indifferent,” “A Pietá,” and “A Portrait,” “The Sleeping Venus” thematizes the painting’s existence within the context of the public art gallery in the process of negotiating transgressive meaning; in the poem, the situatedness of Giorgione’s painting in this public space does not negate conceptions of Venus’ radical sexual autonomy, though, but is rather used to emplace her transgressive meaning within the high cultural field. There are plenty of suggestions in Bradley and Cooper’s notes from their 1891 trip to Dresden that Giorgione’s Venus held special significance for them: Cooper laments that other Old Master paintings in Dresden like the San Sisto Madonna draw “men + women before it … when no-one stops for more than a moment before the Giorgione” (“W&D” 4: 10 August 1891), the poets made a habit of gathering by the canvas during each of their visits to the Dresden Gallery, and Bradley gave her niece a large reproduction of the painting for her thirtieth birthday (a few months after they returned from Germany). These biographical details suggest that Bradley and Cooper felt a private, devotional attachment to Giorgione’s Venus, and furthermore imply the centrality of this poem to Sight and Song’s revisionary ekphrastic project.

The poem begins by invoking the boundaries between the compositional space and the real world:

THE SLEEPING VENUS

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23 Cooper’s gallery notes on Corregio’s The Madonna of the Holy Sebastian are interrupted by Bradley’s imploration that they again visit Giorgione’s Venus: “Here I am called off by Sim [Cooper’s pet name for Bradley] to sit near the Giorgione, hooded with the light of an approaching noon” (“W&D” 4: 16 August 1891).
GIORGIONE

The Dresden Gallery

Here is Venus by our homes
And resting on the verdant swell
Of a soft country flanked with mountain domes (98)

The first line locates Giorgione’s canvas and its central figure spatially, the “Here” gesturing towards the rhetorical repertoire of the museum tour guide: the familiar “Here you will find” that orients a visitor’s gaze towards an artwork worth seeing. It makes for what Michel de Certeau calls a “spatializing operation,” a speech-act that transforms movement through space into a verbal function. In “The Sleeping Venus,” this spatializing operation, which in its reinscription of spatial form into language closely follows the ekphrastic act of turning a visual image into a verbal text, places both painting and poem within the institutional space indicated in its paratext, “The Dresden Gallery.” The painting’s—and poem’s—spatial location is further signaled when the speaker writes that the Venus can be found “by our homes.” Though the referent to the collective “our” is relatively ambiguous, we can make a few informed assumptions about what is meant here: that the poetic voice occupies the same pastoral landscape as the Venus, that the “our homes” refers to the contemporary speaker’s physical or spiritual proximity to the actual Giorgione painting in Dresden’s Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, or that the imagined space of the painting is coextensive with that of the literal space occupied by the speaker who is observing it. What is not left ambiguous is that the ekphrasis “The Sleeping Venus” places the reclining figure in an observational matrix that signals the presence of a seeing subject who, while not an
immanent participant in the diegetic space of the painting, still actively weaves her aesthetic responses into the fabric of the ekphrasis.

“The Sleeping Venus” represents its eponymous figure as mythological telos would conventionally dictate, as a signifier of erotic pleasure, but does so to collapse rather than confirm the heterosexist grammar of active, penetrative male pleasure and passive, receptive female pleasure. In the ekphrasis, Venus dismantles this dualism by being at once active and passive, pleasuring and pleasured (and, tautologically, pleasing herself). Homoerotic and autoerotic imagery are woven together within a complex of female sexual activity, which manifests first in the poem’s depiction of the supine deity’s contact with the landscape:

There is a sympathy between

Her and Earth of largest reach,
For the sex that forms them each
Is a bond, a holiness,
That unconsciously must bless
And unite them, as they lie
Shameless underneath the sky (99)

The poem draws upon the familiar characterization of the natural world as a feminine, maternal space, and specifically from its familiar personification as Mother Earth. Etymologically, this phrasing originates from the Roman mythological goddess Terra Mater, a historical association that through its sidelong invocation in “The Sleeping Venus” locates the ekphrasis’ feminization of the natural landscape and Giorgione’s representation of the Roman goddess Venus within the same relative habitus. In the ekphrasis, this association enables the poetic speaker’s interpretation of same-sex intimacy in Giorgione’s canvas of an otherwise solitary lounging female nude, given
the poem’s emphasis not just on the gender of the landscape but on the “sympathy” that attracts Venus to it due to the “sex that forms them each.” “The Sleeping Venus” turns the bucolic setting for what might initially appears to be the presentation of a female body imminently available for visual consumption into a key element of its homoerotic poetics. In the poem’s fifth stanza, intimations of queer desires and aesthetic autonomy coalesce in unequivocally autoerotic imagery, as Venus, reclining on the capacious female body of the natural world, is described as indulging in self-pleasure:

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Her left arm remains beside
The plastic body’s lower heaves,
Controlled by them, as when a river-side
With its sandy margin weaves
Deflections in a lenient tide;
Her hand the thigh’s tense surface leaves,
    Falling inward. Not even sleep
Dare invalidate the deep,
Universal pleasure sex
Must unto itself annex –
Even the stillest sleep; at peace,
More profound with rest’s increase,
She enjoys the good
Of delicious womanhood. (102)
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The implication of female masturbation is made manifest in the image of Venus’ hands “Falling inward” into the “deep” of “pleasure.” That this act is meant to resonate in the context of
contemporary gender politics, beyond the idealized pastoralism within the frame, is evident when Field write that Venus’s masturbation will “annex” her pleasure: the militant verb implies that the onanistic sex act displaces Venus’s sexuality from one regime of power—which I take to be compulsory heterosexuality—and into the realm of uninhibited pleasures that incorporates both the homo- and the autoerotic.

The form of “The Sleeping Venus” traces this reinscription of traditional gender ideologies into a queer poetic: a sequence of inverted sonnets organized such that the sestet precedes the indented octave, the ekphrasis plays with poetic conventions to make space for the articulation of transgressive pleasures. The invocation of the sonnet form for an ekphrastic poem has sound precedent in literary history, as poets, especially British Romantic writers, often turned to the sonnet as a vehicle for ekphrasis or otherwise for representing visual impressions; John Hollander notes that the genre and this poetic form have been closely associated since Wordsworth “reconstructed the English sonnet into the epitome of the short meditative lyric … it seemed to provide an almost inevitable form for poems addressed to works of art. This may be partially due not only to the scale, but to the possibilities, in a sonnet’s interior structure, of developing rhetorical figures of a whole range of visual elements in the object of the poem’s attention” (81). Following Hollander’s claim that the sonnet form lends itself to the normative ekphrastic project of representing visual images into poetic language, we can see that the reshuffling of the sonnet form in “The Sleeping Venus” functions concomitantly with its reschematization of ekphrasis into a queer poetic. The placement of the phrase “Falling inward” at the volta marks the entry of unequivocal sexual imagery into the text as the poem shifts into the more spacious terrain of the octave. By situating the longer octave in the place where the tension built in the sonnet’s first movement is conventionally released, the ekphrasis exploits a
more expansive poetic space for representing female erotic pleasure than the sestet would provide. That these transgressive erotic pleasures are articulated in the form of an inverted sonnet recalls the late Victorian sexological designation of the homosexual as invert, theories famously propounded in the work of Havelock Ellis, who was a friend to the poets. Venus’ self-stimulation is thus inscribed in a formal poetic terrain that is positioned against normative gender ideologies and sexological diagnostics, an act that sketches the possibilities for a female sexual experience set free from the boundaries of heterosexist discourse.

Although “The Sleeping Venus” locates these queer erotic pleasures—again, understanding “queer” in its broadest sense, here as an onanism that is framed through the antinormative imagery of homosexual intimacy—beyond the pale of then conventional mappings of sexual identity, this transgressive poetic is articulated relationally, in response to the conditions of seeing and interpreting art exhibited in museums. While most of the ekphrasis interprets Giorgione’s painting from within the boundaries of the frame, the poem’s closing stanza zooms out to consider the institutional location of Giorgione’s canvas on display in Dresden. This move reveals ekphrasis to be not a notional translation of the painting absent any shaping influence, but rather to be tied to the particularized aesthetic experience of an embodied seeing subject who is occupying the museum space:

And her resting is so strong
    That while we gaze it seems as though
She had lain thus the solemn glebes among
    In the ages far ago
And would continue, till the long,
    Last evening of Earth’s summer glow
In communication the sweet
Life that ripens at her feet:
We can never fear that she
From Italian fields will flee (104-5)

This final sonnet returns to the personal voice that was earlier invoked in the poem’s opening line, the “our” that there registered the speaker’s proximity to the composition. Here this voice is again located within a larger cultural field, as a “we” that “gaze” upon the painting. The collective “we” points to an audience—perhaps most provocatively the collaborative “we” working beneath the name “Michael Field”—and signifies an authorial source for the poem’s subversive aesthetic interpretations. While a number of the Sight and Song poems locate in Old Master paintings erotic meanings that would otherwise elude late nineteenth-century museum taxonomies interested more in presenting objects for formal analysis than for identity politics, “The Sleeping Venus” explicitly acknowledges that such interpretations are produced by an interpreter (or interpretive community) grounded in a particular place and time within the cultural field. These glimpses at a public hovering beyond the frame underscore the volume’s desire to participate in the museum, to have meaningful—and personal—interpretive experiences within the civic institutional space. By framing ekphrastic interpretation as at once a relational and affective mode of art writing, Sight and Song places the Old Master canvas within a field of others who may not always interpret in ways the museum anticipates.

§

For Bradley and Cooper, the use of ekphrasis as a method of art critical writing complicated the seeming autonomy of the aesthetic object by bringing it into a discursive realm attentive to non-normative passions and experiences. Though they worked in museum galleries,
their reclamation of Old Master paintings in poetic language dislodges the interpretive authority otherwise reified by these paintings’ institutional homes: the *Sight and Song* project depends on the existence of an interpretive community beyond the frame whose aesthetic experiences commit the art object and its meaning into a social world. This framework implies that the interpreter of an art object has just as meaningful a claim on determining its meaning as does the institution itself, that art objects might be able to “sing in themselves” in any of a number of ways.

That this sensuous, affective, and phenomenological contact between the observer and the work of art enables the observer to claim ownership over an artwork’s meaning seems to have registered quite literally to Bradley and Cooper, as their biographer Emma Donoghue details in a humorous episode that played out between them and the art critic Logan Pearsall Smith, the brother of their friend Mary Berenson:

The Michaels had grown to love one of the borrowed pictures in [the Smith family’s] cottage, a painting on silk. They assumed that Logan had discarded it, and so they took it home with them, as Logan wrote later with tongue-in-cheek tolerance, “in pious obedience to that law of possession, which, inscribed in Heaven, if not on earth, decrees that objects of beauty belong to those who love them best.” At the time he was less philosophical, and insisted that [his sister] Mary get it back for him, which caused a breach; the Michaels took years to forgive him for his “meaness.” (116)

The notion that works of art are the emotional—and here, actual—property of whoever “love them best” is resonant in the ways the ekphrastic poetry of *Sight and Song* claims interpretive ownership over the meanings of Old Master paintings to which Bradley and Cooper, in their private writings and in the volume’s preface, otherwise express deep and abiding admiration.
Ekphrasis allowed Bradley and Cooper to become “imaginary possessors” of these paintings, and in this sense their poetry anticipates that of the modernist poet Marianne Moore. Though Field and Moore worked in different continents, time periods, and cultural climates, they share an attachment to art and museums and an interest in the interrelations among observers, objects, and institutions that lead them to noticeably analogous, if not perfectly symmetrical, ekphrastic poetics.
Chapter 2

“Something that Makes Me Feel at Home”: Moore’s Ekphrastic Galleries

Marianne Moore felt museums to be “good things,” or said she did in the unpublished “Museums” (c. 1918-1925), a poem that is itself something of a museum-piece, given that it lives its life exclusively among the Moore papers archived in Philadelphia’s Rosenbach Museum and Library (Marianne Moore Papers I:03:11). The facts of Moore’s biography reinforce this disarming claim: she amassed (and kept) a trove of clipped newspaper advertisements for and reviews of special museum exhibitions throughout her life, produced many sketches after exhibitions she saw at the American Museum of Natural History, and wrote a number of gallery reviews for The Dial and other modernist little magazines. Her tour of Scotland, England, and France with her mother in the summer of 1911 was museum-intensive, with London’s Tate Gallery and British Museum and Paris’ Louvre and Luxembourg museums among the galleries on their itinerary. When Moore relocated with her mother to New York’s Greenwich Village in 1918 so that she could be closer to the city’s developing avant-garde art scene, she became a regular patron of Manhattan’s myriad cultural institutions, including the Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art, and corresponded regularly with Monroe Wheeler, Director of Exhibitions at MoMA from 1940 to 1967. The intensity and significance of this avid museum going is reflected in the fact that, as a number of critics have pointed out, Moore regularly composed ekphrastic poems after objects she encountered either directly in museum galleries or in the form of printed reproductions.

As this litany of her institutional engagements indicates, for Moore museums were as much familiar “things” as they were “good,” a familiarity that defines the way museums and their holdings appear in her work. When Moore draws on the museum for source material for her
ekphrastic poetry, she thus engages not just with the conventions of this genre but also the particular conditions of seeing art in museums in the early twentieth century, including the serial hanging of objects along gallery walls, turn-of-the-century theories about the museum’s public education initiatives and place in society, and the network of people and forces that constituted her contemporary art world (including its artists, institutions, curators, collectors, audiences, and reviewers). Moore invokes these museum practices, discourses, and networks only to redefine them in pursuit of an ekphrastic poetics that frames aesthetic experience around ideas of the familiar and the personal: the affective lives and idiosyncratic interests of each patron. When Moore interprets a museum object in an ekphrastic poem, she habitually does so as an exercise of personal rather than institutional values, acts that resist confirming some of the more conservative museum ideologies of the period, ideologies with which she was familiar not only from visiting some of the universal survey museums with which these ideologies were associated but also in her encounter with one of museum theory’s founding texts, Benjamin Ives Gilman’s *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (1918). Among Gilman’s articles of faith are the supposed universal validity of inherited aesthetic hierarchies, the function of institutional epistemologies as a primary interpretive framework, and the belief that disinterested formal appreciation is the sanctioned way of experiencing the objects on display. However, by the time of Moore’s writing the primacy of such museum ideologies was in flux, as Progressive Era American curators and critics—among the most prominent being the reformer John Cotton Dana—sought to redefine the museum’s cultural and educational goals, its politics, and its place within a diverse, democratic society. Moore’s ekphrases are shaped by, and testify to, these competing discourses at a moment in which progressive museological practices and educational programs began to infiltrate even the most conservative American museums. Moore’s ekphrases,
as literary sites in which Moore refined an aesthetic program based on personal and local interpretations of museum objects, bear the marks of these debates on the democratic potential for seeing and interpreting within the museum.

Moore would compose a number of poetic meditations on single art objects that embody the spirit of traditional ekphrastic poetry, such as “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish” (1924), “No Swan So Fine” (1932), “Charity Overcoming Envy” (1963), and “A Carriage from Sweden” (1944), the last of which I return to in this chapter’s final section. More typical of Moore’s ekphrastic poems, though, is not the sustained contemplation of a single object but rather the curation within a single poem of a mélange of visual objects real or imagined, or, in some cases, based on objects whose sources have been lost in the transference from image to word. Such a poetic practice reconstitutes the poetics of ekphrasis by turning its premise from the lyric description of a single object to the serial collection of multiple items. However, Moore’s ekphrastic galleries aren’t limited to aesthetic redefinition; they also trace the evolution in American museum practice during the first few decades of the twentieth century, as earlier philosophies of museum display—such as those embodied in Gilman’s Museum Ideals, and including his emphasis on an isolated and universalized experience of art—were being contested by newer models of community museums meant to reflect the needs, interests, and histories of particular publics. At the same time that these debates sought to craft the future of the American art museum, Moore’s ekphrastic poems were testing their curatorial principles and meditating on the cultural politics of museum collection and exhibition. Ultimately, these poems align with contemporary calls to reimagine the museum as an egalitarian space more permissive of the free play of the visitor’s imagination, open to the representation of a heterogeneous
collection of both art and everyday objects, and willing to convey a broader range of potential histories, narratives, and aesthetic meanings.

This is to say that in Moore’s poetics, ekphrasis often depends on the kinds of collecting strategies we tend to associate with museums, but it also does so in full glare of museological debates over how, why, and for what ends museums should collect and define objects in the first place. Jeremy Braddock has recently claimed that collecting is “one of the ‘master tropes’ of modernist culture”: as not only do high modernist texts often collect and archive cultural fragments, but the modern period also witnessed the proliferation of new museums and galleries (many of which were the first to provide a public institutional location for the display of modernist art) and of literary anthologies or collections like Georgian Poetry (1912), Some Imagist Poets (1915), and The New Negro (1925) (Braddock 27). He argues that in early twentieth-century modernism, the practice of collection often took on the form of the “authored work” that is both revealing of the aesthetic and epistemological sensibilities of the collector and “expresses something inherent within modernity.” Moore’s ekphrastic galleries can productively be considered an “authored” form of collecting practice, given that they not only exhibit her poetic descriptions of found aesthetic objects but perform such exhibiting with attention to the authoring hand that constitutes any type of collection, including her own.

I. “Museums” in Theory

“Museums” may be “good things” to Moore, but the reasons offered by the poem of that title as to why this is so are revealing of her engagements with modern museum discourses and with the status of ekphrastic poetics in light of them. “Museums,” which involves two movements developed through nine sentences that sprawl across six stanzas, begins:
Museums

are good things, never wholly barren, superficial, ignorant. “Where was it made and by whom was it worn?” The collection of armor, at first sight no more than so much hardware, becomes upon examination, cause for burning speculation.¹

“Museums” proceeds from its first lines through a dialectical tension between seemingly authoritative institutional epistemologies and the outcomes of the speaker’s local experience of the museum space, staking out the push and pull between affirmation and revision of the museum’s cultural authority that shapes the poem’s structural, lexical, and semantic content. The poem’s first sentence spills from its title into the first line, a practice Moore turned to often in her verse to route a single line of meaning through the title and into the text. As many critics have noted, this act of restructuring the title/text relationship troubles received expectations about the poem’s signifying structure, specifically that the body of a poem is enclosed and self-fulfilling and the title communicates its major theme or setting. But in “Museums” this revisionary act also subtly denotes one of the fundamental exhibitionary practices of the institution invoked in its title, the placement of labels next to displayed objects in museum galleries. For in giving the word “Museums” the dual purpose of being both the poem’s title and the first word of its first sentence, the poem “Museums” does not confirm the neat delineation between the displayed

¹ Although “Museums” was never included in any of Moore’s published volumes, images of the two extant typescript drafts of this poem were eventually reproduced in the first issue of the Marianne Moore Newsletter, edited by Patricia C. Willis and published by the Rosenbach Museum in 1977. This marked the first time that “Museums” was released to a public beyond the Rosenbach’s archival holdings. In my reading of this poem, I will be using the second, edited draft unless otherwise noted. The first draft follows an ordered rhyme scheme set in the syllabics characteristic of Moore’s earlier verse, while the second has been revised into free verse lines.
object and the explanatory label (and the supplementary status of the verbal that this delineation inheres). Instead, “Museums” erodes the institutional authority implicit in the act of authoring an explanatory label to instead represent an organic and non-hierarchical unfolding of meaning from title to text.

This structural destabilization of museum ideals carries over into the unsophisticated diction and deflated tone of the poem’s opening statement that “Museums // are good things,” which in its being so modest and inconspicuous in its allegiance is in tacit conflict with the architectural, organizational, and representational resonances of art museums as institutions dedicated to the seemingly interminable accumulation of culture. When the imposing monumental architecture of what Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach term “universal survey museums” like the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art cite classical architectural principles, and when their collections are organized in linear taxonomies predicated on narratives of progress from the primitive to the modern, these institutions imply an evolutionary continuum of art historical achievement that pinacles at the present moment in time. Such claims are a far cry from Moore’s inconspicuous statement that museums are “good things,” a rhetorical deflation of the museum’s grandiosity that is redoubled in the architecture of the poem itself, which sets itself against the typological precedent of museum architecture. “Museums” evades identification with received aesthetic forms by being made of enjamed free verse lines, a relatively un-traditional verse structure more closely aligned with avant-garde poetic practice, itself a kind of anti-institutional institution.

Some of the more hierarchical aspects of modern museum culture are thus called into question from the very first lines (and title) of “Museum,” yet the poem is not solely invested in performing the museum’s rhetorical negation. Moore’s speaker—indistinguishable from the poet
in this poem and often throughout her oeuvre—goes on to express her delight in the opportunity afforded by the titular museum to experience the objects on display, such as the armor that stimulates “burning speculation.” The paradoxical simultaneity of the poem’s reworking of, and expressed pleasure in, the museum’s collection defines the ambivalence of her ekphrasis towards the institution and its display strategies. The museum has a transformative effect on how objects are seen and valued, turning them from unremarkable quotidian things into the desiderata of the aesthetic experience: thus in line 2, armor that was once only “so much hardware” when in use is apotheosized into an object warranting keen examination when displayed in the museum. By depicting the speaker’s encounter with this “cause for burning speculation,” “Museums” expands the representational space of ekphrasis to make visible the genre’s often assumed but crucial condition of possibility: the scene of the aesthetic experience, of a speaker’s encounter with a poetic object. Much like the spatializing rhetoric in Michael Field’s “Sleeping Venus,” Moore’s strategy reconstitutes ekphrasis into a site-specific poetic by situating the scene of the aesthetic experience at the center of “Museum.”

The poem’s focus on the experiential possibilities of museum visiting negotiates local meaning from the institution without aligning itself with the nihilism of the modernist anti-museum argument that museological norms are inhospitable to artistic and interpretive freedom. Instead, for Moore’s speaker “the museum exists” for those who are able to enjoy what they see,

at the time as well as afterward: “The characteristic form of the emerald is a six-sided prism,” “there were two distinct breeds of dogs in ancient Egypt.” The information is there but there is there something more mellow than information.
We can understand the “information” that “is there” in the museum’s galleries to refer to the programs of public instruction associated with museum visiting. The awkwardly phrased “information is there but there is there” uses the rhetorical figure of diacope—the non-serial repetition of a word within a line—to rhythmically and performatively emplace the poem (and the reader’s imagination) within a conjured, imagined museum space. The repetitious “there … there … there” both anchors the poem to the notional space of its articulation, the museum, and implies the presentation of objects on its walls as a series of things that are “there” for the visitor’s visual experience. Objective information about art and human culture may be transmitted “there”—the facts of Egyptian dog breeding and the geometrical shape of an emerald do find their way into her poem, after all—and moreover are matters in which the poet takes a great interest, but it is what the visitor does with this information that determines the value of a museum visit. Moore’s description of museum visiting in this poem traces a path through, and beyond, this institutional pedagogy, in the form of the “more mellow” experiences that are routed through the observer’s individual relationship to the objects on display but resist settling on some particular and final knowledge. If the interpretations are fiery in their “burning” insistence on making meaning, the ultimate nature of the relationship between interpreter and object is rather different. Mellowness connotes an object’s pleasurable appeal to the senses; something that is mellow—such as an enjoyable museum experience—does not impose on or overwhelm the observer, but is instead subtle and accommodating. That this is a definitive value judgment, from a poet otherwise distrustful of dogmatism, is emphasized by the stanza’s lineation: other than the poem’s concluding line, her statement that the museum contains “something more mellow than information” is the only other end-stopped line. Like museum experience in this model, the poem
may flow unhindered by formal regularity, but ultimately Moore makes sure to punctuate how crucial it is that we exceed the objectivity of information in pursuit of subjective pleasures.

“Museums” thus makes a claim that is programmatic in her ekphrastic poetry, that the most meaningful aesthetic experience does not merely replicate received programs of cultural instruction or predetermined interpretations as one might expect, given the museum’s institutionalization of art and culture, for the “museum is not a mere repository” or “a place through which to drag one’s self in museum-tourist fashion.” The poem casts a sidelong glance at modernist anti-museum discourse—the statement that museums may be considered a “repository” of otherwise interesting items recalls Ezra Pound’s calumnious appraisal of the Victoria and Albert Museum as a place where “uncountable excellent things are housed in a horror”—only to suggest that such perspectives fail to account for the potential personal value of museum-going. The final two stanzas of “Museums” follow from this point:

One

takes a horse from the stable for the purpose of

a customary scene; one follows a stream,

every turning of which is a foregone conclusion; it is similarly

that one goes to a museum to refresh one’s mind with the

appearance of what one has always valued.

The issue at hand is thus not such much one of institutional power as it is of visitor use: the point is not to “drag one’s self in museum-tourist fashion,” guided by a Baedeker and received ideas of what art must be seen and what it means, but to use the objects and information the museum provides to occasion an exercise in seeing the things that bring one pleasure. This is why to
Moore museums are “good” things but nothing more grandiose; they let one experience what one “already valued.” The simile developed in these lines calls attention to the dependence Moore’s construction of museum experience has on personal habits, routines, and rituals. More than simply tracing the homology between one’s navigating a museum and one’s following a horse trail or stream, Moore foregrounds the way each of these movements depends on following a familiar route. In doing so, she also makes visible the fault line between the theoretical function of museums, the instruction of their publics, and real outcomes of visitor experiences that may contradict the micro-techniques of instruction that bolster museum’s pedagogical programs. This local poetic enunciation defies conventional ideas of museum visiting as a passive and institutionally structured practice, a notion that Eilean Hooper-Greenhill suggests emerges from the ways museums produce its patrons as “visitors” to culture rather than active agents in the cultural field.² For if in this framework the visitor’s experience of the space is always already determined by the institution and its epistemologies, then we may recognize Moore articulating the possibility for a museum experience that privileges contradictory values: affirmation of the personal rather than conformation to the general, the pursuit of personal pleasures rather than of disinterested appreciation, and the exercise of local knowledges rather than universal ones.

“Museums” may be located in a notional museum meant to be representative of the institution writ large, but the poem nevertheless confronts influential contemporary museological theories that shaped the practices and methods of actual museums in the early twentieth century. In other chapters of this dissertation, I address ideas or images of cultural institutions in poetic texts to suggest the importance of museums to their authors’ ekphrastic poems, but reading

² Hooper-Greenhill writes that “‘Visitors’ are present in a space by permission; they enter an alien space, akin to someone else’s home. The museum or art gallery has in the past been very much the territory of the professional staff, with the ‘public’ allowed in on sufferance, if their behaviour was appropriate … the experience of visiting a museum was two-dimensional, an experience of a slow, controlled, surveyed walk past completed displays designed without the needs or interests of the visitor in mind” (211).
Moore’s engagement with museums is a far more direct matter, not least because her encounter with an influential work of twentieth-century museum theory is a matter of public record. In a (now widely republished and discussed) response to a query from Ezra Pound in 1921 about what she had been reading recently, Moore included Benjamin Ives Gilman’s *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* first in a list of “technical books” that “have … interested [her] most” (*Selected Letters* 162). Gilman, an art historian and professor at Clark University, was employed as Secretary of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts between 1893 until 1924, with his greatest legacy being the invention of the position of museum docent, now a fixture in most museums.³ *Museum Ideals* was a tremendously important text in the transatlantic formation of what has been termed the “aesthetic museum” paradigm in early twentieth-century museology. Carol Duncan describes the governing philosophy of the aesthetic museum as the belief that “works of art, once they are put in museums, exist for one purpose only: to be looked at as things of beauty. The first obligation of an art museum is to present works of art as just that, as objects of aesthetic contemplation and not as illustrative of historical or archaeological information,” a notion that led art museums to develop display methods intended to set artworks apart from their surroundings to encourage isolated, direct looking (16, 25).⁴ *Museum Ideals* proceeds from this belief that the art museum’s aim is to isolate exhibited artworks from all contexts that may inflect visitors’ sights of them so that they may experience each piece in the most unmediated possible way.

³ See Whitehill 293-5 for a discussion of Gilman’s role in the creation of docentry in American art museums.
⁴ Duncan traces the evolution from what she calls the “gentlemanly hang” of private royal art collections, where artworks are subsumed into the design aesthetic of the room they are exhibited in, and thus subordinate to the atmospheric identity constructions palaces were meant to invoke, to the art museums that foregrounded the work itself and ostensibly negated all other potential contexts that may influence one’s experience of it. However, as Duncan notes, this “aesthetic” hang is no less ideological, but rather exchanges one set of interpretive heuristics for another.
I argue, following from the precedent of Catherine Paul’s work on Moore and museums of natural history, that although Moore diligently copied-out quotations from *Museum Ideals* in her private reading notebook now in the Rosenbach archives (Marianne Moore Papers VII:1250/2), the ways museums appear in her work indicate that such quotations are not necessarily endorsements, and that Moore’s interest in these passages is more likely rooted in disagreements with certain anti-interpretive strains of Gilman’s museology. While Moore does describe Gilman’s book as “technical” in the letter to Pound, the ten pages of her handwritten quotations from the text indicate that her primary interest in the study was in its more philosophical discussions of the museum’s social educational function and of how art is to be most productively interpreted. Most of the passages Moore transcribed from *Museum Ideals* involve Gilman’s theorizing the social purpose of art exhibitions, the types of responses visitors may have to different kinds of objects exhibited in museum galleries, and the etiology of aesthetic meaning in the artwork’s production and reception. For instance, on printed page 8/18/1916 in her reading journal, Moore transcribed from Gilman’s preface the epigrammatic but opaque statement, “Not all education is cultivating, and not all culture is cultivated” (Gilman xii): the distinction he makes between education and culture synthesizes the preface’s larger argument that educational and cultural experiences are distinct realms predicated by different epistemologies and served by different kinds of institutions (science/history museums and art museums, respectively). Gilman claims that these different institutions enable dissimilar affective responses from visitors, and he associates art museums squarely with a visitor’s feelings of “enjoyment” for exhibited paintings and sculptures (xi). This idea that museum

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5 Moore generally took any available notebooks for her reading journals, and in the case of this journal, the actual dates of her readings and note-takings do not necessarily align with the printed date in the datebooks. Thus, when referring to passages within Moore’s journal, I cite the “printed page” dates. I thank Elizabeth Fuller, librarian at the Rosenbach, for her clarification on Moore’s note-taking habits.
experiences can bring visitors such pleasures is, as we have already seen, a central conceit in Moore’s ekphrastic poetry; however, the shape and origins of this “enjoyment”—an issue that for both Gilman and Moore is inextricable from issues of an object’s meanings and a visitor’s interpretations—is grounds for their disagreement on the relationship between artistic production, institutional exhibition, and visitor response. Gilman posits that while the role of the museum may be to intensify a visitor’s pleasure by placing him in immediate relation to beautiful art, aesthetic interpretation—how the observer can determine the meaning and significance of artworks on display—is essentially a reconstructive practice with predetermined outcomes. His argument indicates that to appreciate exhibited artworks properly, the museum visitor must interpret within the boundaries of the artist’s intentions: to “find the work,” or more closely, its meaning, “we must go back to the maker. Instead of assuming him to be in our skin … we must put ourselves in his skin” (16). Gilman returns to this idea in a later discussion under the heading “Fine Arts” when he describes an artwork as “an open letter, addressed not to particular individuals, but to any who can read it. With an outlook as wide as humanity, its aim is reached, not by every inspection of it, but only when it is perceived as it has been imagined” (55, emphasis mine). Though these statements imply that the museum democratizes access to art by not binding aesthetic experience to any explicit social hierarchy, the limits to this adumbrated aesthetic democracy certainly linger in his ambiguous exception, “any who can read it.”

Gilman’s museology thus frames the museum as an educative space that cultivates visitors’ art literacies by teleologically instructing them in artistic taste and in the best ways to appreciate its exhibited artworks, and accordingly the strategy of interpreting such objects that most receives his attention is one which locates meaning in the artist’s intentions (i.e., in creating a notionally beautiful aesthetic object) rather than in what the observer sees in it. Gilman
proposes that each museum object be approached as a sealed container of predetermined and ineradicable meanings that are autonomous of any interpretations that may be formed by the “particular individuals” who constitute the museum’s public. Moore must have thought this excursus on the artist’s intentional meaning to be provocative, as on printed page 8/19/1916 in her journal she transcribes Gilman’s note that “It is that in them [the meaning of the artwork] which he [the artist] puts there solely not to let it die that constitutes its substance as a work of fine art” (54). Although Museum Ideals isolates a visitor’s enjoyment from the availability of information and associates these possible outcomes with different kinds of institution (such that one goes to an art museum for enjoyment, and to a history or science museum for knowledge), in Gilman’s framework art museums nevertheless do serve a pedagogical purpose: not the purpose of communicating information in the historical or scientific sense but rather of shaping visitors’ taste so that they can properly appreciate artistic masterworks.

Moore’s museum poems do not invoke Gilman directly, but they do engage the aesthetic-philosophical context from which Museum Ideals emerges: in Moore’s poems about art perception and institutional experience, several of the dualisms she encountered in Museum Ideals dissolve, such as those between art and science/history museums, feeling and instruction, and an artwork’s production and the experience of it. These poems challenge the silent value judgments that motivate Gilman’s ascriptions of aesthetic value, the determinations of what objects belong within the field of the fine arts and its primary institutional manifestation, the

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6 The broader philosophical context For this discussion seems to be neoclassical aesthetic philosophy rather than the theories of Gilman’s contemporaries: There is a noticeable Kantianism baked into his notion that artworks possess meanings that range “as wide as humanity” but yet are autonomous of any perceivers, reflecting Kant’s notion that the greatest artworks have a universal, timeless significance that can be appreciated by all individuals who are capable of making disinterested, objective aesthetic judgments. Gilman foregrounds the continuity between his museum philosophy and Kantian aesthetics when he quotes favorably from Kant’s Critique of Judgment the philosopher’s epigram defining aesthetic beauty as “Purposiveness without purpose” (qtd. in Gilman 6), the claim that all art objects are intended to be beautiful without having any other intentional function.
museum. The dialectic between the conventional museum discourse Moore distrusts and the experientialism she values is reflected, for instance, in the artifacts invoked in “Museums” as those one might encounter in museum galleries, a catalogue which in its heterogeneity compromises some governing principles of Gilman’s museology. He suggests that art museum collections should not bother with objects of purely historical significance (i.e., things not typically considered art objects or thought to be of aesthetic interest), because these institutions are intended solely to evoke a visitor’s “pleasure.” The underlying idea is that knowledge and pleasure have an asymptotic relationship, wherein one may approach the other but the two responses never be elicited by the same object, a formulation Gilman relies on to justify assigning these effects to different kinds of institutions. “Museums” denies the rigidity of Gilman’s designations by operating chiastically where Gilman would have his asymptote, associating the affect he assigns to art museums, “enjoyment,” with just those historical artifacts he would expel from its walls. The poem first identifies the “collection of armor” as representative of the kinds of objects one may find in a museum, objects that spark the speaker’s questions, “Where was it made and by whom was it worn?” Information of this nature would typically be made available to any patron on explanatory placards or by conferring with a docent, but these questions are not posed in the poem with the expectation of a concrete response, the form of instruction Gilman associates singularly with objects in history museums. Instead, Moore’s poem focuses on the effect the armor has on the contemporary patron in the present moment of contact with it: “The collection of armor, at / first sight no more than so much hardware, becomes / upon examination, cause for burning speculation.” The museum certainly provides a prompt for aesthetic experience, but the sight of the armor being “cause for burning speculation” suggests different affective coordinates for the viewer/object relationship than those
implied in Gilman’s idea of the history museum as a space for unaffective education. The key difference for Moore is that such knowledge should not disable speculation but rather encourage it: in its fieriness, the visitor’s “burning speculation” may assail the object with interpretations but never conquer with a final determination of meaning, Moore’s choice of protective armor is revealing of the way aesthetic experience functions for her as a sustained relation between observer and object that never resolves in epistemological penetration – just the kind of thing successful armor prevents. Moore’s description of a valuable museum visit—that is, why exactly museums are “good things” to her—hangs instead on personal experiences without objective truths: more crucial than the knowledge a visitor can gather from a visit to the museum is the process of coming to know, this irreducible hermeneutic relation.

Though her reading notes on Museum Ideals contemporaneous to the composition of “Museums” provide an essential interpretive context for the poem, its focus on the radical idiosyncrasy of aesthetic knowledge, the instructive value of a heterogeneous museum collection, and the local pleasures of seeing and interpreting in the museum—all dispositions that Gilman would explicitly censure—serve to locate “Museums” within a different strand of early twentieth-century museum discourse that was premised on aesthetic principles contrary to Gilman’s. Although Museum Ideals is indicative of a conservative strain of turn-of-the-century museology that was widely influential among many of the global art world’s most powerful institutions, at the same time the possibilities for making an egalitarian and unhierarchical museum more broadly representative of a range of experiences of class, gender, race, and nationality were gaining discursive traction in museums and galleries both large and small. As Nancy Einreinhofer has persuasively argued, during the first half of the twentieth century prominent American museum administrators, curators, and administrators began to rethink the
art museum, conceiving it less as a pinnacle of high culture and more as “the triumph of American democracy, for it stands with its doors open, its treasures gathered for the benefit of all the people. In other words, it projects an image of what Americans want to believe and what they want to be” (19). Developments in museology during this time sought to transform this democratic potential into actionable practices by coupling exhibitions with parenthetical devices meant to foster a more inclusive, user-friendly museum experience, including “informative signage, gallery talks, publications, video presentations, [and] recorded tours … The museum was soon recognized as a potential center for public education for people of all ages and economic and social levels” (Einreinhofer 199). If Gilman’s museology depends on the top-down distribution of artistic literacy and specialized training to stimulate the intellectual enlightenment of the masses, for other early twentieth-century American museum theorists the museum’s primary social obligation would instead be connected to its community’s local needs, interests, and cultures.

“Museums” may be in tension with the museological theories of Gilman, Moore’s most likely interlocutor, but in diverging from his precedent the poem approximates the progressive values these new museums and their reformers developed, by privileging the institution as a site for egalitarian and more broadly representative experiences. Several newly opened museums and galleries at this time, such as the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington, D.C. and the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, both in 1921, and the Museum of Modern Art in 1929, combined the collection and display of modernist art with heterogeneous objects from everyday life: the Phillips and Barnes, both publicly displayed art collections of modern art patrons, exhibited modernist paintings in domestic settings that included a range of cultural objects irrespective of medium, nation of origin, or period, while the MoMA (though a representative case of “aesthetic
museum” display methods) complemented its collection of fine arts with “practical, commercial, and popular arts” (Einreinhofer 153). This modernist phenomenon of recontextualizing the fine arts in relation to a panoply of objects variously placed in received aesthetic hierarchies even carried over into the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its controversial installation of period rooms and displays of domestic objects for the opening of its American Wing in 1924; this event was largely credited with spurring an interest in period rooms and contextualized displays in nearly all of the museums in North American metropolitan hubs such as Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and St. Louis.

Among the most prominent proponents of this shifting ideological terrain was the progressive museum reformer John Cotton Dana, whose theories of museum pedagogy noticeably resonates with those that underwrite Moore’s ekphrastic poetry. Dana, who founded the Newark Museum in 1909 and served as its director for the following two decades, was a vocal proponent of what he termed the “new museum,” an institution that would eschew received aesthetic hierarchies and evaluative systems conventionally associated with museum collections (and which he associated with the art world’s Eurocentrism) in order to be of immediate utility for the education of its community: while “old-style museums are founded on the assumption … that the presence in a community of rare and expensive objects in fields either of art or science give that community not only a certain prestige in the world but also a certain mental éclat,” the new museum “examines the community’s life first and then straightway bends its energies to supplying some of the material which that community needs” (38-9). Writing in 1920, Dana proposed that one of the strategies American museums ought to adopt in order to actualize this

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7 On the Phillips Memorial Gallery and the Barnes Foundation, see chapters 2 and 3 respectively of Braddock.
8 See Heckscher; and Harris 133.
potential would involve undisciplining the museum to develop a broader program of “visual instruction”:

It is that the new museum is not a museum of a certain kind. It is not of fine art, or applied art; or of all sciences, or of any special science; or of industry or commerce; or of pedagogy or technology; or of hygiene or religion ... a new name must be discovered—such a name I suggest in ‘institute of visual instruction’—and applied to those creations whose usefulness is wide, direct, obvious, and in fair degree measurable. (65)

This notion that the museum’s essential instructive value—teaching its visitors to refine their ability to interpret what they see—could best be literalized by transcending received hierarchical divisions between objects, such that scientific, artistic, and applied art objects could exist within the same institutional location, is a riposte to Gilman’s rigid distinctions not only between types of objects and institutions but in the ways they would affect observers.

Although Moore’s representation of the museum in “Museums” might grapple with Gilman’s Museum Ideals, her point of contention aligns her with Dana’s progressive museology, for her poem cites the sheer variety of objects on display, from armor to an emerald and ancient Egyptian antiquities, as affecting the mind and emotions of Moore’s observer. Though I have yet to glean any indication that Moore was directly familiar with Dana’s work or even the existence of the Newark Museum, which was a short train ride from her apartments in Greenwich Village and Brooklyn, her ekphrastic engagements with early twentieth-century museology nonetheless embody his theoretical principles. In a “Comment” that she published in the May 1927 issue of The Dial, for instance, Moore distinguishes between neoclassical aesthetic values such as Gilman’s and the instructive value of miscellaneous collections like those advocated by Dana when she assails what she terms “academic feeling,” the idea that the most valuable cultural
engagements are those that treat a given topic most comprehensively. She opposes “academic feeling, or prejudice possibly, in favor of continuity and completeness” as represented by the “miscellany”:

music programs, composite picture exhibitions, newspapers, magazines, and anthologies. Any zoo, aquarium, library, garden, or volume of letters, however, is an anthology and certain of these selected findings are highly satisfactory. The science of assorting and the art of investing an assortment with dignity are obviously not being neglected, as is manifested in “exhibitions and sales of artistic property,” and in that sometimes disparaged, most powerful phase of the anthology, the museum. (Complete Prose 182)

Moore eschews critical engagements with the artistic field that advocates for “continuity and completeness” when interpreting or categorizing cultural objects, those discursive investments in unities and depths that to her can only ever be exercises in the very selectivity they reject: that is, “academic feeling” ignores the creative possibilities of “picking and choosing,” to borrow one of Moore’s other devices, skimming the so-called surface of a heterogeneous mix of cultural objects. Her reference to the miscellany—a form of variety popular in eighteenth-century print culture that allowed for the circulation of poems and songs that reflected the interests of a mass public, rather than an elite, literary audience⁹—as a more constructive approach to cultural experience than the continuity implicit in “academic feeling,” suggests a broader audience than the intellectual elitism associated with the latter. Moore does not condone the total elision of historicity in her condemnation of the “continuity and completeness” of “academic feeling,” which we can glean from her enthusiasm for the historical form of the miscellany itself, but rather rejects the authority of a coherent, linear narrative history that she associates with

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⁹ For more on the history of the miscellany and a database of over 1500 digitized miscellanies, see the Digital Miscellanies Index, http://digitalmiscellaniesindex.org/.
hierarchical cultural ideologies, such that the spirit of the miscellany is seen to infuse sundry
different forms that share its public appeal and mixed nature. Still, unlike the museological
valences in the work of her contemporaries Eliot and Pound, whose poetic projects aim to
rehabilitate lost cultural unities from the fragments of modernity, Moore identifies a poetry latent
in the act of collecting, but not reconstructing, disunited fragments when producing miscellanies
or other miscellaneous forms; if Pound later grieves that the palimpsestic historiography intended
in his *Cantos* fails because he “cannot make it cohere” (*Cantos* 816), Moore’s “Comment”
insinuates that such an incoherence can be seen as a valuable creative act in itself. Whereas high
modernism and “academic feeling” might agree on the value of cultural wholeness in the form of
macro-level cultural engagements, Moore instead locates value in localized but yet
heterogeneous cultural forms like the anthology, miscellany, and museum.

That Moore considers the museum “the most powerful phase of the anthology”—rather
than placing it alongside the unified, monolithic discourses she associates with “academic
feeling”—is revealing both of her distance from Gilman’s museological theory and her affinity
to Dana’s. For while Gilman posits that the ideal scenario for aesthetic experience in the art
museum is that which places the individual in relation to the inalienable, permanent intentions of
the object’s creator, Moore’s association of the museum with the miscellany proposes that
aesthetic meaning can instead be elicited through the assemblage of heterogeneous materials
made available to the individual by the curatorial hand. Indeed, in Moore’s framework the
curator herself serves an artistic function, and she presents the museum collection as a text that
offers an “unintentional portrait … of the mind which brought the assembled integers together”
(183). By focusing on the personal texture of museum experience, the way an individual’s
preferences contour institutional experience beyond discourses of objectivity or universality,
Moore locates in the museum the possibilities for object experiences predicated on local knowledges rather than institutional epistemologies, and in turn highlights the fault-line between a museum’s “purpose and method” and the nature of real visitor experiences. Indeed, Moore’s historicizing in this “Comment”—her identification of the miscellany as an originating context for a number of diverse works, institutions, and methods that share a homologous form—rearticulates the linear taxonomies privileged in the aesthetic museum paradigm to trace unanticipated continuities across genres and traditional high/low cultural hierarchies, a boundary-crossing of the cultural field that she continually returns to in her poems about museum experiences.

This idea of the museum as miscellany rather than cultural authority, and of the curatorial acts that produce its heterogeneity as a form of self-portraiture, informs the shape and substance of Moore’s poetic representations of art objects and conventions of pictorial representation. In the section below, I turn to the poems “When I Buy Pictures” and “In the Days of Prismatic Color” to show that Moore’s engagements with the visual arts toy with the conventions of ekphrastic poetry by routing its generic possibilities through the museum and museological theories of the early twentieth century. In Moore’s poetry, scenes of ekphrasis are bound in the literal, epistemological, and philosophical conditions for aesthetic experience in the museums and galleries of the early twentieth century. Moore strategically contours these conditions into elements of poetic discourse, enmeshed as they are within the display practices of the modern museum, the inherited matrices of artistic value privileged in the art world, and contemporary debates over the social and educational possibilities of aesthetic experience and the utility of the institution as a site for, as Dana calls it, “visual instruction.”
II. Modernizing Ekphrasis

Moore’s poem “Museums” and her Dial “Comment” may be among her most explicit entanglements in the modern museum and its attendant aesthetic philosophies, but her interest in the personal, creative responses enabled by visits to museums underwrites the themes and practices of her ekphrastic poetry more generally, and particularly during the 1910s and early 1920s. During this time, Moore was actively involved in New York’s artistic avant-garde, living in Greenwich Village, counting among her vibrant social network the experimental artists Alfred Kreymborg, Alfred Stieglitz, Lola Ridge, and William and Marguerite Zorach, and regularly patronizing the formative institutional spaces and places of New York Modernism, including the Provincetown Playhouse and Stieglitz’s 291 gallery. During the formative visit to New York in 1915 she famously called her “Sojourn in the Whale,” Moore first went to 291, that important modernist institution where among the exhibited works were those by the photo-secessionists, who were at the time instrumental to an increased recognition of photography as an aesthetic practice in the art world. In an enthusiastic letter to her brother John, Moore recalls being invited by Stieglitz into a private room in the gallery to see works not placed on display in the main gallery – a literal back room in one of the New York art scene’s most important alternative spaces, where the dominant artistic norms of the art world, those seemingly universally privileged in “universal survey” museums and galleries, were being contested.10

It was during the time that Moore encountered and navigated these early modernist countercultural institutions that her ekphrastic poetry most openly expresses doubts about

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10 “Wednesday morning I went to ‘291’ to see as I thought, some of Alfred Stieglitz’s photography. He had an exhibition up of [Oscar] Bluemner, a modern architect. Mr. Stieglitz was exceedingly unemotional, and friendly and finally after telling me how he was hated, said I might come back and look at some of the things standing with their faces to the wall in a back room. I enjoyed them” (Selected Letters 103). The unexhibited works Moore saw in this back room seem to have included paintings by Francis Picabia and Pablo Picasso and a landscape by Marsden Hartley.
museological ways of knowing and interpreting culture. However, if such encounters contributed to her ambivalence towards cultural institutions—and indeed, many Moore critics have taken to comparing Moore’s ekphrastic practices to those of avant-garde visual aesthetics\[^{11}\]—it must be noted that the nature of her engagements with museum culture neither fit snugly within the definitional boundaries of high modernist pictorial aesthetics nor do they accord with modernism’s larger antagonism towards establishment art institutions and, importantly, the interpretive contexts they assume or impose. Many of Moore’s contemporaries maintained ideas of the artist’s autonomy from the social world that sublate the artist’s relation to the public sphere and potential interpreters of his work: we may be reminded of Eliot’s theory of poetic impersonality, Duchamp’s transforming a urinal into an art object with the flourish of the artist’s signature, or Joyce’s artist-god disinterestedly paring his fingernails, to name just the most famous instances. Lisa Siraganian has perceptively claimed that these modernist aesthetic programs were meant to constitute the modern artist’s autonomy as “freedom from others ascribing meaning to art objects” (4). Redolent of Gilman’s contemporaneous notion of the art object’s singular meaning, this concept that the modernist artwork signifies regardless of its reception provides one possible explanation for why so many modern artists expressed antipathy

\[^{11}\] This critical penchant is perhaps partly authorized by Moore’s oft-quoted observation to Ezra Pound that “Over here [Greenwich Village in 1919], it strikes me that there is more evidence of power among painters than among writers” (\textit{Selected Letters} 123). See, e.g., the introduction and seventh chapter of Bonnie Costello’s foundational study, \textit{Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions} (1981), Jennie-Rebeca Falcetta (2006) and Ellen Levy (2011) on assemblage in Moore’s poetry and Joseph Cornell’s boxes (2006), and Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux on Moore’s use of ekphrasis as a feminist act (2008). Leavell begins \textit{Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts: Prismatic Color} (1995) with this quotation to frame her study of how Moore responded in poetry to the aesthetic quandaries identified by the modernist visual artists she associated with in New York (particularly those that belonged to the Stieglitz circle and the precisionists), including definitions of national identity, the materiality of art, the place of new technologies in the modernist aesthetic, and the representation-abstraction polarity that divided the avant-garde.
for the museum, an institution that placed objects in interpretive contexts for broad public consumption.

Although Moore’s ekphrastic poetics similarly interrogate the museum’s role in defining an object’s meaning, she does so without entirely undermining the institution; rather, her poetry seeks opportunities to locate creative possibilities within art’s institutions, much as in “Museums” the imaginative collection of art objects made a museum out of the poet’s personal predilections. What these poems do grapple with and seek to overcome is the assumption of the museum as a space antithetical to fostering social relations, debate, and interpretive heterogeneity, an assumption central to Gilman’s museology and challenged by Dana’s. In her ekphrastic poems, Moore places her artists-observers-speakers (a conglomerated subject-position in her poetry that cannot be divided into its constituent parts) within a matrix of meaning-making reliant on the complex, mutually sustaining relations among artistic creators, creations, and connoisseurs. Museums may not always be directly referred to in the texts of these ekphrastic poems, but many of them are tacitly informed by—and dialectically framed against—museological images and practices, including those that she encountered directly through reading Gilman and others she likely noticed during her own regular museum-going.12 In “When I Buy Pictures”

12 Of course, there is a museological texture to some of Moore’s poetic practices: as Paul notes, her proclivity for incorporating quotations from eclectic textual, verbal, and visual sources into her poems resembles the museological practice of making meaning from the juxtaposition of cultural fragments. Paul writes that Moore’s use of quotations and endnotes replicates the museum’s signifying system, indicating larger contexts of which the present quotation is merely a singular artifact: “The notes lead back into the larger collection for which the poem is merely a display case, and they remind readers of the act of curating going on in her poetry writing and in acts of literary production more generally. These literary collections, like collections in museums, must invite readers to travel imaginatively beyond the page into realms not previously experienced” (152). I question, though, if something a bit more ambivalently museological is afoot in Moore’s penchant for quotation and reference. Her endnotes, for instance, may name their sources but they are oftentimes elliptical and many quotations remain unsourced; even when the original text Moore was working with is named, she does not indicate how the fragment fits into the context of the poem, a museological standard for making meaning by integrating fragments into a narrative.
(1921) and “In the Days of Prismatic Color” (1919), Moore confronts the central supposition of Gilman’s “aesthetic museum” paradigm, that art’s meaning is autonomous from social or personal praxis and that aesthetic judgments are only valid when they emerge from the appreciation of acknowledged masterworks. These poems bear out instead what is a central postulate of Moore’s aesthetic theory, with its evident affinities to Dana’s “new museum”: that our relationship to art, to culture, and to the museums that make art relatively accessible to a majority of the public ought not to be determined by what she identifies as an overwrought culture of intellectualism that mystifies the social and personal value of art and occludes personal aesthetic experiences. Moore locates a different heuristic for defining value, which, as Bonnie Costello observes, expresses “conflict between her desire to form and delimit thought and experience and her alertness to the inassimilable detail” but ultimately trace “the recalcitrance of objects to their separate reality, which poetic form can conjure but never captures” (Imaginary Possessions 16). More narrowly, I suggest that this non-coincidence of identity and interpretation defines the place of museology in Moore’s ekphrastic poetry, in which aesthetic value is determined phenomenologically within the scene of aesthetic experience.

In the poem “When I Buy Pictures,” Moore responds to the museum’s role as arbiter of taste by reclaiming the cultural significance of the “imaginary possessor,” a subject-position from which determinations of aesthetic value can be formulated under the aegis of personal opinion. In this poem, the possession of an aesthetic object is equated to its representation in verse, a notion that situates “When I Buy Pictures” against a broader ekphrastic tradition of correlating the poet’s ability to verbally represent a visual object with his imagined mastery over it (Bergmann Loizeaux 88); yet while this framing takes the lyric meditation on the single work of art as the poem’s subject, Moore instead expands the ekphrastic text in a way that reflects the
mass accumulation of objects in museums and galleries (an accumulation that might seem antipodal to a meditation on any one art object), finding in this curatorial accumulation a desirably wider access to opportunities for aesthetic experience. In the process, what traditionally functions as a drama of artistic mastery becomes recast as Moore’s poetic take on the museum’s professional practices, the imaginary curation of objects in its collection. Originally published in *The Dial* and collected (in edited form) in her 1924 volume *Observations*, “When I Buy Pictures” is a statement on the relationship between artworks and observers, and on the individual preferences that shape opinions on the meaning and function of art.\(^3\) The poem reflects on the conditions for knowing and experiencing art in modernity by cutting against the depersonalizing force of the “pure gaze,” the notion that art can be disinterestedly appreciated for its formal properties that Bourdieu argues is central to museological display practices; the speaker’s acts of imaginatively procuring “pictures” by adding them to her mental catalogue of valuable objects are framed as local practices that take on larger cultural significance in relation to institutionalized aesthetic discourses.

This free verse poem, comprised of two sentences set across eighteen lines, begins:

*When I Buy Pictures*

or what is closer to the truth,

when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the imaginary possessor,

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\(^3\) Three different variants of “When I Buy Pictures” were published, although only the two mentioned above received Moore’s consent. A third was published in the Egoist Press edition of Moore’s *Poems* (1921), which was printed by friends Bryher, H. D., and Robert McAlmon without Moore’s knowledge or approval. This version of “When I Buy Pictures” uses an earlier draft set in syllabics with a regular stanzaic pattern, which Moore had revised and reset in free verse lines before submitting to *The Dial*. Differences between the *Dial* and *Observations* versions of the poem are minimal, aside from their final lines (which I discuss below) and some minor variations in diacritical markings. My discussion of the poem uses the *Observations* version because it represents not only the latest of the three major variants but is also the version Moore selected for her 1968 *Complete Poems*. 
I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments (Moore, *MMP* 144)

Like Moore’s rejection of hierarchical “academic feeling” in her *Dial “Comment,”* “When I Buy Pictures” expresses a commensurate distrust of critical opinions that value “that which is great because something else is small.” This anti-hierarchical attitude is insinuated structurally in the semantic contradiction in the space between the title and opening line in the conjunction “or,” a disruption of the certainty that poem’s titles conventionally provide. While the title of “When I Buy Pictures” suggests that Moore’s speaker can be the literal possessor of paintings in the art market (and frames such procurement as a regular, unexceptional event of her quotidian existence), Moore doubles back on this assertion in the poem’s first line by revising her meaning to “what is closer to the truth,” that is, that the speaker is window-shopping: she is a viewer and a visitor to commercial galleries and public museums, a “collector” and miscellany maker who considers herself an owner and possessor only outside standard definitions of ownership and possession. Accordingly, a contingency of knowing (and not knowing) is inscribed in the movement between the title and first line: here, all of the discrete matter is dependent on its relationship to other parts, a slipperiness of signification that casts doubt on whether substantive determinations can be claimed. That one can claim ownership over a “picture” without literally owning it suggests that one needn’t have money to be an agent in the artistic field, and that merely enjoying the objects one encounters is enough to make for an equally meaningful intervention into it.

Moore’s rejection of anticipated poetic tropes and ideas of cultural ownership provides the terms for her poem’s challenge to the standards that predicate conventional determinations of aesthetic value. In “When I Buy Pictures,” Moore’s poetic speaker makes clear that she is uninterested in adhering to received artistic theories when she selects which pictures to
imaginatively possess, but instead fixes on what provides “pleasure” in “average moments.” That Moore refers to these things as “pictures” rather than the more prestigious designation of “paintings” implies that the speaker is rooting around for objects to possess—like, for instance, drawings and photographs, “pictures” that were judged of lesser status than the oil paintings of the Old Masters—at the bottom of conventional artistic hierarchies, or rather that she is overturning these hierarchies by casting her value judgments in different directions. Inscribing her criterion for determining aesthetic value within the quotidian and its associated affects—the “average moments” that recall her description of museum visiting as a “mellow” practice—resists the kinds of aesthetic judgments privileged in the philosophy of a pure gaze, a rhetorical effect continuous with her reference to horse-trails and streams to describe museum visiting in “Museums.” This notion runs counter to the museum’s conventional taxonomies of period, national traditions, and artistic media, placing Moore’s poem in line with a more democratic ethos of aesthetic experience. This distinction registers as a radical disavowal of the entrenched judgments of the art world and the interpretive “pure gaze” it implies. Bourdieu writes that when “faced with legitimate works of art, people most lacking the specific competence [in learned artistic discourse] apply to them the perceptual scheme of their own ethos, the very ones which structure their everyday perception of everyday existence … The result is a systematic ‘reduction’ of the things of art to the things of life, a bracketing of form in favor of ‘human’ content, which is barbarism par excellence from the standpoint of the pure aesthetic” (Distinction 44). I will return to this notion of the “barbarism” attributed to interpretations that rely on “everyday existence” shortly, but I invoke Bourdieu here to note that by carving out a place for sublunary criteria of aesthetic value in “When I Buy Pictures,” Moore writes against the dominant philosophies of the artistic field—and the art market where she window-shops for the
pictures she imaginatively possesses—and in doing so sanctions her poetic speaker’s sensuous aesthetic perceptions as expressions of local predilections that surface in her unremarkably “average moments.”

Placing these “average moments” against the depersonalizing structure of the “pure gaze” places in high relief the way local pleasures underpin the determination of aesthetic value in Moore’s ekphrastic poetics. The catalogue of items that please Moore’s speaker in “When I Buy Pictures” bear this point out, as she is most taken by curios, unique objects that appeal to her personal interest:

the old thing, the mediaeval decorated hat-box,

in which there are hounds with waists diminishing like the waist of the hourglass and deer and birds and seated people;

it may be no more than a square of parquetry; the literal biography perhaps,

in letters standing well apart upon a parchment-like expanse;

an artichoke in six varieties of blue; the snipe-legged hieroglyphic in three parts;

the silver fence protecting Adam’s grave, or Michael taking Adam by the wrist.

(MMP 144)

“When I Buy Pictures” here expands the conditions for ekphrastic writing: while the quoted section is constituted by descriptions of visual objects, a traditional ekphrastic set-piece, it suggests a mobile poetic sensibility rather than a stationary lyric one, which fixates not on the singular art object in a meditative moment but rather on the experience of seeing all of these sundry items in a single site. Of course, collecting such seemingly ordinary objects in a work of

14 Bergmann Loizeaux also points out that this roving ekphrastic gaze resists the power dynamics inherent to the phallocentric male gaze of traditional ekphrasis, “unfixing authority” and favoring “the fleeting glance rather than the fixing gaze” (88).
modernist poetry already implies the transformation of the quotidian into the aesthetic, yet Moore’s gathered miscellany resists affirming aesthetic hierarchies in the way that, say, Eliot does in his “Preludes” and *Waste Land* when quotidian items enter the text as refuse that signifies the disharmony of the modern condition. Instead, in “When I Buy Pictures” the ordinary is imbued with an aesthetic extraordinariness that, paradoxically but necessarily, reinforces the importance of their ordinary status. For instance, while the poem’s title may promise that its speaker will be in the market for visual art objects, “pictures” in the traditional sense of the word, the objects that are listed in this catalogue all diverge from this definitional category; if these are to be counted as “pictures,” then the conventional ways of identifying objects in terms of form and medium are being figured elastically, the determinations of what makes something a “picture” ultimately being made by the observer.

As I’ve been arguing throughout this chapter, the identification of these items as things warranting keen interpretive (and ekphrastic) interest tacitly challenges the supremacy of the fine arts in institutional hierarchies. This gesture resembles Dana’s call for American museums to undo the ascendency of oil paintings in order to accommodate a greater diversity of objects that are reflective of the interests of the people:

The extreme veneration now paid by museum authorities to great paintings will surely become weaker as the possibilities of a museum’s influence becomes better understood … In due course the oil painting will take its place in museums with other products of men’s hands simply as one of the many things of high beauty and great suggestiveness produced in perfection only by men of special talent who have been able to master a difficult technique … the oil painting has no such close relation to the development of good taste and refinement as have countless objects of daily use. (55)
Dana here attributes, against then dominant museological values, an otherness to “great paintings” that would otherwise be placed in the museum as items representative of a generalized human condition: for him, they are instead only “products of men’s hands” like so many other kinds of handicraft. Similarly, Moore’s reference to the seemingly everyday objects in her poem as fascinating “pictures” worthy of artistic judgment challenges the authority of the “great paintings” of the past as indices of aesthetic value and, consequently, of universal interest. Whereas Michael Field locate possibilities for a comparable cultural critique in their ekphrastic reinterpretations of such “great paintings,” Moore here eludes the high arts altogether in order to curate a poetic museum from “countless objects of daily use.”

The way Moore gathers these linguistic references serially across the poetic line suggests a resemblance to museum curation, and indeed, Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta has commented that Moore’s propensity for cataloguing items in poems like this one is museological in nature, motivated by “the possibility of a personalized museum” dependent on the “inventory ... of objects, varieties of species, or types of people according to the poet’s own system of classification” (125). However, it must be noted that while Moore is certainly interested in creating a “personalized museum,” this moment in “When I Buy Pictures” is opposed to the value judgments enmeshed in conservative museological theories such as Gilman’s. More closely, these cataloguing lines in “When I Buy Pictures” can be read as a poetic homology to the Kunstkammer or curiosity cabinet, given that Moore gathers on the poetic line a collocation of objects to which she has some personal attachment or affinity. Curiosity cabinets, a

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15 Hooper-Greenhill describes the curiosity cabinet as an early form of the museum, given that the cabinet provided a space for a collector to bring together disparate materials that in their collection are intended to create a partial “world picture,” or idea of the relationship between otherwise disparate phenomena. She compares the collections of curiosity cabinets as a “material form of writing” that “varied ... according to the position of the collecting and representing subject” (126). We can see the curiosity cabinet as a more
phenomenon of the late Renaissance and eighteenth century which took the form of anything from small pieces of furniture to entire rooms in courtly palaces, provided space for their owners to store or display encyclopedic collections of items of ethnographical, scientific, religious, and/or aesthetic significance; while curiosity cabinets share in a museological urge to curate fascinating items, these cabinets differed from the museums of today by virtue of their taxonomies being shaped around the preferences and partialities of their owners rather than the purely historical (and thus suggestively objective) taxonomies that most museums follow. Moreover, the irregular shape of these lines—where the object descriptions often stretch across line endings or are enjambed—suggest a different mode of object experience than that of the isolated attentive looking promoted by Gilman and common in early twentieth-century museum practice. By distributing these descriptions in such a way and making the poet and her personal predilections the generative principle behind the collection of objects in “When I Buy Pictures,” Moore appropriates a pre-museological curatorial practice, though articulated in the full glare of—and as a departure from—the dominant aesthetic values of museum culture.¹⁶

Moreover, and with the idea of the socially autonomous “pure gaze” in mind, it is notable that her poetic curiosity cabinet contains utilitarian objects (a hat-box from the middle ages depicting a hunting scene), home decorations (a square of decorative wood paneling), and the

¹⁶ Levy notes the museological resonances of this practice in her interpretation of the same sources I discuss above (“Museums” and the Dial “Comment”), but makes the claim that Moore’s poetic collections find “a refuge in the institution of visual art ... by dint of its excessive length, extreme detail, and quasi-encyclopedic range, Moore’s list of precious objects creates the effect of a utopian world apart, a dream of the possibility of a pleasure unshadowed by pain” (61). While I agree with Levy that Moore’s linguistic object assemblages are devoid of certain negative emotions and experiences, I question if we can easily characterize these poems as a pure rejection of the outer world. Levy associates Moore’s museology with Foucault’s idea of the museum as a heterotopia that constitutes “a place of all times that is itself outside time” (181-2), but I suggest that it is this very museological discourse that Moore rejects when she theorizes museum experience as a localized individual practice.
stylized alphabet of Egyptian hieroglyphs, all objects that have explicitly practical uses. This collection contravenes the Kantian notion that objects that provide aesthetic pleasures must necessarily be non-utilitarian, and should serve no tangible social function beyond their pure form so that they can be appreciated disinterestedly. Instead, Moore locates a certain artfulness in usefulness, in those sublunary items that Kantian aesthetics expurgate from the field of the fine arts, and which Gilman associates with purely informational experience antipodal to a visitor’s pleasure or “enjoyment.” We may be reminded of Moore’s statement on the cultural value of creative expression and its conditions of possibility in a climate of increasing artistic complexity in her *ars poetica* “Poetry,” where she articulates a preference for art that is, before all else, “useful”:

Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are

useful. (*MMP* 135)

In much the same way, the objects that interest her in “When I Buy Pictures” are all things one may have encountered or used in everyday life either in the present or the past; aesthetic hierarchies are not reified nor are they plainly overturned, but rather Moore implies criteria of determining aesthetic worth that are cast in multiple different directions at once.

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17 Kant makes this point to distinguish art from what he calls “handicraft,” or “remunerative art” (133, emphasis in original). A work of art, he argues, must be “agreeable on its own account,” in distinction to the remunerative object that pleases the creator only because it results in monetary compensation.
In the second sentence of “When I Buy Pictures,” the poem’s focus widens to consider the discursive significance of this personal collection of pleasing objects against traditional ways of interpreting aesthetic artifacts. Moore’s speaker warns that placing “too stern an intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that” will “distract from one’s enjoyment” of them. While this abasement of academicized heuristics may initially ring of anti-intellectualism—and Moore is firmly opposed to the rigidity of certain strategies that insist on authoritative ways of experiencing art—Moore is not so much invested in degrading an intellectual approach to aesthetic experience as she is in eschewing approaches that are defined univocally so as to occlude other interpretive strategies. She resists, that is, the prolixity of art and art criticism that makes a fetish of difficulty and intellectual self-aggrandizement and effectively disable genuine discourse, a contestation to which she frequently returns in her poetry. This notion is central to many of her other poems that deal explicitly with art criticism: for instance, “To a Steam-Roller” (1915) abjures an art critic who crushes “all the particles” of an artwork “down / into close conformity / and then walk back and forth / on them,” and “Novices” (1923) condemns those who “anatomize their work” in order to weave intellectual personas as “the masters of all languages, the supertadpoles of expression. / Accustomed to the recurring phosphorescence of antiquity, / the ‘much noble vagueness and indefinite jargon’ of Plato” and the “learned scenery of Egypt” (MMP 92, 152). Moore’s attribution of “stern”-ness to such critical positions in “When I Buy Pictures” is continuous with these poems’ rejections of overdetermined intellectual rigidity, the rigorous application (and countenancing) of predetermined rules for defining aesthetic value. Her condemnation of rigid intellectualism comes with a broadened conception of what constitutes the beautiful, the artistic, or even the poetic (so as to accommodate a decorative
hatbox or a particularly striking example of wood flooring) and of what affective positions can possibly lead to a determination of aesthetic value – particularly, “enjoyment.”

At nearly the same time as she composed “When I Buy Pictures,” Moore wrote another meditation on aesthetic experience and institutional discourse, “In the Days of Prismatic Color,” which explores the possibilities for resonant aesthetic experience in a modern age of artistic complexity. In “Prismatic Color,” Moore ekphrastically appropriates aesthetic discourse into poetic language as a means of adjudicating between the simplicity of an imagined prehistory before art and the irreducible complexity of the modern day and its practices of artistic representation. Composed of three movements across seven stanzas, “Prismatic Color” traces a thematic and temporal trajectory from the purity of ancient forms to the intricacies and abstractions of modern art, before finding some semblance of resolution between these two poles in the hidden truths that may still be ensconced within modern aesthetics. “Prismatic Color” takes up the interrelationship among aesthetic forms, artistic meaning, and the aesthetic dispositions that define the artistic field and museum philosophies, and challenges the entrenched privileging of autonomous aesthetic form over artistic content that has the effect of isolating art from everyday life.

The poem’s first sentence, which spans most of its first two stanzas, describes the isolated existence of Adam in prelapsarian Eden prior to the creation of Eve, a time in which all forms of existence are clearly defined and the eye is able to distinguish all phenomena in the visible world:

when Adam

was alone; when there was no smoke and color was

fine, not with the refinement
of early civilization art, but because
of its originality; with nothing to modify it but the
mist that went up (MMP 136)

This Edenic scene is prior to the materialization of modern institutions, which we can gather from Eve’s absence from the text: in Moore’s poetic imaginary, Adam and Eve often function as a synecdoche for traditional social rituals and institutions, such as when in “Marriage” (1923) their union is referred to as “This institution / perhaps one should say enterprise” (155, emphasis mine). Importantly, though, the aporia of “This institution”—the dyad of Adam and Eve—in the opening lines of “Prismatic Color” is complemented by a commensurate absence of artistic institutions, an absence that significantly affects the way individuals see and respond to the world. The poem begins with a description of the prelapsarian visual field as characterized by a strict distinction between colors, a notion first introduced in Moore’s titular reference to a prism, which separates light into primary colors, and stated more plainly when she writes that “color was / fine” because unobscured by any external mediation. In this original scene of human life, there is no prior history of aesthetic representations to influence sense perceptions: Adam may be the first creation, but he nevertheless inhabits a world prior to human creations, which means that all forms of knowing in this idyllic world, even those ostensibly clouded by “obliqueness,” are “plain to see and / to account for.” Moore registers, with some hint of nostalgia for this irrecoverable clarity, that today “it is no / longer that.” If the days when “Adam / was alone” are defined by optical and epistemological lucidity precisely because of the absence of art (and other forms of human creation) that clouds our vision, then the modern condition is characterized by an ineluctable murkiness in which “nothing is plain.” Although this is a time before “early
civilization art,” Moore paradoxically engages with the conditions of pictorial representation that are supposedly at odds with the primal atmosphere conjured: her recourse to pigmentation, atmospheric descriptive language, and acts of scene-setting all work towards throwing a visual image upon the reader’s imagination (provocatively, of a scene before such images). Despite its setting, “Prismatic Color” opens with the poetic representation of an imagined pictorial scene—what Hollander refers to as “notional” ekphrasis (16)—routed through visual aesthetic discourse, depending on such verbal-visual interplay to indicate the poem’s larger interest in the conditions for art and aesthetic experience in the institutions of modernity.

The poetic production of the visual performed in these opening lines moreover dovetails with the poem’s broader programmatic critique of modern aesthetics. The references to coloration and to a prism that separates primary colors, the poem’s use of the development of “early civilization art” to designate the shift from prelapsarian simplicity to modern complexity, and its closing examination of the relationship between forms and truth all suggest that “Prismatic Color” can be productively read in terms of the art institutional values Moore expresses in “Museums” and “When I Buy Pictures.” If the clarity of vision in this early idyll is accomplished prior to the development of “early civilization art”—a periodizing term that noticeably echoes the expansive categories museums often deploy for its early collections\(^\text{18}\)—the institutionalization of the arts and consequent emergence of privileged evaluative and taxonomic criteria and their attendant ways of seeing (things that museums help codify) can be seen to precipitate the murkiness of modernity and negated the possibilities for an unmediated aesthetic experiences. As “Prismatic Color” moves towards the existential uncertainty of the modern condition in the final three lines of the second stanza, the rhetorical thrust of the poem

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\(^{18}\) In the Chicago Institute of Art, this is “Ancient and Byzantine”; in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, “The Ancient World.”
appropriately shifts from a detached observation of Eden to a diagnosis that directly implicates the practitioners of complexity, those that produce obfuscatingly complex art or art criticism, as the wellspring of modern perplexity. Moore is not unilaterally condemnatory of complexity in art—she writes that it is “not a crime” in itself—but finds fault when complexity is carried “to the point of murki- / ness” until “nothing is plain” and the “blue red yellow” of prismatic color cannot “keep its stripe.” Moreover, the ineluctable murkiness of modernity has the effect of isolating individuals from knowledge of the world, as the “sophistication” of the present day is as it al-

ways has been – at the antipodes from the init-

ial great truths.

The epistemological complexity of the modernity is suggested in the manner that Moore’s line endings slice through standard orthography to complicate the reading experience; while these line breaks strategically uphold the poem’s syllabic verse style, in which line lengths are measured by the number of syllables rather than their stresses, we can infer that because these are among the only radically spliced line breaks in “Prismatic Color” there is likely some greater motive at play beyond structural expediency. And indeed, the placement of these line endings let surface an embedded complexity in the text, the broken internal rhyme of “al // ways” with the final syllable of “init / ial.” While the poem suggests that the simple, orderly universe of prelapsarian Eden, where all things can be seen plainly, remains a possibility, it has become buried within the formal complexity conative to modern institutional culture – and here, in the jagged edges of another complex art form, the modernist poem.
“Prismatic Color” reproduces a familiar poetical strain in the context of artistic modernism, shoring cultural fragments against the implied ruins of modernity. This interplay between the historical and the modern—a corollary to the institutional/personal dualism that structures “Museums” and “When I Buy Pictures”—informs the poem’s concluding stance on the possible recovery of truths from their obscurity within aesthetic forms and an art culture that values complexity over more authentic, because simpler and personal, expressions. The poem concludes with reference to the relationship between the obscured “great truths” and the aesthetic forms that waxed while simplicity waned:

Truth is no Apollo Belvedere, no formal thing. The wave may go over it if it likes.

Know that it will be there when it says:

“I shall be there when the wave has gone by.”

Although “Prismatic Color” is enmeshed in aesthetic discourse, the poem’s only reference to an actual art object occurs in the negative. The mention of the Apollo Belvedere as antipodal to truth encapsulates the disparity between aesthetic theories and the kinds of artistic knowledges that Moore most values. The Apollo Belvedere, the famous Roman copy of a lost Greek statue that is part of the Vatican Museum’s permanent collection, was celebrated during the eighteenth century as the epitome of classical art and the perfectibility of the human form, and as Victoria Bazin argues, Moore’s selection of the Apollo Belvedere to support her belief that truth is “no formal thing” is meaningfully juxtaposed against this critical precedent. Bazin notes that to Moore, the Apollo Belvedere encapsulates the problematic idea that we can surreptitiously “replace real things with imagined and idealized art works” without any palpable loss of meanings – in the Apollo Belvedere’s institutional reception, pure form is triumphant over
history and meaning. However, to Moore the Belvedere represents no more than “a ‘pestilence’ that destroys the integrity of objects” (Bazin 109). The statue, an artist’s copy of a (now lost) sculptural representation of an idealized male body, may indeed have a structural resemblance to the human form, but Moore’s poem claims that in its material manifestation it exists at a double remove from “Truth.” By lacking this authenticity and representing only pure form, the Apollo Belvedere stands as no more than a teleological museum object, produced by and for the appreciation of the artistic field in conformity with its attendant aesthetic values. That aesthetic representations such as this obscure “Truth” rather than reveal it, that the Apollo Belvedere paradoxically obstructs the path to the kind of knowledges the philosophy of the pure gaze claims for aesthetic forms, troubles the assumption that aesthetic form is the definitive expression of an artwork’s meaning, a testing of, and assay at, the positivist hermeneutics underwriting Gilman’s museology.

Although the capital-T “Truth” that the poem identifies as a foil to the Apollo Belvedere may seem to suggest the kinds of authoritative interpretive judgments that Moore is otherwise allergic to in other contexts, whatever this Truth is, it is the converse of a “formal thing.” If not a formal one, then, it seems Moore means to suggest that, ultimately, Truth is fluid and indeterminable within any received forms. Her criticism of the formalized, aestheticized “truth” emblematized by the Apollo Belvedere thus finds its footing on similar grounding as the personal preferences that underpin aesthetic perceptions in “When I Buy Pictures”: that, as Bazin puts it, Moore “seeks a truth in her poetry but not the truth” (109), which is meaningful not definitively or authoritatively, but relationally. While I agree with Bazin that Moore’s poem searches for a way to locate valuable, and plural, truths outside the distortions of representation, it’s important to note too that Moore’s critique of modern epistemology is continuous with the aesthetic
theories she developed in her ekphrastic poetry about museum objects. At the risk of tautology, Moore’s art about epistemology is often always already about knowledge of art too, and in “Prismatic Color” the hypervaluation of aesthetic forms in institutionalized art discourse—and the practices of the idealized “aesthetic museum”—is judged a “pestilence” to aesthetic experience. The poem’s partial recourse to ekphrastic conventions to make this point attests to the inherent resistance of this aesthetic program to received artistic values: the conventional schema of ekphrasis, the poetic description of a majestic art object, is conjured only to be eschewed in the poem’s sidelong evaluation of the Apollo Belvedere, while a mode of ekphrastic image-making in the poem’s opening lines derives usable truths available on the surface of the aesthetic rather than buried within its complex forms.

This chiastic interweaving of aesthetic discourse and artistic knowledge (and the values appended to each) in “Prismatic Color” is helpful for unpacking the opaque rhetorical gestures of the concluding moments of “When I Buy Pictures,” in which Moore writes that any art object she chooses to imaginatively possess must “acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it” (MMP 144). In “When I Buy Pictures,” meaningful aesthetic experience is understood to be complicit with an object’s etiology, a notion central to the censure of the Apollo Belvedere in “Prismatic Color” for its exclusive origins in the artistic field: knowing an object, these poems suggest, involves having access to its conditions of possibility beyond the strictures of pure aesthetic form. While this idea certainly resembles Gilman’s claim that aesthetic meanings—and thus interpretations of exhibited museum objects—originate exclusively in the artist’s intentions, there is a more complex relationship among artistic creation, aesthetic experience, and acts of interpretation here than Gilman’s museological framework allows for. An object’s “acknowledge”-ment of its constructedness does not necessarily imply a closure in its meaning,
and indeed, by bearing traces of its production but yet being in the speaker’s possession, the
object places its creator and the “imaginary possessor” in immediate relation. This line
encapsulates the critical value of being such an “imaginary possessor,” with the suggestion that if
the aesthetic objects that draw the observer’s attention are those that are pleasurable no matter
where they are situated within aesthetic hierarchies, they are also absent the same “finish” that
would obscure the object’s production and make it seem, like the Apollo Belvedere, an
autonomous and timeless thing.  

Still, settling on a definitive interpretation of Moore’s critical judgments as expressed in
her poetry is a thorny endeavor given her voracious editing practices, and the example of the
final lines of “When I Buy Pictures” is representative of the ways Moore’s revisions bury prior
meanings just as they allow others to surface. Moore altered the arrangement of the final lines
of the Dial variant of “When I Buy Pictures” before including it in Observations, and a different
line concludes the earlier version that offers an even more overt salvo at Kantian-influenced
aesthetic philosophies:

it must acknowledge the forces which have made it;

it must be “lit with piercing glances into the life of things;”

then I “take it in hand as a savage would take a looking-glass.”

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19 Bourdieu describes “finish” as a defining quality of academic art, a field that is institutionally (and
hierarchically) legitimated by state sponsorships, incentives such as awards at competitions which favor
art that coheres to dominant (conservative) aesthetic ideologies, critical discourses that locate aesthetic
value in the formal properties of a work of art rather than its historical or political meaning, and the
symbolic power of the artistic field to train artists within the parameters of approved styles and support
their careers. A lack of finish, seen in “the freedom to express the direct impression in the final, public
work – until then reserved to the sketch, a private, indeed intimate, moment – appears as an ethical
transgression, a form of facility and carelessness, a lack of the discretion and self-effacing manner that is
incumbent on the academic master” (“Manet and the Institutionalization of Anomie” 248).

20 For a helpful discussion of the difficulties of developing a fully usable bibliographic record for Moore’s
poetry that accommodates all of her edits, see Robin Schulze’s introduction to Becoming Marianne
Moore: Early Poems, 1907-1924.
Considering these lines in relation to Moore’s resistance to institutional ways of seeing art illuminates the cultural work that the earlier variant performs. Particularly, the image of the poetic speaker as a “savage” who identifies something resembling herself in the objects that interest her proffers a provocative counter-image to the Kantian derision of an individual who lets his personal desires shape his taste as a dilettante. Kant claims in the *Critique of Judgment* that any “taste that requires an added element of charm and emotion for its delight, not to speak of adopting this as the measure of its approval, has not yet emerged from barbarism” (54, emphasis in original): the uncultivated subject in this framework is one whose aesthetic experiences are informed by things to which he has a personal, emotional, or desirous relation.²¹

The idea of aesthetic judgment that Moore develops in “When I Buy Pictures” gains traction against just this strain of academic-artistic discourse, for while Kantian aesthetics makes it the obligation of the critically minded art observer to approach the artwork autotelically and as if it existed beyond the parameters of space-time, Moore describes her poetic speaker as an exoticized “savage” whose personal interests dictate what she will “imaginatively possess.” Indeed, each person and thing involved in Moore’s vision of aesthetic experience—the artist, the observer, and the aesthetic object—is a “low” form, in so far as she or it would be excluded from the conventional parameters of “high” artistic culture. Moore’s savage finds her enjoyment for

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²¹ The interplay of the subjectivity of perception (that any experience of an art object is necessarily personal) and the objectivity of taste in Kant’s philosophy requires some unpacking. To Kant, perceptions of the beautiful can only be subjective – that is, our understanding of what is beautiful is inherently shaped in our relationship to the object. “Beautiful” is not an intrinsic characteristic of the object itself but rather a product of the human intellect as it is intended towards the object. But, as Kant makes clear throughout the *Critique of Judgment*, our awareness of the beautiful is universal (something is beautiful unilaterally, to all perceivers) and is derived from the unity of the object’s formal properties rather than the sensations of pleasure derived from our perception of it (which are personally experienced, and thus an invalid way of judging an object’s beauty). Thus, to know an object is beautiful means to know that our subjective impressions of the beautiful are emanations of subjective standards of taste.
aesthetic objects not by putting herself in the “skin” of an object’s maker, as Gilman suggests each museum visitor should, but instead finds pleasure in the reflection of her own preferences in all her interested, pleasure-seeking glory. Seeing this self-reflection in the aesthetic object—a central precept of Dana’s community-centered “new museum”—instead functions as a riposte to dominant museological philosophies that deindividualize aesthetic experience. And of course, among other forms of class stratification, access to museums is predicated on adherence to certain behavioral and dress codes that certainly would not accommodate a “savage” with a “looking-glass,” an imagined patron of the artistic field who nonetheless has other artistic values and forms of aesthetic experience in mind.

III. The Museum at War: “A Carriage from Sweden”

Moore composed all of these ekphrastic poems in the eight-year period between 1918-1925, but she remained interested in museums and their impacts on aesthetic experience throughout her writing life. She continued to patronize New York’s museums regularly, compose gallery reviews, attend special events at museums (to which she was often an invited guest after having become a minor celebrity later in life), and take inspiration from museum objects for her poems. In the 1940s, however, Moore’s poetry about cultural institutions shifts keys: while most of her verse can be (and has been) seen to carry some latent sociopolitical content if not an explicit political message, the poems she wrote during the duration of the Second World War often respond directly to the ongoing international conflict. The rousingly antifascist “In Distrust of Merits” (1943) remains her most famous and frequently anthologized political poem, but I’d like to close by considering one of Moore’s late ekphrastic poems, “A Carriage from Sweden,” in which the status of international relations during the war creeps into the gallery space and
inflects her speaker’s interpretive experience of an exhibited object. The values Moore earlier
ascribes to museum visits, local knowledge and “burning speculation,” are not sacrificed to this
broadened, international perspective, but are rather prompted by the social critique that
underwrites the ekphrastic description of the poem’s subject. The aesthetic museum paradigm
discussed above may encourage negating interpretive contexts beyond the institution’s walls, but
in “A Carriage from Sweden” Moore works out a competing heuristic that places the historical
meanings within the museum in sustained relation with the events of the contemporary world
beyond it: at a time when both international relations and personal security alike were made
highly fraught by global conflict, the Swedish carriage promises Moore’s poetic speaker, at
home in America and isolated from the warfront, the possibilities both for spiritual identification
with Europe in the heat of conflict and assurance in her own sense of place, as a poet describing
her perception of a carriage in a gallery of a museum in Brooklyn.

That Moore chose to set this ekphrastic meditation on the local and global in the
Brooklyn Museum is telling: not only was Moore a frequent visitor to this institution during the
several decades she spent living in Brooklyn, but she believed that the Museum’s eclectic
collection and display practices embodied the diversity of the borough itself. In the late essay
“Brooklyn from Clinton Hill” (1960), her expressed appreciation for the institution quickly
unfolds into a cataloguing of heterogeneous artifacts in its collection that personally interested
her (perhaps the most signal indication of her approval of anything):

The Brooklyn Museum, although representative, is not so vast as to justify the impression
that gathered art can be the most lethal form of exhilaration. It has “the” Peruvian double-
fish-motive textile, a closely woven parallelogram with widely spaced pairs of fish in
pale thread on maroon; almost an entire floor devoted to finely jointed carapaces by
Japanese armorers. There are costumes, including a French mull Empress Josephine long
dress with high waist, embroidered in a tiny flower-cluster design, appropriate to a
Leghorn hat with pale-blue streamers in a Turgenev picnic-scene by a waterfall. Not only
is art primitive, early, and modern, exhibited by the Museum, it has a class in painting
taught by William von Kienbusch, whose own work, naturalistic or abstract, has plenty of
drive. (*Complete Prose* 543-4)

The Brooklyn Museum’s charm is seen to lie in its deft balance of capaciousness and selectivity;
like the miscellanies Moore references in the *Dial* “Comment,” it represents to her a curation of
artifacts that are “representative” of human cultures in the plural without in their accumulation
attempting to capture the totality of a single human culture. Moreover, all of these objects are
sublunary items that would have obvious practical uses in everyday life when they were created,
including textiles, armor, and clothing. This catalogue thus includes items that do not conform to
the Kantian estimation of autonomous aesthetic beauty emptied of social praxis that was central
to dominant museological theories and practices. Instead, as in the comparable object collection
in “Museums” and “When I Buy Pictures,” in this essay Moore textually curates a variegated and
anti-hierarchical mosaic of items, and in doing so aligns her interests with early twentieth-
century progressive museum theories that called for an undisciplining of the museum. Moore
found in the Brooklyn Museum, then, a space where visitors may access a sense of the familiar
through experiences with unfamiliar objects so as to, as she had earlier put it in “Museums,”
“refresh one’s mind with the / appearance of what one has already valued.” Moore saw the
museum’s chief virtue to be its ability to be representative without being so comprehensive that
it delimits the possibilities for personal experiences – that it resists the comprehensiveness of “academic feeling” so as to best accommodate each visitor’s “enjoyment.”

Moore brings this sense of the Brooklyn Museum as a space that offers visitors contexts for exploring the local pleasures of object experiences into the opening lines of “A Carriage from Sweden,” when she draws upon a contrast between an idealized image of Sweden that the titular object evokes and the actual exhibition space in which her speaker encounters it:

They say there is a sweeter air
where it was made than we have here;
a Hamlet’s castle atmosphere.

At all events there is something in Brooklyn
something that makes me feel at home. (MMP 262)

Local knowledge comes into contact with the evocativeness of the unfamiliar in the poem’s thematic and prosodic registers, with the sense of the limits of acts of classification only confirmed in the deliberate confusion between Sweden and Hamlet’s Denmark. Set in the syllabic verse style that Moore experimented with in her early poetry and returned to in the work of her post-Dial years, “A Carriage from Sweden” follows a regular pattern of five-line stanzas with end-rhymed second and third lines; the fourth line of each stanza contains a variable number of syllables while every other line is comprised of eight. This stanzaic arrangement emblematizes the interplay between the local and the foreign, as it encases a familiar pattern, the

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22 In some ways, the Brooklyn Museum today still follows the principles Moore associates with it in “Brooklyn from Clinton Hill.” Among the more administratively and curatorially progressive of New York’s many art museums, the Brooklyn Museum’s long-term exhibition Connecting Cultures: A World in Brooklyn juxtaposes pieces from its collection with different regional and temporal histories in order to encourage cross-cultural thinking and interpretive possibilities that traditional museum taxonomies would typically preclude. Occupying the main gallery space on the Brooklyn Museum’s first floor, Connecting Cultures is the first exhibition one encounters when entering the museum, and it prepares visitors to exercise new ways of thinking when exploring the rest of the museum.
rhymed couplets in the indented second and third iambic tetrameter lines, within each stanza’s unrhymed first, fourth, and fifth lines. This enmeshment of the familiar and the unexpected performs poetically the speaker’s phenomenological experience of the carriage, which simultaneously augments her awareness of the differences between contemporary Brooklyn and a romanticized Sweden (as it is put into discourse by those who “say there is a sweeter air” there) and also opens a channel between these otherwise distant times and locales.

As in her earlier ekphrastic poems, “A Carriage from Sweden” suggests that the Swedish cart is worthy of its place in the museum not because it exemplifies academic judgments of aesthetic value, but rather because it attests to the pleasure its creators took in crafting “this country cart / that inner happiness made art.” That Moore’s speaker takes the carriage, finely made and decorative but still having once had a definite utilitarian purpose, as a testament to the handicraft of its builders recalls the concluding judgment of “When I Buy Pictures.” Much like the pleasing object that “must acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made it,” the carriage is emblazoned by a definitive mark of its production, “a surface that says / Made in Sweden: carts are my trade” (263). To prepare for composing “A Carriage in Sweden,” Moore read and took copious notes on Charles Holme’s *Peasant Art in Sweden, Lapland, and Iceland* (1910), an anthropological study of Nordic peasant craft that focuses on the intersections between fine craftsmanship and utilitarian purpose (Marianne Moore Papers I:01:29). Moore imports the methodological interpenetration of design and function in Holme’s analysis into “A Carriage from Sweden,” as her ekphrastic description hovers between meditations on its design and on its local purpose. Different epistemologies than those promoted by then predominant museological theory thus contour this aesthetic experience, all of which orbit around the personal: the
craftsmanship of its creators, the occasions of its use, and the experiences of the contemporary observer who sees the object in the Brooklyn Museum.

“A Carriage from Sweden” thematizes some of the conventions for ekphrastic poetry through its emphasis on the site-specificity of the aesthetic experience (“in Brooklyn”), the speaker’s detailed description of the carriage’s stylized components—

Seats, dashboards, and sides of smooth gourd-rind texture, a flowered step, swan-dart brake, and swirling crustacean-tailed equine amphibious creatures

that garnish the axle-tree!

—and the enthusiastic response that the aesthetics of the cart prompt in the speaker. This ekphrastic description indeed has a marked resemblance to that most celebrated object of poetic ekphrasis, Keats’s Grecian urn. Like the Romantic “unravish’d bride of quietness” (344), Moore’s Swedish cart is a highly stylized container that inspires a jouissant ekphrasis of energetic appreciation. We may notice some echoes of Keats’s apostrophe “O Attic shape! Fair attitude” in Moore’s celebration of the cart’s form, “What // a fine thing! What unannoying / romance!” but “A Carriage from Sweden” resists the synthesis of beauty, truth, and artistic permanence that defines the concluding moments of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (Keats 345; Moore 262). Instead, Moore’s poem emphasizes an aesthetic joy in objects not evidently intended for aesthetic appreciation.

Moore’s ekphrasis of the Swedish carriage is inextricable from the greater political context at the moment of its contemplation within the Brooklyn Museum, registering the transatlantic distance between the scene of the speaker’s aesthetic experience and Europe
currently embroiled in war. This distance that must have registered particularly intimately for
Moore at this time given that many of her friends were at or near the front during the Second
World War, including Sylvia Beach (who remained in Paris during the Nazi occupation) and H.
D. and Bryher (who chose to stay in their London flat during the Blitz). For while the speaker of
“A Carriage from Sweden” concedes that perhaps “no one may see this put-away / museum-
piece” at a moment in which art’s public significance was paled by more galvanizing political
interests, the cart nevertheless brings distant places into holistic relation in yet another
miscellany that exchanges an implied unity (here, of mapped geographic space) for imaginative
possibilities and unanticipated continuities:

in this city of freckled
integrity it is a vein

of resined straightness from north-wind
hardened Sweden’s once-opposed-to-
compromise archipelago
of rocks. Washington and Gustvaus

Adolphus, forgive our decay.

Though the speaker’s attention shifts from the poetic description of the cart itself to an elevated,
contemplative register, she nevertheless continues to write ekphrastically by framing this
contemplation in the language of visuality and materiality: “freckled,” “resined,” “hardened.”
The matrix of references here requires some unpacking, as it encapsulates the relationship
between past and present, local and global, and art and politics in Moore’s ekphrasis. First, the
aesthetic experience places the American museum visitor into relatively immediate relation with
Europe by enabling comparison across time and space, a pedagogical cross-cultural encounter that enables her to contrast the “freckled / integrity” of the American people and the “resined straightness” of the carriage, and of the general quality of Swedish workmanship. Furthermore, the aesthetic experience in the Brooklyn Museum provides a context for subtle cultural critique: the rectitude of two wartime leaders, the sixteenth-century Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus and the eighteenth-century American President George Washington, is contrasted with the “decay” of the modern moment, a world immersed in another destructive war. More acutely, this worry over the absence of such values in the context of World War II also levels a criticism of Sweden’s official policy of wartime neutrality, which led to the nation’s giving material support to the Axis Powers for a brief period of time during World War II. While Sweden’s neutrality allowed it to escape being part of the European Theater of Operations, a fate not spared other Scandinavian countries like Denmark and Norway, “A Carriage from Sweden” implies that the nation’s initial hesitation to support the Allies was an unfortunate contradiction of its status as being “once-opposed-to- / compromise.”

The ekphrasis of the well-crafted Swedish carriage thus radiates the social values Moore wants to see recultivated in artistic modernity: a firmness in conviction and a steadfast resistance to the impositions of external forces. The pedagogic value of the carriage from Sweden is not exclusively invested in its history, but instead enlivens the contemporary observer’s encounter with it. Moreover, the poem’s reference to Gustavus Adolphus returns these values back into the domain of art’s institutions: among Adolphus’s legacies was his role in cultivating Sweden’s cultural history and the development of its nationalistic Romantic art movement, a historical fact
that may explain his presence in a poem ostensibly about a museum experience. This image of an idealized, pre-modern Sweden thus incorporates the aesthetic only to entwine it with the observer’s personal values and the historical contexts of the carriage’s construction and modern reception. The ekphrasis is thus not predicated on the studied depersonalization of Kantian aesthetics, the determination of universal aesthetic value from the neutralized perspective of the connoisseur’s disinterested or “pure” gaze that inheres in Gilman’s museology, but rather embodies Moore’s desire for aesthetic experiences that encourage and confirm personal responses to museum objects. The immediate context of a war beyond the museum’s walls (and across the Atlantic) alters the aesthetic experience in ways for which aesthetic philosophies reliant on ideas of art’s autonomy from the social and political cannot account.

That the carriage establishes a “vein” between Sweden and America in the poem underlines the vitality of the relational exchange between museumgoer and “museum-piece” (262). If Moore believed, as she communicated in a letter to Bryher, that artistic representation can strike a balance between display and preservation “so long as you don’t do violence to the essence of a thing” (Selected Letters 174), here we see the instructive value this “essence” can provide the observing eye of the ekphrastic poet. Yet as Moore earlier expresses the matter in “Museums,” the things we see in such institutions can speak to personal pleasures as well as offer historical or artistic instruction. After exulting in the carriage’s design, Moore imagines even greater romance in its use by a Swedish woman:

And how beautiful, she

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23 Germain Bazin records that “On May 20, 1630 King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden issued an edict ordering historians and antiquarians to study ancient monuments and runic inscriptions; these instructions were renewed in 1643 and regional inspectors were changed with compiling inventories; military successes did not keep Gustavus Adolphus from interesting himself in these investigations into the life of early Swedish people … Romanticism in Sweden was firmly rooted in the exaltation of the protohistoric and popular culture of the nation” (235).
with the natural stoop of the
snowy egret, gray-eyed and straight-haired
for whom it should come to the door—
of whom it reminds me.

These lines provide a vivid instantiation of the “burning speculation” prompted by museum experience that Moore conveyed nearly three decades earlier in “Museums.” Standing in front of the Swedish cart, Moore’s speaker is thrust into reveries of the imagination, projecting a vision of an idyllic and idealized Sweden where and when this carriage would be put to use. The poem provides no space for the museum’s routines of cultural instruction, which would conventionally dictate information about the history of the carriage, its creation, or its owners. Instead, “A Carriage from Sweden” places a primacy on the private and imaginative excursions an individual visitor like Moore’s poetic speaker may be able to embark on when visiting a museum, provocatively punctuated by the origins of this image – “me.”

“A Carriage from Sweden” is ostensibly a poem grounded in a material aesthetic experience, but Moore’s ekphrastic contemplation of the carriage suspends a series of dualisms, including literary fiction/real experience, romance/war, Brooklyn/Sweden, and high art/peasant craft. The poem does not simply dissolve these binaries, however, but rather exploits their dissolution as a context for producing social commentary through aesthetic contemplation, yet another dualism the poem ambivalently suspends. In the poem, a critique of execrable contemporary history and the description of a romantic episode are both derived from the visitor’s aesthetic experience, signifying that poetic material can be cultivated both in and beyond the artistic field and its sustaining hierarchies, those that invest interpretive authority in
the institution and the “pure gaze.” The miscellany of affective responses the speaker experiences and expresses in her ekphrasis locates aesthetic meaning in acts of encountering and interpreting an exhibited museum object, threaded both with ideas of the museum as a space for personal “enjoyment” and an irreverence towards the traditional aesthetic hierarchies that certain museological theories have tended to maintain.

For Moore, making ekphrasis modern entailed folding into her poetics the contemporary institutions, aesthetic philosophies, and collected objects of an early twentieth-century art world largely organized around the museum. In “Museums” and “When I Buy Pictures,” she reconstitutes ekphrasis by expanding its traditional representational expectations and possibilities to depict the accumulation and serial presentation of objects in the ekphrastic text, while in “In the Days of Prismatic Color” ekphrastic descriptions of aesthetic forms are juxtaposed against the prevailing institutional values of the modern art world. “A Carriage from Sweden” marks a natural progression from these earlier rearticulations of ekphrasis, manipulating the formal conventions of this genre to connect the moment of aesthetic experience to the political conditions of modernity. While Moore’s innovations in the poetics of ekphrasis recall the concept of the museum as a democratic, community space that was being then refined in the theory of John Cotton Dana and in new American museums and exhibition strategies, for another of Moore’s contemporaries the public art museum was instead seen to disable a sense of community identity and, consequently, the kind of sustained aesthetic contemplation that ekphrastic poetry requires. This poet is Siegfried Sassoon, the British First World veteran who, in his ekphrastic verse of the interwar period, associates museum culture squarely with the “academic feeling” that Moore assigns elsewhere. However, as much as his ekphrastic poetry
outwardly critiques the museum as a space so saturated with bourgeois forms of cultural capital that it becomes impossible to see (and write poetry about) art clearly, the museum also functioned for Sassoon as a productive site for refining his poetic and political identity during the 1920s.
Chapter 3

Museum Politics: Sassoon’s *Satirical Poems*

Siegfried Sassoon was moved by the sight of a lock of John Keats’s hair, a material trace of his poetic heritage seen by the poet in archival holdings far from home. While staying in New York City in the winter of 1920, in the midst of a rare lecture tour through the Eastern and Midwestern United States, the British poet reported back to his friend Sir Edward Marsh about a visit to the Morgan Library and Museum: “I have spent some happy hours in the Pierpont Morgan Library [as it was then known], when they give me the run of the M.S.S. + I gloat over locks of Keats’ hair, + letters from Shelley to Byron, etc.” For this ardent devotee of the Romantic Period and of genteel English poetic traditions in general, the manuscripts and ephemera in the Morgan’s holdings elicited his enthusiasm; indeed, as his biographer Max Egremont notes, Sassoon even reported that the sight of Keats’s last epistle to his lover Fanny Brawne “made [him] cry” (245). The affective response elicited in the poet’s encounter with these historical artifacts attests to a paradox at the heart of Sassoon’s literary work during the 1920s: while Sassoon’s literary reputation was forged through his rebellious anti-war poetry, and he was at this moment in the midst of a decade-long flirtation with left-leaning politics, the episode in the Morgan suggests that Sassoon retained a not insignificant attachment to his English poetic heritage. His contact with traces of literary history in the Morgan moves him in a manner redolent of the sublimity of aesthetic experience in the writing of those very authors whose ephemera he was then examining: it inheres in and draws on the capacity to be affected vertiginously, for the local aesthetic experience to broaden out to heightened emotional reception. Sassoon’s institutional encounter with traces of Keats and his circle subtly, likely unintentionally, but certainly revealingly encodes an aesthetic disposition characteristic of the
poetic predecessor, recalling Keats’s poetic expressions of “dizzy pain” and the “gentle luxury to weep” in his own ode to museum experience, “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” (1818, ll. 11, 6).

However, the particular conditions for Sassoon’s museum going in the Morgan Library are just as indicative of tensions between his investments in received aesthetic traditions and the conditions for receiving such traditions in cultural institutions. The context of Sassoon’s visit to the Morgan Library was rather exceptional, reflective not as much of the increasingly public nature of twentieth-century museum culture as of older traditions of collection and display in the private domains of wealthy collectors. Although today one may pay an admission fee to patronize the Morgan Library and see the art and rare books collection of American banker and financier J. P. Morgan, at the time of Sassoon’s visit the Morgan was not yet a public institution; Sassoon’s visit was arranged through a friend’s contact with the Morgan’s then head librarian and later director, Belle de Costa Green, and occurred in the relative seclusion of an edifice not yet thronged by the patrons that today pass through its halls.

Throughout his writing career, Sassoon regularly composed ekphrastic poems after both historical and contemporary aesthetic objects, objects that Sassoon often sets within museums and galleries; in this poetry, it is the relatively hermetic space for aesthetic experience that he found in the Morgan Library that his speakers seek—and fail—to reproduce in public art museums. Although in the Morgan Sassoon expresses pleasure in the prolonged contemplation of Keatsean ephemera, a contemplation that moves him to a heightened state of aesthetic sensation, this remains a deeply desired but impossible situation in Sassoon’s ekphrastic depictions of art experience in the modern museum. In these poems, his ekphrastic speakers are constrained by the museums and galleries of a modern art world that, in being congested by other bodies, objects, and high cultural signs, stifles the possibilities for having any resonant aesthetic
experience – and, thus, to recover any possible material for a traditional ekphrastic poem in the style of his poetic ancestors.

Tensions between Sassoon’s desires for a sustained, lyric contemplation of an art object and the museums that frustrate such desire shape his ekphrastic poetry of the 1920s and make it a novel part of the larger story of modernist ekphrasis. In the poems of Michael Field and Moore, as the previous two chapters have shown, the art museum emerges as a site that at once tends to reify prevailing social ideologies but yet offers space for the revaluation and revision of these norms through ekphrastic writing. Although Sassoon adopts a comparably critical orientation towards museum culture in his ekphrastic poetry, his work rests liminally—and in certain ways uneasily—alongside what I have been tracing as modernist formal innovation in ekphrastic poetics. The writers examined thus far contest the museum’s practices of collecting, defining, and displaying cultures through the deformation of such lyric ekphrastic tropes as the coherent lyric subject, the protracted contemplation of a single aesthetic object, and the aspiration for an experience that transcends the banalities of modern life. In Sassoon’s ekphrastic poetry, however, such tropes are less points of radical departure, as they were for Field and Moore, than the conditions for art experience his speakers seek to reclaim as they navigate institutional modernity. Sassoon denatures the possibilities for lyric ekphrasis in the early modern museum not primarily through formal modification—such as Field’s challenge of coherent authorship and Moore’s expansion of the ekphrastic poem into a gallery—but rather through the reiteration of the formal and tropic expectations of lyric ekphrasis in inhospitable institutional climates. The tensions between the ekphrastic tropes Sassoon deploys and the museums that constrain them reveal the discordance of established modes of ekphrastic writing with the contexts for seeing art in twentieth-century public museums. It also demonstrates that innovations in ekphrasis during
this time did not singularly take the form of radical reconstitution commonly associated with modernism, but that the recapitulation and retrenchment of formalist poetics offered modern poets comparably productive contexts for institutional critique.

For Bradley and Cooper, revaluations of the ekphrastic subject turn aesthetic sight into song; for Moore, aesthetic experiences are curated and repackaged into imagined object collections. Sassoon, by contrast, retains the central prerogatives of lyric ekphrasis in his own poetic representations of works of art, but does so metaleptically, to gesture towards the irreconcilability of these prerogatives with the modern conditions for seeing art in museums. This gesture, though not productive of the radical formal innovation that I locate in the poetry of Field and Moore, nevertheless inscribes an equivalent, if equivocal, message: that in cultural modernity, the act of contemplating established art objects—and the formal practices for composing such contemplative ekphrastic verse—is inseparable from the institutional spaces of their exhibition and display, spaces that seem tendentially unreceptive to such sustained contemplation. While the poets previously discussed evade an ekphrastic sublime altogether by developing local, site-specific strategies for cultivating poetic meaning from aesthetic experience, Sassoon takes as primary subject for his ekphrastic poems the institutional conditions that prohibit this kind of aesthetic experience in the museum. Why and how Sassoon deems lyric ekphrasis incompatible with the conditions for museological display can be best understood in relation to the hierarchical social and political ideologies that give shape to modern museum culture, features which I have been tracing throughout this project. For Sassoon, the museum’s oversaturation with bourgeois forms of cultural capital and congestion with indifferent masses of other people systematically alienate individual observers—including his poetic speakers—from the modes of direct, sustained aesthetic contemplation that constitute lyric ekphrasis. Instead, his
speakers’ inabilities to truly see the art on display morphs into a critical gaze directed at a range of actors in the art world—from museum curators and administrators to wealthy patrons and an obedient haute bourgeois class of art appreciators—who, in their totality, turn art experience into an impersonal ritual of enlightened citizenship.

I focus this chapter primarily on a collection of Sassoon’s verse that was in many ways the culmination of a ten years’ long aesthetic and political agenda of contesting British polite society: *Satirical Poems* (1926), a volume of thirty-two verse invectives against British institutions, cultural rituals, and hierarchical social and political ideologies. At the time, Sassoon was enjoying minor celebrity status in political circles as a pacifist and liberal intellectual, a reputation made by the 1916-17 publication of war poems that depict the grim conditions on the Western Front and the valor of combatants on either side of the conflict, as well as by the circulation of his sensational anti-war statement “Finished with the War—A Soldier’s Declaration,” which was read aloud in the House of Commons and published in *The London Times*. Following the war, Sassoon briefly flirted with (though never fully committed to) the causes of the British left, speaking at a number of Labour Party rallies and public events, campaigning in support of Labour representative Sir Philip Snowden’s 1918 bid for reelection to Parliament, joining the staff of the Labour-leaning *Daily Herald* as literary editor, and publishing his anti-nationalist satirical poetry in popular periodicals. In *Satirical Poems*, Sassoon’s poetic speakers fulminate against an expansive roster of British social and cultural institutions and characteristic personalities, including the royal family, the government, aristocrats, military bureaucrats, the popular press, cricketers, foxhunters, modern poets, and theatergoers. Also among the volume’s targets, and most central to my own purposes, are national public art museums and the poetic conventions available for engaging objects in their collections.
The public art museum is, of course, a natural site for satire for a book oriented towards critiquing British bourgeois cultural rituals and institutions. Though many of the national art museums founded across the nineteenth century were at least partially intended to reflect a general national culture, the museum’s role in reifying social stratification was not lost on working-class political movements throughout the “Museum Age” and into the twentieth century. Indeed, almost from the moment these institutions first emerged in the British cultural landscape, fears circulated that public galleries would be targeted for destruction by the unruly mob – ironically so, given the origins of the public art museum in the political upheaval of the French Revolution. This anxiety resulted in the reactionary policing of the museum’s doors during moments of political unrest: for instance, during the Gordon Riots of 1780 and Chartist march to Parliament in 1848, the British Museum was diligently guarded in anticipation of social revolution that would, in reality, not arrive. In the early twentieth century, however, British museums did become sites for protest for various social causes, including for the Suffragettes (including Mary Richardson’s infamous 1914 attack on Velasquez’s *Rokeby Jesus* in the National Gallery) and working-class groups. As Suzanne MacLeod notes, the museum “was a legitimate and important site for protest” in the early twentieth century “due to its location and identity as a universally accessible public space, centrally placed within the spatial networks of the urban landscape. Here, powerful political protests could be made due to the nature of the public art museum as a key site for male middle class identity and authority and for the civilized values it claimed to uphold” (54). In September 1921, to take an instance of museum protest closest to Sassoon’s own political causes, the communist-inspired National Unemployed Workers’ Committee Movement—a group comprised predominantly of World War I veterans greeted with mass unemployment following war’s end—occupied the Walker Art Gallery in
working class Liverpool as part of a public demonstration that culminated in violent police intervention.

These instances of political agitation in museums locate Sassoon’s satires of bourgeois museum-going within a broader association of the art museum with class hegemony among the twentieth-century British left. Yet Sassoon’s antagonistic relationship to museums and establishment art during the 1920s, at the moment in which he was composing his social satires, was complicated by his own personal and familial histories and the paradoxical nature of his own political beliefs. Sassoon personally struggled to reconcile his own class privileges—including his upbringing in rural Kent, the modest fortune he inherited from his father, his fondness for foxhunting and cricket matches, and a social circle comprising aesthetes and conservative politicians—with his nascent political reputation as anti-bourgeois populist, a struggle reflected in the contradictions in his position towards the art museum.¹ The institutionalization of art was significant to Sassoon not least because both sides of his family—the paternal Sassoons and maternal Thornycrofts (with whom he more closely identified)—were deeply involved in establishment art cultures in the English colonies and metropole respectively. His paternal grandfather David Sassoon subsidized numerous public institutions and monuments, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, Bombay (renamed in 1975 as the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum); his maternal grandfather Thomas Thornycroft and uncle Hamo Thornycroft

¹ For instance, in a diary entry written shortly after he began working at the Daily Herald, Sassoon writes that he “cannot smell any crisis in 1921. I can imagine a revolution rushing down Whitehall, but I should probably read about it on the front-page of the Herald, get up at 12.30, and drift down to lunch at the Reform by a side-route without so much as seeing the flutter of a red flag … My nine months on the Daily Herald seem more remote than Karl Marx working in the British Museum library” (Diaries 30). Sassoon here identifies with emancipatory politics but, even in this fantasy scenario, expresses phenomenological distance from direct participation: the people’s revolution is textual (“on the front-page of the Herald”), he can “imagine” it and “read” of it but not “smell it,” and he envisions taking a “side-road” to the center of revolutionary activity. Collective politics did not effortlessly suit a man who carefully guarded his privacy—including the true nature of his wealth, his homosexuality, and a great portion of his creative work—and who was so uneasy about his public image.
both exhibited work in Westminster Hall and the House of Parliament; his mother, Theresa Thornycroft, studied painting under Ford Maddox Brown and at the Royal Academy; and his uncle Hamo Thornycroft was a prominent figure in the British “new sculpture” movement.\footnote{One of the strengths of Max Egremont’s 2005 biography of Siegfried Sassoon is his thorough examination of the history of the Thornycroft family; my present discussion of their engagements with art institutions is deeply indebted to his work. See Egremont 5-7.}

Sassoon himself was an ardent patron of museums and galleries throughout his life and an amateur watercolorist who regularly painted English pastoral scenes; however, he circulated his visual work mostly among his closest friends and it largely remains in private collections today, an older, aristocratic model of coterie circulation.\footnote{For full color reproductions of a number of Sassoon’s paintings, many of which are reproduced from auction catalogues, see: http://siegfried-sassoon.firstworldwarrelics.co.uk/html/sassoons_art.html} Even during the duration of his participation in the Labour Party, he moved for the most part in a social circle of wealthy aesthetes, art connoisseurs, and art patrons, including Sir Edward Marsh, Edith and Osbert Sitwell, Edmund Gosse, Stephen Tennett, Glen Byam Shaw, and Lady Ottoline Morrell.

The tensions between Sassoon’s evident ties to high art cultures and his developing socialist politics come to the forefront in a sequence of four poems set in museums and galleries in Satirical Poems—“In the National Gallery,” “The London Museum,” “In the Turner Rooms,” and “On Some Portraits by Sargent”—in which his poetic speakers endeavor, and roundly fail, to have the kinds of meaningful aesthetic experiences that are conventionally the focus of ekphrastic poetry. In doing so, these poems each satirize the cultural capital of the public art museum and its role in the symbolic production of British national culture. Sassoon’s then inchoate and soon abandoned personal political philosophy—Satirical Poems would be his final collection with any sustained political commentary, and he retired from public life not long after its publication—entwine in his satires of museum cultures with his broader investment in high artistic traditions; as a result, Sassoon’s engagements with the museum are at once prescriptive
of how individuals ought to experience art and acutely cynical about the possibilities for fostering this mode of art perception in the modern museum. In the process, Sassoon takes the sustained ekphrastic contemplation of the art object as emblematic of the ideal conditions for aesthetic experience that have been lost to institutional modernity. Sassoon’s seemingly paradoxical attachment to bourgeois cultural traditions and distrust of conservative social norms suggests that, against precedents of isolating Sassoon’s post-war work from literary modernism, his *Satirical Poems* participates in a broader modernist critique of the public art museum.

I. Poetic Satire in and of the Museum

As I hope will seem evident at this point of “Beyond the Frame,” the conventions of ekphrasis provided a number of modernist poets with an established (if not entirely stable) literary context for interrogating the exhibitionary practices of museums of art. However, the ways in which Sassoon places the particular prerogatives of lyric ekphrastic poetry—from the transcendent status of the art object to the desire for a sustained, ethereal contemplation of it—positions his work rather uniquely in relation to the traditions of modernist ekphrasis, indicative of the importance of Romantic verse traditions to his aesthetic sensibility. Sassoon’s satirical poems indeed engage with a concept that was formative to nineteenth-century lyric ekphrasis and instrumental to its turn-of-the-century generic codification: that of the speaker’s private, imaginative engagement with an art object invested with significance beyond the quotidian, material world.\(^4\) Sassoon’s ekphrases employ the typical formal conventions and expressive content of this lyric paradigm yet cast doubt on its compatibility with the ways of seeing and interpreting art that were possible in the public art institutions of the early twentieth century,

\(^4\) See, e.g., chapter 3 in Heffernan and chapter 2 in Cheeke.
attending instead to the means through which the institutionalization of art and aesthetic experience now constrain the lyric scene of a sublime engagement with the work of art.

In keeping with Sassoon’s investment in socialist politics throughout the 1920s and as expressed throughout *Satirical Poems*, his satirical ekphrases call attention to the ways in which the museum and its cultural capital paradoxically impedes its patrons from having any meaningful experiences with art objects in its collection. In doing so, Sassoon echoes the sense of unbelonging that many patrons—and particularly middle- and working-class visitors—often express feeling in art museums. His ekphrastic speakers often seem incapable of gaining any kind of phenomenological traction for their aesthetic experiences in the museum, and instead convey the sense that the institution disables their abilities to elicit any meaningful poetic material from the art on display. When patronizing a museum of art, one can hardly fail to notice what Sassoon calls the “parenthetic matter” of museum going: the proliferation of objects, crowds, and information that shape the perception of any individual art object on display. However, while sensitive to the experiences of the masses, these poems are ultimately more deeply invested in the possibilities for reclaiming private, isolated aesthetic experiences *despite* the ever-present museum public. This contradiction points to an irresolvable dialectic at the core of Sassoon’s ekphrastic practices: the museums that make art publicly available for contemplation constrain ekphrasis due to these very conditions of public exhibition. Each of Sassoon’s ekphrastic speakers—often indiscernible from the poet himself, although also distinct personae who navigate institutional spaces—express aversion towards the ways in which the museological presentation of art clutters aesthetic experiences by placing individual art objects

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5 On the class experience of the museum, see Bourdieu and Darbel 131-141, particularly Tables A3.1-4, 3.7, and 3.8. Their findings indicate that visitors of the middle-class and with moderate art education most prefer didactic companions to their museum visits, including explanatory panels, guided tours, and arrows indicating advised paths through the museum space, to communicate aesthetic value and foster for them a more educative museum visiting experience.
not only among a profusion of other objects, but also within crowds of other people. Although ekphrasis manifests itself as a spatial poetic practice in these poems, it does so as a practice that is seemingly allergic to actual space: representations of art objects are glancing and imbedded within the broader museum culture that is subjected to critique; we follow Sassoon’s speakers as they navigate art institutions and grapple with their cultural ideologies, desiring an experience of art than can transport them to an aesthetic realm beyond the public institution. The seeming inconsistency between Sassoon’s politics of the interwar period with the substance of Satirical Poems has vexed critics of his work who, in the rare instances that they do discuss this collection, cursorily dismiss it as a failure in comparison to the war poetry of the previous decade precisely because the tensions in its politics are taken to be signs of its unworthiness of critical interest.\(^6\)

Although the facts of his biography make evident his immersion in high culture and establishment artistic traditions, Sassoon’s private writings indicate that he nevertheless thought critically about the interconnectedness of dispositions of art appreciation and class and educational status. While on a museum-intensive tour of Italy and France in 1922 with his friend

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\(^6\) Michael Thorpe, for instance, charges Sassoon with lacking any viable poetic subject matter after his discharge from the war, that since “the cut-and-dried issues of the War were no more … almost as soon as he turns his famous artillery upon privilege and plutocracy and bourgeois manners, his sights begin to blur” (51). More recently, Stanford Sternlicht writes of Satirical Poems that “for the most part, [Sassoon] failed. His heart wasn’t in it” (67), a notion that Moeyes, curiously, echoes verbatim: “Sassoon may have attempted to cast himself in the role of the socialist satirist taking a critical view of the upper middle-class world from the inside … ultimately that was a role that did not suit him at all. His heart was not in it” (105, emphasis mine). In a recent monograph on Sassoon’s interwar writing, Robert Hemmings only refers to Satirical Poems once, and with a sidelong glance at that, as the poet’s “brief post-First World War foray into satirical social commentary” (23). Still, I find these diagnoses to be unsatisfactory partly because of the tacit assumptions they inhere: that the value of Satirical Poetry is contingent on the coherence of its political message and that authenticity of voice is a necessary precondition to critical analysis. Appraisals such as these largely internalize the logic that bolstered the commercial success of Sassoon’s war poetry as authentic expressions of wartime traumas, and turn this logic into an evaluative standard. Thorpe’s recourse to a militaristic metaphor (“famous artillery”) to characterize what he takes to be Sassoon’s more successful poetry is revealing of this penchant, as is Sternlicht’s and Moeyes’s claim of authenticity of voice as determinative of literary value.
and then lover Prince Phillip of Hesse, the grandson of German Emperor Frederick III, he expresses aversion to the young nobleman’s behavior in museums, in terms that anticipate Bourdieu’s sociological work on just this topic:

P’s mind is extremely rigid for a young man. He does not easily readjust his opinions … his artistic tastes and admirations derive mainly from the training he received from his father (he acknowledges the indebtedness). In fact P. is an example of conventional culture. He has had the right things imposed on him from his boyhood … Also he is impervious to any arguments. He doesn’t even pretend to be interested in the other side of a discussion on politics or art. He merely listens and then produces his own stereotyped phrases without reference to anything that has been advanced by the other side. … I am afraid this intellectual rigidity will develop into ossification, unless something extraordinary occurs to wake him up. (Sassoon, Diaries 278, emphases in original)

Among the flaws Sassoon identifies in his companion, whom he associates with bourgeois cultural conservatism (“an example of conventional culture”), are his uncritical reliance on received aesthetic discourse (“the training he received from his father”), resistance to intellectual exchange (“impervious to any arguments”), and an “intellectual rigidity” that immunizes him from any private or personal response to the art on display. Tacit in, but integral to, the criticism of Hesse is the sense that the privileges of class and education—particularly through his regular exposure to art and training in art discourse, and the cultural competency these experiences enable—endowed him with a particular aesthetic disposition that, according to Sassoon, effectively restrains him from having meaningful experiences in the museum, and which is (again in Sassoon’s framing) an inevitable outcome of his social class.
These intersections among artistic competence, social class, and the cultural practice of museum going are at the center of Sassoon’s ekphrastic poems. Given the narrowness of Sassoon’s representation in the literary canon today, and his virtual exclusion from the modernist canon (even after the numerous canon revisions carried out under the banner of the New Modernist Studies), he may seem an unlikely subject for what this project has examined as modernist revaluations of inherited generic practices for composing poetry about visual art. Sassoon’s reliance on received poetic forms, archaic language, and regular meter and rhyme quite discernibly jar with the anticipated formal innovativeness of modernist poetics, and he published work in the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies that were intended to conserve genteel English poetic traditions against iconoclastic modernist provocations. The status of Sassoon’s *oeuvre* in criticism today hinges largely on its incommensurability with the modernist literature that was taken as an arbiter of literary value in mid-century canon formation. Indeed, though Sassoon wrote prolifically until his death in 1967, producing several volumes of poetry, memoirs, autobiographical fiction, and a biography of nineteenth-century poet George Meredith, his First World War poems remain the portion of his work almost exclusively represented in anthologies and discussed in criticism today – poetry that, in its ideational rejection of aesthetic and political givens, was and remains his only work that is compatible with traditional understandings of modernism. Yet despite dissimilarities in style and method, in *Satirical Poems* Sassoon captures a concept at the heart of modernist ekphrasis: that the ekphrastic poet must necessarily negotiate the conditions of the public display of art in modern museums and

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7 For Robert Hemmings, the encampment of critical interest in Sassoon’s war years seems almost conspiratorial, a “perception tacitly accepted … that Sassoon’s historical and cultural relevance touches the First World War only” (15); Brooke Allen similarly comments that while “Sassoon lived a very long life … he remains frozen, for posterity, somewhere in his late twenties, as an infantry officer in the trenches of the Western Front” (15).
galleries—including the interpretive possibilities these institutions condition, and those which they foreclose—in order to recover any usable poetic material from the museum experience.

Sassoon’s interests in the standard practices and priorities of lyric ekphrasis were deeply rooted in his poetic sensibility. Not only was he an avid reader of the poetry of British Romanticism, the literary period around which the conventions of lyric ekphrasis were first programmatically shaped in the early twentieth century, but in a letter to his mother written in his teens (undated but likely from 1905 or ’06) Sassoon included a pen-and-ink sketch of a pastoral scene and an ekphrasis of it that is among the earliest extant pieces of his juvenilia. The sketch of a country road depicts two cyclists riding down along path while a ploughman works on a fence at roadside; two upright horses are led along a path on the far right side while another horse has toppled over in the bottom-left corner. Titled “For ‘A Pastoral by Petroliano,’” the poem identifies “two oil-environed spots” as causing this horse’s plight:

This winter afternoon is loud with moan
Of clamoring wheels; the hammer that is past
Leaves the swart ploughman gaping + aghast
As though some luminous evasive vision shown;
Now, when the tumult wears away at last,
Shush, … speak no blasphemous epithet nor groan
To see the palpitant hairy hoofs upthrown
And what was once a hen toward chaos cast. (Sassoon to Teresa Sassoon, c. 1905/6)

That English poetic traditions were evidently on Sassoon’s mind is indicated in his combining ekphrasis with another poetic form prominent in English letters, the pastoral, and in the outrageously prolix language that parodies the very kinds of genteel, pastoral poetics that would
soon be rehabilitated in the Georgian anthologies (“palpitant hairy hoofs upthrown”). Yet even in this private poem playfully rooted in received verse forms, Sassoon engages with the global reach of the modern art world: by giving the presudo-Italianate name “Petroliano” to the imagined artist of this tumultuous pastoral and anti-pastoral, machine in the garden scene, he draws on the cultural capital of Italian Renaissance painting while, of course, punning on the oil slick at the road’s center. Given that both painting and poem—the two constitutive elements of ekphrasis—were produced in the space of a private letter, and that there are no indications of one inspiring the other, the letter provides some insight into just what ekphrasis meant in Sassoon’s early creative practices: an art form predicated on the verbal description of a visual art object that, if not perfectly dispositive or mimetic, nevertheless rather faithfully transfers ideas, images, and themes across media. The poem is not interrogative of the painting, as were the ekphrastic poems of the Michael Fields, nor is it a poetic reimagining that departs from its visual source material, as is typical in poems by Moore; rather, Sassoon fashions this poem in a way continuous with the traditions of lyric ekphrasis, eliciting aesthetic meaning in the unmediated transfer of inter-medial energies in a relatively hermetic, imaginative space.

This notion of a hermetic symmetry between poem and image later becomes the ideal ekphrastic scenario that Sassoon’s poetic speakers seek, and fail, to cultivate in public art museums. In “For ‘A Pastoral by Petroliano’” the shared authorship of picture and poem and the contained space of the private letter permit the free interchange between visual and verbal texts; by the time of Satirical Poems this framework is made incompatible with the actual and symbolic spaces of museum culture. Most of the poems in Satirical Poems build upon a formula: Sassoon’s speaker critiques an event, cultural institution, or social convention from which he is distant enough to launch a disinterested critique yet with which he is inextricably involved. The
satirical content is triangulated through the relations among the alienated poetic speaker, an intellectually passive mass public, and bourgeois cultural codes, ethics, and practices that coerce the public into such passivity. Sassoon’s satires of museum culture focus on a number of its sustaining elements, elements that constrain his poetic speakers’—and the museum’s public writ large—experience of exhibited art: museum display technologies and the selectivity of museum curation, the disinterested aesthetic responses that exhibited collections are presented to elicit, and the portion of the public who visit the museum (or so the logic of Sassoon’s satirical poems runs) to demonstrate their class status. The political work of these poems is inscribed in a dialectic between ingrained poetic expectations and the institutionalization of art in museums, an arrangement that as much provides Sassoon space to interrogate the status of ekphrastic poetics in cultural modernity as it complicates the volume’s socialist commentary.

This relationship among poet, public, and institution structures “In the National Gallery,” the first ekphrasis of *Satirical Poems*. “In the National Gallery” is a uniquely structured sonnet, as it contains three turns instead of the typical two, with the first volta elevated to the sixth line from the conventional eighth, and a tercet punctuating its argument instead of the closing couplet of the English sonnet. As discussed in Chapter One, the sonnet was a favored formal arrangement for ekphrasis among Romantic poets, and Sassoon’s manipulation of this set-piece immediately signals his poem’s at once mimetic and critical relation to the expectations of lyric ekphrasis. “In the National Gallery” begins with its speaker immersed in an act of attentive looking while patronizing the museum named in its title, but his gaze is fixed not on the art on display but on the behaviors of his fellow patrons.

Faces irresolute and unperplexed,

Unspeculative faces, bored and weak,
Cruise past each patient victory of technique
Dimly desiring to enjoy the next
Yet never finding what they seem to seek.

Here blooms, recedes, and glows before their eyes
A quintessential world preserved in paint,
Calm vistas of long-vanished Paradise,
And ripe remembrances of sage and saint;
The immortality of changeless skies,
And all bright legendries of Time’s creation . . .

Yet I observe no gestures of surprise
From those who straggle in to patronize
The Art Collection of the English Nation. (SSCP 149, ellipses in original)

The poem’s setting in the National Gallery is appropriate to the social commentary made throughout *Satirical Poems*. A public art museum in Trafalgar Square comprising “The Art Collection of the English Nation,” the National Gallery has since its effective founding in 1824 been at the center of debates on the presence and continuation of a national English culture and on how the acquisition, organization, and presentation of disparate cultural materials can establish and maintain it. The founding intention of the National Gallery was to make available a robust collection of European paintings, many of them donated from private collections, in order to elevate public taste, improve national education, and strengthen the general national culture. Sir George Beaumont, one of the wealthy donors whose bequest was foundational to the National Gallery’s early collection, described the museum’s purpose as promoting the aesthetic
education and behavioral development of the British public, particularly the middle and lower classes who have far occasions to see such valuable objects:

By easy access to such works of art the public taste must improve, which I think the grand desideratum … I think the public already begin to feel works of art are not merely toys for connoisseurs, but solid objects of concern for the nation; and those who consider it in the narrowest point of view will perceive that works of high excellence pay ample interest for the money they cost. (qtd. in *The Emergence of the Modern Museum* 74, emphasis mine)

Beaumont here articulates one of the crucial, though usually silent, discourses subtending the formation of public art museums throughout nineteenth-century Europe, which Sassoon grapples with in *Satirical Poems*: the museum’s cultivation of public taste fortifies national interests and industry by producing educated and enlightened citizens able to appreciate the aesthetic objects that have been socially legitimated as beautiful and valuable. The frequent Parliamentary debates surrounding the most effective organizational and exhibitionary methods for the National Gallery’s collection exemplify the faith placed in museological practice to intellectually and morally enrich its public. Christopher Whitehead notes of these debates that, “[u]nlike the generic educated frequenter of private collections, the new public was seen to require the rudiments of a chronological history of art as an intellectual framework for the exercise of taste and as a vehicle for the apprehension of quality in a work of art. A chronological and scholastic structure in the presentation of paintings formed … an instrument for their comprehension” (7). The historiographical organization that was eventually selected for the National Gallery served the educative purpose of exposing patrons to a chronological narrative of the formal development of art history that suggested a continuous evolution of
achievement from antiquity through the present moment. However, as a number of Museum Studies scholars more recently posit, this organizational practice also risks constraining the experiential possibilities of the museum visit by circumscribing the visitor’s attention to an art object’s form rather than its content and encoding art appreciation as one’s ability to comprehend the chronological development of art history (with emphasis on such objective information as the identity of the artist, the influences on his work, artistic schools, and national traditions).\(^8\)

Sassoon’s poetic speaker confronts the cultural capital of this mode of museum going in “In the National Gallery,” in which his poetic speaker places the idiosyncrasy of aesthetic experience and the phenomenal message conveyed by artworks—two attributes coextensive with Romantic ideologies of aesthetic expression and reception—in tension with museological rituals of disinterested appreciation. The impassiveness that Sassoon’s speaker critiques among the museum-goers—“irresolute,” “unperplexed,” unspeculative”—corresponds to the learned, disinterested, and unimaginative disposition that Sassoon suggests delimited his companion Hesse’s experience in European museums, as discussed above. Moreover, the poem’s emphasis on the apathy of this undifferentiated, homogenous public anticipates Duncan and Wallach’s influential argument that the museum space encodes performative scripts that lead visitors to encounter and enact dominant social beliefs and values: “by performing the ritual of walking through the museum, the visitor is prompted to enact and thereby internalize the values and beliefs written into architectural script … it is meant to impress upon those who use or pass through it society’s most revered beliefs and values” (450-1, 449).\(^9\) Sassoon’s “In the National

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\(^8\) See, e.g., Duncan 25; Hooper-Greenhill 68; Bennett 46-7.

\(^9\) Duncan and Wallach also echo the poetic argument made in “In the National Gallery” when they write of the typical museum-goers’ neglect of the contemplation of individual objects: “The museum experience is usually described in terms of artistic contemplation. Yet … the average visitor comes to the museum with no fixed purpose or perspective and usually looks over the entire collection rather than focusing on individual works” (448).
Gallery” follows from a similar point, that the museum patrons’ tepid and routinized experiences of the museum space disable any possibilities for meaningful engagement with the art on display and, implicitly, any understanding of its potential significance to their own lives. The absent term here is the personal resonance of aesthetic experience: the observer’s sustained engagement with an individual work of art, the very staging for ekphrastic poetry. Here, instead, the patrons’ experiences are perfunctory, devotional, and detached from any manageable objective: they wander, but “never find what they seem to seek.” That the object of the visit is what they “seem to seek” implies indeterminate motivations for the patrons’ museum-going or the unknowability of these motives, and further that the impetus to visit the institution and experience its treasures is primarily social, rather than personal. This depiction resonates with what Bourdieu terms the “aesthetic disposition,” the socially distinguished and institutionally sanctioned mode of art appreciation that negates the value of any aesthetic response that emerges from the particular backgrounds, identities, or experiences of the interpreter.10 “In the National Gallery” may be critical of the museum’s public, but ultimately targets this ingrained aesthetic disposition and the cultural capital invested in it. The designation of the National Gallery in the poem’s concluding triplet as “The Art Collection of the English Nation”—and not, say, of the English People—suggests that although this museum was by design a space maintained by and for its use by the English public, in practice, it is saturated with class signifiers and ideologies of art experience that dovetail with cultural orthodoxy.11 Though ostensibly about the learned impassiveness of the

10 Bourdieu defines the aesthetic disposition as “the only socially accepted ‘right’ way of approaching the objects socially designated as works of art, that is, as both demanding and deserving to be approached with a specifically aesthetic intention capable of recognizing and constituting them as works of art” (Distinction 29).

11 On the intersections of gallery exhibition strategies and the fields of museum curation and administration with dominant state ideologies and interests, see Bennett; and Duncan and Wallach 449-452. Bennett draws from Foucault and Gramsci to argue that the exhibitionary complex of nineteenth-century British museums deprivatizes the individual body by creating a space within which the visitor
British public, “In the National Gallery” also begins to establish the terms essential to Sassoon’s ekphrastic poetics in *Satirical Poems*: that the cultural politics of art’s institutions discourage the kind of sustained and attentive attention to art that forms the substance of ekphrastic poetry.

“*In the National Gallery*” shifts from sardonic commentary on the museum’s public in its first movement to ekphrastic descriptions—though brief and highly impressionistic—of the compositions of a series of paintings among the National Gallery’s collection in its second movement. These lines make no gesture towards specifying the paintings the poetic speaker glimpses; rather, in their peripatetic nature, they catalogue a sequence of possible aesthetic sights that visitors might have contemplated had they engaged with art on display directly rather than inhabiting the museum aimlessly. The sensuous ekphrastic engagement with the work of art—modeled in the speaker’s immanent, affective, and comparatively unmediated aesthetic response—comes to embody the mode of museum experience the visitors otherwise neglect, effectively setting the speaker apart from the undifferentiated museum public. This stanza’s rich descriptive language helps distinguish the speaker’s robust aesthetic response from those of the patrons with their “irresolute and unperplexed,— / Unspeculative faces.” Sassoon draws from the familiar rhetorical repertoire of lyric ekphrasis to intimate each object’s singularity and transcendence (“quintessential,” “changeless,” “immortality,” “legendries”), an ekphrastic discourse that clearly recalls the museum’s role in arbitrating and enshrining the aesthetically valuable. However, Sassoon’s skeptical poetic speaker frames art’s transcendence not by the sense of permanence conveyed by the institutional space of its display, but rather in organic rhetoric that curiously presents these objects as animate, living things: the active verbs 

receives messages of political authority: “In thus rhetorically incorporating an undifferentiated citizenry into a set of power-knowledge relations which are represented to it as emanating from itself, the museum emerged as an important instrument for the self-display of bourgeois-democratic societies … so the museum might serve as the emblem for the emergence of an equally important set of relations … through which a democratic citizenry was rhetorically incorporated into the processes of the state” (98).
(“blooms,” “recedes,” “glows”) imply they are at once continuous with the material world and invested with meanings that exceed it. Traces of the recent war are conjured in the negative in images of a “quintessential world preserved in paint,” “calm vistas,” and “ripe remembrances,” each of which suggests qualities and dispositions antipodal to those regularly expressed in Sassoon’s earlier war poetry: “preserved,” not ruined; “calm,” not pugilistic; “ripe,” not degenerative; and signifying “immortality” rather than the inescapable reminders of mortality.

The failure of these idyllic scenes on display in the National Gallery to capture the attention of the post-war public marks a signal failure in the museum’s ability to foster the potential meanings Sassoon’s ekphrastic speaker locates in the representations of a “long-vanished Paradise,” the nostalgic and restorative ruminations on an idealized past.

Yet while the generic priorities of lyric ekphrasis emerge in this poem as a model for personally felt experiences lost to an indifferent public beholden to the cultural ritual of museum-going, the ekphrastic lines of “In the National Gallery” are nevertheless contoured in a manner homologous to the very museological frameworks they outwardly complicate. Sassoon’s speaker catalogues five of the aesthetic objects one might see in the National Gallery precipitately and paratactically, in five serial lines that recall the linearity of museum gallery hangings and the patron’s experience of navigating that space comparable to the ekphrastic galleries constructed by Marianne Moore. For both, the ekphrastic gallery functions as to allow them to model propitious modes of responding to museum objects; however, in Sassoon’s verse this gallery is also framed negatively in opposition to the actual ways his poems claim individuals inhabit museum spaces. “In the National Gallery” thus might critique the cultural ritual of museum going but in its structure and subject matter it comes to resemble an imaginary poetic museum in its own right. If lyric ekphrasis typically develops as what John Hollander calls a “narrative of
scanning” that traces the poetic speaker’s gaze as it moves across the object’s surface picking up iconographical details (18), here the narrative space is expanded: what is scanned is the museum gallery writ large, and the ekphrasis linguistically embodies the kinetics of inhabiting it.

Sassoon’s satire of the museum’s public is at least partially rooted in his own discomfort with the degree of artistic knowledge he possessed and his ability to understand and appreciate art in discursively legitimated ways when patronizing a museum. In a 1922 diary entry, he writes:

My taste in looking at pictures is still a very lop-sided affair, overbalanced by my unaesthetic and unintellectual biases towards ‘literary interests.’ I hurry from one San Sebastian to another: from Ganymede to Narcissus, and from Narcissus to Apollo. I hunt for beardless Christs and prostrate Abels, and hang about in front of Isaacs quailing at the crises of immolation by Abraham. Abraham, owing to the intervention of the angel, substitutes a ram for his offspring. I wish I could substitute intellect for the lust of the flesh. Also I find myself drugging my visual sense with colour instead of cultivating my appreciation of design. (Diaries 280-1, emphasis in original)

This self-critique makes evident what is silent but formative in “In the National Gallery,” that the animus of the poetic speaker against museological codes of aesthetic experience is embedded in the broader problem of the relationship between institutional knowledges and private responses in the museum. It implies an attachment to the sensuous resonances of “color” rather than the elevated formalism associated with “design,” an indication of Sassoon’s sense of detachment from more discursive approaches to art analysis. What is framed as ironic distance between the poetic speaker and bourgeois taste in “In the National Gallery” here is recast as a relatively disabling sense of self-deficiency. Particularly telling is that this “affair” is “lop-sided” because
Sassoon feels himself incapable of dividing his private “unintellectual biases”—private interest and desires—from his experiences of the art on display, implicitly suggesting that the museum is a space meant for elevated intellectual experiences. It is notable that the figures that most solicit his “unintellectual” attention—St. Sebastian, Ganymede, and Narcissus—are each, historically, common subjects of homoerotic representation in Western art, a fact that clarifies Sassoon’s ambivalence in this passage about his affinity for these representations, his “lust for the flesh” in the museum space.\(^\text{12}\) This suggests that aesthetic response can be dangerous as well as desirable, particularly because it at once encodes and reveals private predilections and attachments. The poet’s dissatisfaction lies in the fact that he cannot isolate his aesthetic responses from his personal inclinations, here in the form of the queer signifiers that organize his path through, and response to, the art museum. In “In the National Gallery,” such expressions are abjected and reassigned to the museum public, and his aesthetic evaluative principles shift chiastically: the dogmatic appreciation for “design” over sensation that he once wished to harness is rearticulated as a deficiency, and a “lust” for feeling is recoded as a cardinal virtue. Feeling, desire, and the sublime pleasures of aesthetic experience all intersect in the ekphrastic contemplation of the work of art; in this poem, the tradition of lyric ekphrasis offers a discursively legitimate and normative space within which to invest these energies.

Sassoon further plumbs the phenomenological depths of aesthetic response in the museum in “The London Museum,” a poem that takes as subject the museum curators and administrators whose work makes art and cultural history available for public examination. The

\(^{12}\) St. Sebastian has been especially co-opted as a queer icon; treatments of his martyrdom in visual culture typically emphasize his boyish features, impressive musculature, and the penetration of his body by arrows. For a discussion of the queer uses of St. Sebastian iconography, see Kaye, “‘A Splendid Readiness for Death’: T. S. Eliot, the Homosexual Cult of St. Sebastian, and World War I.”
poem’s primary target for critique, “Antiquarians” whose tastes for the past shape the museum industry, are invoked in the poem’s opening lines:

Antiquarians, filling their noses
With the aromatic dust of some episode in History;
How I pity them their aversion from the flowing vistas of the Future!
For they organize an epoch as if it were a hall for obsolete utensils;
And the blunt broad sword must be catalogued according to its postulated Period.

But to me that am no antiquary, and a most indifferent historiographer,
This Museum is a mortuary for departed passions… (SSCP 149-50)

The poetic speaker frames the motivations behind their professional practices as primarily historiographical, calling to mind the historicizing function of the museum as a space in which objects are curated and interpreted as a means towards constructing a vision of the past; it also recalls the fact that until the late nineteenth century, as Randolph Starn notes, “museum work and historical scholarship [were] often overlapping and interconnected” (69). Here, the museum worker is represented as a dispassionate cataloguer of historical objects, although the skeptical poetic speaker casts doubt on not just the utility, but also the authenticity of his scholarly judgment (note that the items are attributed to a “postulated Period”). What strikes the speaker as more valuable than the backwards-looking scholarship of the museum professional is fostering an enlivened, sensuous relation to the objects in the museum’s collection. This poetic argument gives shape to the form and prosodic arrangement, or rather the absence of conventional form and consistent prosody, of “The London Museum”: a free verse poem with varying stanza lengths and irregular meter and without a rhyme scheme, a rather atypical arrangement given
Sassoon’s usual preference for standard versification and genteel poetic traditions. Here an uncharacteristically modern poetics complements the speaker’s denunciation of what he diagnoses to be the museum’s univocal administrative preoccupation with the organization of a moribund past. For the “antiquarians,” historical objects signify only their own belatedness (or that of their viewers), a tautology that makes the museum professional neglectful of the possible contemporary meanings one might still recover from them. The framing of the museum as an epistemological “mortuary” for objects of historical interest echoes the modernist anti-museum discourse I discussed in the dissertation’s introduction, and most closely recalls the bombastic rhetoric of Futurism—that most fervently anti-museum of modernist avant-garde movements—in the mention of the “Flowing vistas of the Future.” Sassoon likely was conceptually familiar with Italian Futurism if not through direct contact with it, for as Lawrence Rainey notes, Marinetti’s series of Futurist events in England between 1910 and 1914 (prior to Sassoon’s deployment to the Western Front) were widely attended and reported on extensively in the British popular press.\footnote{Rainey speculates that Marinetti’s Futurist event on March 19, 1912 in London’s Bechstein Hall attracted an audience nearing 500 and galvanized public interest: “Marinetti’s lectures achieved instant notoriety. After only six weeks in England, he reported in mid-April, the Futurists had elicited 350 articles in newspapers and had earned more than 11,000 francs in sales of paintings … More important, Marinetti had achieved his success not by addressing only an educated elite but by speaking in a public forum to a wider audience” (28).} The Futurist echoes of “The London Museum” may be inadvertent, but they are underwritten by an anti-museum sentiment commensurable to Marinetti’s infamous plea for the destructions of museums because they function as artistic “graveyards … [with] their grim profusion of corpses that no one remembers” (14-5). Sassoon’s speaker echoes this rhetoric when claiming that conventional museology disables connections between historical objects and contemporary meaning (whether social, cultural, or political). Yet while Marinetti ultimately calls on his followers to “divert the canals so they can flood the museums,” Sassoon’s speaker
arrives at a less agonistic and eschatological response to the problem of the museum’s status in contemporary cultural life, instead cataloguing some more gratifying—though purely imaginative—museum experiences than those institutions are functionally capable of providing.

What the poem frames as the antiquarians’ prosaic engagement with historical items is exchanged for a sequence of illusory phenomenological exhibitions in an imagined museum space:

And I’d barter all the brocaded farthingales in Conservation
For a single scolding word from great Eliza’s lips.

In holograph documents of the Commonwealth
Are memories and ghosts from yellow-candled councils;
Yet what are these, and even the death-mask of the Protector,
Compared with the gruff murmur that came to some nodding secretary,
When in politic debate the voices of Cromwell and Milton mingled? (SSCP 150)
The speaker goes on to contemplate a “sprigged silk dress and a bonnet with ostrich feathers” worn by Queen Elizabeth to the Great Exhibition in 1851 and now exhibited in the museum, which elicits for the speaker the question of who, instead, “shall recover those heart-beats of Victoria, Regina et Imperatrix / When she sailed into her Crystal Palace on the climacteric of a European culture?” Although these aesthetic experiences are all clearly impossible to capture in actuality—it would be truly remarkable for a museum to exhibit the breath of Queen Elizabeth or the sidelong grumblings of Cromwell’s secretary—“The London Museum” is nonetheless shaped around a critical judgment of what makes the museum valuable to a visitor: not impersonal historical taxonomies but rather the possibilities for sensory experiences that cultivate
continuities of feeling between history and the present day. In doing so, Sassoon distinguishes between the direct sensory experience of history and the aestheticization of it in the museum, the kind of work that the museum professionals are criticized for performing. His preference for the former accounts for Sassoon’s own uncharacteristic turn towards formal irregularity in “The London Museum,” a decision not to present his imagined direct engagements with history in established and historically rooted prosodic and formal arrangement. Stripped down to a roving peripatetic engagement with a host of possible art objects, as in “In the National Gallery,” here Sassoon’s ekphrasis depicts museum experiences that can enliven belated historical moments and personages by infusing them with an affective, experiential immediacy that is lost to contemporary museology. These relations are, however, purely fictive; ekphrasis allows Sassoon’s poetic speakers to imagine potent museum experiences, but these are nevertheless shown to be beyond the pale of the actual institutional space. While the museum is partly intended to be a space in which historical meanings are constructed and remediated through practices of object display, in this poem ekphrastic description is exploited as a mode for imagining modes of cultural experience more immediate than the museum could ever realistically provide.

“The London Museum,” skeptical of conventional museological frameworks for cultural experience, resolves in the speaker’s return to the public sphere and observation of the British public’s engagement with a living embodiment of dominant national identity:

It is four o’clock; and the London Museum is closing.

Outside, in the courtyard, a group of patriots lingers
To watch the young Heir to the Throne step into his hushed Rolls-Royce.
And I wonder, are they wiser than the antiquarians?
The concluding opposition of the “group of patriots” to the “antiquarians” suggests that the former’s connection to cultural heritage—in the person of an unspecified “Heir to the Throne” who, in his anonymity, is a synecdoche for the nation writ large—is more meaningful in its spontaneity and authenticity than that of the museum professionals who, circumscribed within the hermetic symbolic space of the cultural institution, are isolated from the contemporary world. The speaker discounts the intellectual capacity of these “patriots,” as their awed gawking at the royal heir entering his luxury vehicle, two signifiers of elevated class and political status, is strikingly commensurate to the uncritical reverence of the museum public of “In the National Gallery” towards the “Art Collection of the English Nation”; in both poems, the middle and working classes are represented as deeply flawed in their uncritical reverence for signifiers of upper class status. Here, the “patriots” are incorporated in the poem as props against which the poem leverages its commentary on the normative practices and dispositions of a group of figures still riper for ridicule, the museum professionals.

“In the National Gallery” and “The London Museum” mobilize the formal and affective expectations of lyric ekphrasis, maintaining its core function of describing a visual object in poetic language but reconstituting it into an integrated component of broader satirical poetic narratives. While these poems incorporate passing moments of poetic contemplation of real and imagined art objects, the genre of ekphrasis becomes the primary space for critique in Sassoon’s other ekphrastic ventures in Satirical Poems: “In the Turner Rooms” and “On Some Portraits by Sargent.” These poems shift attention from the museum’s public to the institutional structure of the modern art world, the discourses of aesthetic worth that shape its evaluative hierarchies, and the ways such elements interact with the actual practice of writing ekphrastic poetry.
II. Ekphrastic Parodies in the Modern British Art World

“In the Turner Rooms” takes this writing practice as its subject by locating the scene of ekphrasis directly within the museum space. In the lyric model of ekphrasis the poetic text is assumed to represent the instant of aesthetic experience—not in recollection, but in the immediate act of contemplating an object—and in “In the Turner Rooms” Sassoon plays with such notions of experiential immediacy by depicting his poetic speaker’s failure to compose ekphrastic lines directly within a public art museum that makes such an aesthetic experience available. Of all Sassoon’s museum satires this poem draws most explicitly on the actual practice of ekphrasis, and thus parodies the incongruence of lyric models for ekphrasis with the conditions for seeing art in museums. In distinguishing between the earlier satires of museum-going and this poem’s function as parody, I have in mind Carolyn Williams’s argument that parody as a form is “always based on imitation, unlike satire, although its forms of imitation are exaggerated, twisted, and preposterous … parody is both mimetic and critical”; parody is “powerfully modernizing,” as through irreverent imitation it presents the social rituals and cultural forms of the past as absurd or absurdly out of touch with the present (6, 9). If satire instantiates a non-participatory and critical distance from the object of critique, parody reproduces and participates in this object’s standard forms and uses, admitting complicity with its target that satire otherwise avoids. As a parody of ekphrasis, “In the Turner Rooms” calls attention to the fact that Sassoon’s interest in received cultural practices such as poetic ekphrasis and museum-going is bound up in his critique of them, that the sense of ambivalence that pervades Satirical Poems is elicited by this dialectic of simultaneous formal maintenance and revaluation.
Written in the voice of a poet struggling to derive inspiration for his ekphrastic poetry in the Tate Gallery’s exhibition of J. M. W. Turner’s paintings, “In the Turner Rooms” dramatizes a failure of synesthetic exchange in a way that gestures towards the limitations of the public art museum—and its valued artists—to stimulate the creative imagination. The poetic speaker in the museum settles in front of the works of the English painter—

Into warm regions of Romance I stared;
Sat down; produced my note-book, and prepared
To fabricate iambics: something rich,
Serene, perpetual; tuned to concert-pitch:
Carthage without the climax; autumn-gold;
Red sunrise on a crag-set castle...Bold
With pursuance of the encharioted Sublime,
I set my brains to work till closing time. (SSCP 151)

—and engages with them not in order best to appreciate them, but with the explicit motivation to translate the visual art into ekphrastic discourse: to develop a metrical pattern and descriptive lexicon that adequately corresponds to the paintings’ compositions. We may recall the interartistic rhetoric Bradley and Cooper use in the introduction to Sight and Song to describe their ekphrastic project as intending to “translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves” (8). “In the Turner Rooms” makes visible on the poetic line the mechanisms of this intermedial translation, through its play with the fundamentals of poetic composition and metageneric glance at the expectations and etiology of ekphrasis. The latter is signaled in the poem’s densely idealized images of poetic creation drawn from Romantic artistic discourse: “warmth,” “serene,” “perpetual,” and most conspicuously, “Sublime.” The adequacy
of such discourse for describing the contemporary scene in the Tate is ironically undermined in line 8, as the Romantic rhetoric clashes with the material constraints of composing ekphrastic poetry in the art museum: here, with the acknowledgement that the poetic act has only until the museum’s closing time to be fulfilled. The supposed timelessness of great painting is demystified by institutional constraints and, more generally, by the material frameworks that shape aesthetic experience in modernity. That the interartistic dialogue at the heart of this intended ekphrasis is destined for failure is further evident in the stanza’s synthetic verbal excesses, the mixing of metaphors with the invocation of musical orchestration (“tuned to concert-pitch”) to describe the verbal description of the visual object, the numerous caesuras and diacritical marks that suggest an unsteady or inconsistent act of poetic making (far from the organic flow of the creative imagination in Romantic discourse), and the poet’s inability to “fabricate iambics” consistently, an objective that is ironically foiled at the utterance of the word “iambics,” a cretic foot followed by a full stop that interrupts the iambic line.

The speaker directly comments on his failure to derive poetic material from Turner’s paintings in the following stanza, shortly before the actual material constraints of museum-going comically disrupt the romanticized scene of poetic creation:

Words failed me: Dido’s harbor was a gleam
That vanished in white vapours: and the Garden
Of the Hesperides was but a dream
Shut in by storm-clad summits. On my toes
A mild enthusiast trod; and begged my pardon.
I bit my pencil; blinked; and blew my nose.
The two Turner paintings in the Tate to which the poetic speaker refers are likely *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (1817) and *The Goddess of Discord Choosing the Apple of Contention in the Garden of the Hesperides* (1806). These are lush, vibrant representations of scenes from classical mythology set against richly detailed natural worlds, in which Turner’s perspectival diminution of human figures enables the representations of an expansive, powerful environment characteristic of the Romantic sublime. The ekphrasis dramatically lacks this sublimity, instead tacitly contrasting the aesthetics of the visual compositions—austere, majestic, glorying in the power of nature—with the current situation of the poet working in the museum: frustrated, failed, and inhabiting an institutional space within a modern city that is a far cry from Turner’s idealized mythological world. The prolix diction and suggestions of Romantic effusion that convey the opening stanza’s ekphrastic ambitions are abruptly undercut by the paratactic transition into the second stanza, “Words failed me,” and in the humorous image of an inelegant fellow museum patron treading upon the act of poetic writing. The solitariness of artistic creation that defines Romantic scenes of writing is disturbed in and by the modern institutional setting, with the suggestion that the conditions of museum-going jam the mechanisms for ekphrastic expression: in yet another of the satirist’s ironies, it is damage to the poet’s literal foot that prevents his production of metrical feet. While ekphrasis would typically center upon the eye that glimpses the work of art and, in the bardic sense, the mouth that gives voice to poetry—the *sight* and *song* of Bradley and Cooper, for instance—here Sassoon leaves us at a different organ, the nose, and a clogged one at that, which elicits the only organic discharge (“blew my nose”) in this representation of aesthetic experience.

In the poem’s final stanza, Sassoon’s speaker faults Turner’s paintings for failing to inspire the ekphrastic exchange, on the grounds that Turner’s compositions obstruct interartistic
sympathy; that is, they disable the imaginative relational attachment to the visual object that the
speaker deems essential for producing an ekphrastic poem:

In canvases like these one ought to find

Imaginative moments; yet my mind

Jibs from their glory. Mellow rhymes with yellow;

And Turner was a wonder-working fellow:

But he forbids creation; fails to start

Co-ordinated memories …

The speaker concedes Turner’s accomplishments as an individual artist while registering one
important shortcoming: by representing scenes of “glory,” he inhibits the observer’s complete
identification with the subjects of his compositions. By failing “to start / Co-ordinated
memories” at the moment of aesthetic experience, the only affective position available to the
observer is appreciation, that disposition that elicited the aversion of the poetic speaker of “In the
National Gallery.” All that the speaker of “In the Turner Rooms” is able to conjure is facile
rhyme (“Mellow” / “yellow” / “fellow”) and a hollow sense of disappointment. Yet Sassoon’s
sentiments towards art culture are more complex than the satirical bent of these poems might
initially make apparent, and “In the Turner Rooms” is no exception. For if the intended lyrical
ekphrastic act is thwarted, the museum experience nevertheless offers the setting and occasion
for a different kind of poetic production: the satirical poem that we do receive, “In the Turner
Rooms,” a parody of the modern poet’s inability to connect the sister arts in the public art
museum. While the aesthetics of the paragonal ekphrastic model can only admit the dynamic,
irreconcilable tension between painting and poetry, Sassoon’s “In the Turner Rooms” suggests
other aesthetic possibilities that emerge when poetry cannot overcome its differences with its sister art.

“In the Turner Rooms” calls attention to the incompatibility of lyric models for ekphrasis with an early twentieth-century high art culture centralized in congested and ideologically loaded public institutions. This focus on self-satire and ekphrastic parody carries over into the final poem in this sequence, “On Some Portraits by Sargent.” The title of the poem seems to mark it as a typologically consistent ekphrastic poem, calling to mind such canonical nineteenth-century ekphrases as Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Shelley’s “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery,” and Rossetti’s “For Our Lady of the Rocks, by Leonardo da Vinci.” However, rather than contemplating any single or series of paintings as do Keats and Shelley, in “On Some Portraits by Sargent” Sassoon represents his speaker’s situatedness in a modern art world inexorably shaped by the economic influence of the upper class. Sassoon signals this focus in the poem’s italicized opening series of two rhyming couplets, which function at once as a prologue to the poem and as a comment on the speaker’s distance from the ingrained aesthetic values and dispositions of the art world:

The Royal Academy has been much maligned
By modern aesthetes . . . For myself, I find
More motives to applaud than to condemn
An edifice so opposite . . ahem! . . (SSCP 152, italics in original)

As in “In the Turner Rooms,” Sassoon’s speaker signals his alienation from art cultures, represented in terms of modish aesthetic discourse and the aversion to academic art that was common among early twentieth-century intellectual elites. The Royal Academy, as a socially legitimated and governmentally subsidized institution dedicated to the training of artists in the
dominant aesthetic styles of the time, was regularly the target of scorn of modernist and avant-garde artists for its alleged role in maintaining the artistic status quo (and other comparable institutions across Europe were similarly treated at the time as well). The Academy’s regular exhibitions of the paintings of popular British artists, along with its special loan exhibitions of Old Masters, did much to shape public taste and consolidate the critical and commercial success of contemporary painters like John Singer Sargent. Yet Sassoon holds his own speaker’s place in the modern art world up to critique as well when he misconstrues this trendy avant-garde animus against the Academy as being aimed at its as an “edifice”—the actual architectural space—rather than the aesthetic styles privileged in its instructional programs or the art displayed in its special exhibitions. In the interrupted final line of the poem’s first movement, the speaker begins to proclaim that the edifice itself is “apposite,” or suitable, to what we can assume to be its pedagogical functions, before catching himself with a conspicuous throat clearing. That the institutional space is on the poetic speaker’s mind is made further apparent as he charts his own movement through the exhibition of Sargent’s portraits:

Climbing the stairway in a cloud of chatter,
   I am pledged to practise cogitant concision
   And to reject all parenthetic matter
   While ambulating round the Exhibition.

The poetic speaker here internalizes the logic of Bourdieu’s aesthetic disposition discussed above, determined to engage with the art on display immanently and without distraction. Such a statement is of course continuous with the desire of the speaker of “In the Turner Rooms” to the

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14 See Bourdieu, “Manet and the Institutionalization of Anomie.” Though primarily focused on the French avant-gardist response to the Académie Royale, Bourdieu’s argument is for the most part commensurate to that which Sassoon identifies among the British “aesthetes.”

extent that the present speaker seeks to reclaim this kind of unmediated engagement with exhibited art within—and despite the conditions of—the institutional space in which it is accessed. Yet we might keep in mind Williams’s claim that parody draws directly on the form of that which it outwardly seeks to disavow; here, the poetic speaker’s attempt to “reject all parenthetic matter” in pursuit of an isolated aesthetic experience is immediately contradicted by the very act of outwardly articulating this as an intention. The declaration itself signals the presence of the “parenthetic matter” that the speaker hopes to ignore and calls attention to the poem’s own status as a textual mediation of the aesthetic experience, a parenthesis that brackets the speaker’s engagements with Sargent’s works.

“On Some Portraits by Sargent” is, of all the ekphrases of *Satirical Poems*, the one most explicitly oriented toward leftist political commentary, as the poem condemns the pretensions of a “deaf-mute Reception where the Great / (With snobs whose wealth could wheedle them their places) / Survive in envied Sargentry.” The selection of the American painter Sargent—and the transformation of his name into shorthand for the economics of the modern art world writ large—is particularly relevant to the critique, as Sargent earned both his living and his reputation in the international art market as a specialist in portraiture, and particularly through commissioned portraits of wealthy and upper class patrons. As in “In the Turner Rooms,” the poem thematizes a miscarriage in ekphrastic production, with yet another speaker lamenting his inability to identify with Sargent’s portraits in any productive way:

In calm cynosural canvases I seek

Some psycho-coefficient unconfessed . . . .

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16 Simpson, *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent* provides an invaluable analysis of the aesthetic and publicity strategies used by John Singer Sargent and his proponents to position his work within the emerging global art world of the mid-nineteenth century.
A glum (though lingually-exempted) guest,
I analyse the output; which includes
Complacent persons opulently poised
In unawareness that their names are noised
In highbrow cliques as “psychological nudes.” (SSCP 152)

The speaker searches for a psychological constant (“psycho-coefficient”) that could foster a connection to any of the exhibited paintings, yet all he can locate are class signifiers: depictions of wealthy subjects whose pictorial representations tautologically signify their wealth (“opulently poised,” with the complacency of the leisure class). The following stanza remarks candidly on this class critique, as the speaker claims that Sargent’s penchant for painting socially distinguished individuals is the primary determining factor of his renown: that “If Sargent could have called his soul his own / And had not been the hireling of the Rich / There’d not be many portraits now re-shown.” Sassoon’s critique exonerates Sargent in advance from any charges of complicity with the bourgeois, suggesting instead museum culture’s faults in celebrating Sargent not for his technique but for his subject matter, his portraits of the rich. At the same time, the critique made in “On Some Portraits by Sargent” runs up against that of Sassoon’s *Satirical Poems* writ large: while Sargent’s reputation as a portraitist of the rich is chided here, in the previous poem paintings by Turner—a landscape painter not at all known for portraiture—is similarly subjected to reproach. Thus, while Sassoon approaches the status of aesthetic critique (as a commentary on the work of art) in *Satirical Poems*, the poetic argument actually made ultimately hinges on the privileged status these artworks occupy in establishment art culture. Indeed, “On Some Portraits by Sargent” provides only passing references to the actual compositions of the Sargent paintings exhibited in the gallery space: there are, in addition to the
“complacent persons” and “psychological nudes,” portraits of “ladies lovelified to ball-room pitch,” “sempiternal hostesses,” and “fashion-dated ghostesses” lining the walls. The poem’s engagements with these paintings are glancing, referential, and invoked only to the degree that they factor into a broader critique of the modern art world and bourgeois aesthetes. This mobile, wandering poetic gaze underscores Sassoon’s modifications of ekphrasis to engage with museum culture: the structural conventions, historical typology, and affective associations of ekphrasis are incorporated but yet distilled in the poetic text so as to function as components of the collection’s broader program of social satire. This integration is far from seamless, however; the seams indeed show conspicuously as Sassoon’s treatments of ekphrasis derive meaning through the genre’s association with special—if neglected, in the modern museum—forms of engagement with art and culture.

The ekphrastic poems of Satirical Poems are rife with internal contradictions and set within a matrix of dialectical play between the affirmation and disavowal of a series of inherited cultural forms: the genre of ekphrasis and its rootedness in lyric practices; the modern art museum and its place in public life; and the social meaning of historical art and aesthetic experience among a loosely defined “English people.” The hesitancy of Sassoon’s social commentary in these poems, and the evident inability to fully reconcile their circumscription within the symbolic field of bourgeois high culture that they outwardly critique, are illuminating of the contested status of experimental ekphrastic poetry in the modernist art world. As a principally Anglo-European poetic form that traditionally—and indisputably at Sassoon’s time of writing—derives material for poetic representation from the elite objects of high culture, ekphrasis does not bend easily to the kinds of critiques to which twentieth-century poets like Sassoon have attempted to put it. In the case of Sassoon’s parodies, the very British populace for
whom the wide majority of these public art museums were (at least nominally) founded to benefit is reduced to amorphous clutter that inhibits his poetic speaker from recovering much usable ekphrastic material from the art on display. The act of maintaining the conditions of ekphrasis in a way continuous with its paradigmatic lyric form is revealed to be, for the most part, an impossibility in art museums partly for the reason that the museum’s public—this profusion of bodies around that of the poetic speaker—cannot but disrupt the essential structure of lyric ekphrasis, that of a speaker’s hermetic and dialogic contemplation of the art object. While rupturing the lyric ekphrastic situation is poetically productive for other writers discussed in this dissertation, enabling them to locate and demystify systematic exclusions in the modern art world, for Sassoon, a devotee of genteel English poetic traditions, it signifies as the regrettable discordance of his poetic inheritances with institutional modernity.

IV. Ekphrasis after Satirical Poems

*Satirical Poems* represents Sassoon’s final explicit endeavor in attempted—if not always successful—socialist poetic critique; his subsequent books of poetry follow a trajectory towards heightened lyricism and spirituality, and his conversion to Roman Catholicism late in life punctuated his transformation into a poet of religious pilgrimage in collections such as *Lenten Illuminations* (1959) and *The Path to Peace* (1960). While the cultural status of art and aesthetic experience in modernity would remain a concern of his work, the nature of his engagement with ekphrasis alters to meet the changing prerogatives of his evolving poetic program. Sassoon carries several of the themes and innovative practices of his satirical poetry over into these later ekphrases, but discards the suspicion and antagonism towards public museums in the earlier verse in order to locate other ways of engaging with historical art. The inherited practices of
ekphrasis, even in modified form, retain a vitality in Sassoon’s creative imagination as a mode of critique even if the actual cultural meanings ascribed to them shift over time, from the agon with domestic society in *Satirical Poems* to trepidation over international conflict.

“‘A View of Old Exeter,’” from *Rhymed Ruminations* (1940), returns to what was a focal point of the satirical poetry, the spatial locations of aesthetic experience, in a poem that engages with a landscape by the minor nineteenth-century artist J. B. Pyne. Several of the concerns of Sassoon’s earlier ekphrastic poetry are in play here, including the painter’s institutional reputation, the possible meaning of his work for the contemporary moment, and the space in which the artwork is encountered. However, “‘A View of Old Exeter’” reassigns focus from the public institutions that negatively affect aesthetic experience to a more holistic poetic: here, Sassoon contemplates a work of art uncelebrated in the art world, by a marginal artist, in the private space of the home. Pyne is described as “a small honest painter, well content / To limn our English landscape,” a statement that both figuratively and literally places him at the peripheries of modern England and its culture of art (*SSCP* 242). The poem represents its poetic speaker’s nostalgic recollections of the painting’s acquisition, an act that brings the scene of aesthetic experience, and consequently the poetics of ekphrasis, out of the public museum and into the privacy of the home:

Here’s his ‘Old Exeter’: much eyed by me
Since (how time flits!) full fifteen years ago
I bought it cheap and carried it home to be
A window on my wall making me know
Old Exeter, affectionately recorded
In the now slow paced ‘fifties.
Much is made of the painting’s current location and the fact that Pyne’s landscape did not command the high monetary value typically associated with objects in museum collections (“I bought it cheap”), an implication that now different criteria—quaintness, personal significance, and an integration into daily life—inform the speaker’s evaluation of its worth. The reference to the habitual nature of the poetic speaker’s examination of the painting—“much eyed by me”—distinguishes this aesthetic experience from those of the earlier satirical speakers who were relentlessly impeded by the crowds of patrons. Like Moore, who sought in her “imaginary possessions” the ability to make private, personal meanings from objects that attracted her interest, the poetic speaker of “‘A View of Old Exeter’” underscores the perpetual availability of this art object for contemplation.

Yet while this poem is distinct in tone and in represented space from the ekphrastic poems in *Satirical Poems*, Sassoon’s speaker still does present himself as an arbiter of alternative cultural values, and in doing so resembles the speaker of “On Some Portraits by Sargent” who deliberately signals his distance from the interests of the wealthy “aesthetes.” Here, the whimsical image of the speaker who carries his beloved painting “home to be / A window on my wall making me know / Old Exeter” is deployed for its own kind of cultural capital, constituting the poetic speaker as an individuated subject who claims autonomy from the ideologies, rituals, and taste of bourgeois high culture.

The poem’s second stanza shifts into an ekphrastic description of Pyne’s painting:

For J. B. Pyne Old Exeter was good;

Cows in his foreground grazed and strolled and stood:

For J. B. Pyne Victorian clumps of trees

Were golden in a bland October breeze:
Large clouds, like safe investments, loitered by;
And distant Dartmoor loomed in sombre blue.
Perpetuator of that shifting sky,
It never crossed his mind that he might do
From death such things as make me stare and sigh,—
Sigh for that afternoon he thus depicted,—
That simpler world from which we’ve been evicted. (SSCP 242)

Sassoon incorporates descriptive details from the pictorial composition into the text, but ultimately this poem attends to distinctions between the idealized bucolic landscape of Pyne’s 1850s painting and the contemporary world. There is some level of self-parody in the poet’s nostalgic yearnings, as the blandness of the breeze and “safe investments” of the clouds all too conspicuously suggest an oversimplification of the recent past, a past that Sassoon had spent much of the 1910s and 20s demystifying in his work. However, what registers more prominently than what Pyne actually depicted or than the speaker’s determination to draw a stark contrast between past and present is his sense of wonder that an art object from the past could affect him so profoundly (“make me stare and sigh”) in the present. The speaker’s unmediated, habitual, and affective contact with this artwork recapitulates the dispositions of lyric ekphrasis that Sassoon earlier deems impossible in public art museums, but also enables his juxtaposition of the placidity of the aesthetic to the world beyond the speaker’s home, a world currently embroiled in the Second World War. Germany’s aerial blitzes on England are intimated in the speaker’s reference to the “prim figures” of Pyne’s composition that are “complacently unknowing / Of their great-grandchild’s air-raid-worried mind.” What seems meaningful to Sassoon’s ekphrastic speaker is the apolitical nature of the composition, which in its “unknowing” equips him with a
space for nostalgic identification: “For me it shines far far—too far—away; / For time has changed this ‘View’ into a Vision” (SSCP 243). The vision of an undisturbed English countryside made available in art is fleeting in actuality, its darting away from the poetic speaker’s grasp underscored by the rising spondaic “far far” and by the caesuras that reach towards an unrecoverable past. Yet while the contemporary speaker is left grasping for this sense of harmony, his experience of Pyne’s painting provides glimpse past the world at war, restoring a sense of peace in a “Vision” of a separate reality. Of course, this experience with the art object provides the poet too with the material for an ekphrastic poem that can lament the present through its juxtaposition with an idealized English history. This juxtaposed glance recalls the climax of “In the National Gallery,” the “quintessential world preserved in paint” and “calm vistas of long-vanished Paradise” that the bourgeois museumgoers neglect. Still, if Sassoon’s earlier satirical poem mobilizes these descriptions to represent the significant aesthetic meanings lost to the museum’s indifferent public, in “‘A View of Old Exeter’” ekphrastic contemplation directly pictures the possibilities for amelioration made available in an unmediated aesthetic experience.

Although Sassoon’s work following Satirical Poems does not often convey explicitly partisan political messages, the Second World War was indeed regularly subject matter for his verse during the 1930s and ‘40s, as in “‘A View of Old Exeter.’” The brief volume The Road to Ruin (1933), a sequence of nine poems written in response to Hitler’s rise and with a prescient sense that the simmering international crisis would soon boil over in yet another global conflict, anticipates the dawning of what W. H. Auden memorably refers to as the “low dishonest decade” in his more widely known Second World War prognostication, “September 1, 1939.” In The Road to Ruin, Sassoon’s poetic speakers don the garb of an Old Testament prophet to decode the
ill omens and warn an otherwise deaf British public (or so the volume’s argument implies) of the events certainly to come. While the entirety of *The Road to Ruin* merits reconsideration in the context of the aesthetics of late modernism and the Auden Generation, in closing this chapter I call attention to one of the collection’s poems that returns to a scene from Sassoon’s earlier satirical verse, the National Gallery, and to the poet’s interest in the museum’s place in cultural modernity. In “A Premonition,” the National Gallery provides the setting for a dream-vision of the possible wartime ruination of English national culture. Sassoon’s poetic speaker envisions a chemical attack on England committed by an unidentified foreign power that devastates the civilian population at Trafalgar Square, where “corpses, chemically killed, / Lie hunched and twisted.” The poetic speaker, a “gas-proof ghost,” enters the National Gallery to ascertain how the “priceless paintings” of what had earlier been referred to as the “Art Collection of the English Nation” have fared in the attack. The outcome of his investigation is predictably bleak:

To time’s eternities I came;

And found the Virgin of the Rocks

Dreaming with downward eyes the same

Apocalypse of peace…The claim

Of Art was disallowed. Past locks

And walls crass war had groped, and gas

Was tarnishing each gilded frame. (*SSCP* 202)

As in the satirical poetry, aesthetic and political dimensions overlap as the stakes of an attack on the English nation register most dramatically through the collateral damage to the national art collection. (The contradictions in Sassoon’s earlier investment in collective politics are no more evident than the relative significance this poem places on the destruction of the national art
collection in relation to the corpses of the British dead.) Sassoon reiterates his conviction that historical art can serve a crucial function in contemporary life in the image of the art object with “claim” to permanence juxtaposed against the bodies littering Trafalgar Square. The sociopolitical climate of modern Europe compromises art’s seeming transcendence, however, as the coming of war on the home front reveals this transcendence to be no more than one of the many myths that cannot endure war’s demystifications.

Still, that Sassoon draws on the image of the desecration of the “Art Collection of the English Nation” to communicate the gravity of this global conflict again attests to the complexity of his engagement with the high arts and cultural institutions. In the earlier satirical poetry, critiques of the public art museum as a culture industry primarily target the ways that the prevailing aesthetic dispositions of the art world mediate the public’s experience of art on display. The problems of such forms of mediation are integral to Sassoon’s ekphrastic poetry, but on a vertiginous scale from culture war to literal battle (if at this point still only an anticipated one). While in the satirical verse the museum’s mediation is shaped by prevailing cultural rituals that dovetail aesthetic experience with forms of ideological management, in “A Premonition” the harshest modality of such mediation emerges in the form of a war that threatens to eradicate all art—and all contexts for aesthetic experience—from England’s cultural landscape.

Sassoon’s premonition was vatic. The National Gallery did come under direct attack during the Second World War, as it was struck nine times during German air raids over London in 1940 and 1941. However, despite these attacks, the “Art Collection of the English Nation” remained safe throughout the war. Prior to England’s formal entry in 1939, the Gallery’s holdings were clandestinely transported for their protection: first, dispersed among several private homes throughout England, and then gathered underground in the Manod rock quarry in
Wales, where makeshift infrastructure and a conservation center were established to care for the collection. Still, the National Gallery itself retained its place of prominence in English national culture during the Second World War, even after a number of its galleries were destroyed: the museum’s administrators organized a weekly series of lunchtime concerts featuring classical pianist Myra Hess, which ran unimpeded from 1940 through 1946 and attracted unanticipated crowds of attendees who flocked to the museum for some semblance of cultural continuity during a time when English culture seemed under threat of permanent extinction.\(^\text{17}\)

The effects of the Second World War on the literal and cultural geography of the contemporary European metropolis, and on the museological imperative to curate and conserve cultural traditions, are consociate concerns in the wartime poetry of one of Sassoon’s contemporaries, the expatriate poet H. D., and particularly so in her epic of the London Blitz, *Trilogy*. While in “A Premonition” Sassoon’s poetic speaker anticipates that in the next stage of global conflict the frontline will shift to England’s home front and directly impact everyday life for London and its citizenry, this vision manifests in the familiar idiom of World War I: the mustard gas of the poet’s own trench experiences on the Western Front are what damage the “Art Collection of the English Nation.” What Sassoon did not, and could not, fully anticipate is how modern war technologies and strategies would change from the First World War to the Second, and as a result, the implications these developments would have for the rhetoric of war poetry, including wartime ekphrastic writing. In *Trilogy*, an epic poem of cultural destruction and mystical renewal drawn from H. D.’s first-hand experience of the Blitz, the German air raid campaigns that brought unprecedented levels of destruction to the city shape her responses to the ways in which the atrocities committed by humankind—and the hyper-masculine

\(^{17}\) See Suzanne Bosman, *The National Gallery in Wartime*, for a discussion of the evacuation of the National Gallery’s collection and the cultural events held in the museum during World War II.
epistemological and affective positions that attend it—deflate art’s traditional claims to permanence. But for H. D., the London Blitz also unintentionally disrupts the patriarchal foundations of modern art cultures, enabling her recovery of other ways of experiencing, interpreting, and composing poetry about institutions of art and culture.
Chapter 4
The Muse in the Museum: H. D.’s Relational Ekphrasis

Museums figure prominently in H. D.’s life and work, in ways both anecdotal and fundamental. I’d like to begin with a brief glance at the former, at two career-framing events that transpired in museums: her initiation into the poetic avant-garde and her coronation as one of its foremost practitioners. It was in a tearoom in the British Museum in 1912 that Ezra Pound used swipes of his “creative pencil” to chisel away at her poem “Hermes of the Ways” before submitting it to Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry*, the little magazine that was at the time among the foremost tastemakers in the emergent literary avant-garde (H. D., *End to Torment* 40). Beneath the poem’s text, Pound wrote “H. D. *Imagiste*,” christening Doolittle with her literary name and placing her in the movement that she would be associated with for the greater part of the twentieth century. At the time, H. D. had yet to publish in any major periodicals, and this episode in the British Museum, a space in which she read and worked with Pound and Richard Aldington in those early imagist days, signaled her debut in modernist public culture. The British Museum was then, and still remains, central to London’s cultural and intellectual life, and it was in this space that H. D. received her initial poetic identity, one of many she would adopt during a long career marked by steadily evolving poetic practices and artistic self-identifications. But a later, less renowned museum incident differently—and, I believe, more accurately—demonstrates H. D.’s legacy in twentieth-century literature, and speaks closely to what museum experiences mean to her poetics. While in New York City in the summer of 1960 to receive a prestigious Award of

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1 “Hermes of the Ways” was published in the January 1913 issue of *Poetry*, the first in a sequence of Grecian-themed poems that also included “Priapus” and “Epigram.”

2 A number of important nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers worked in the British Museum’s domed Reading Room in its Central Great Court, including Karl Marx, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Virginia Woolf, and many of the imagist poets. For a discussion of the British Museum’s significance among modernist writers with special focus dedicated to Pound, see Paul 65–69, 74–77.
Merit from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (she was the first female poet to be selected for this honor), H. D. regularly traveled across Fifth Avenue from her hotel to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She used the museum as an impromptu salon for “at homes” during this time, entertaining callers—including Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, two members of a younger generation of poets greatly influenced by her work—around *The Fountain of the Muses*, the Hellenic sculptural pool then installed in the museum’s main restaurant space. Moreover, in a letter to Richard Aldington dated June 16, 1960, H. D. amusingly describes what she calls the “first fiasco” of her series of at homes in the Met: a tray of food, knocked into the pool by one of her guests, had to be “fished out by a ‘character’ with a brush and broom, and we were sorry there were no fish to gobble the floating buns” (*H. D. Papers*).

If the British Museum housed the birth of a poetic identity, the Met provided a location for the solidification of a career of remarkable breadth and influence. The use H. D. made of the Met as a salon space, and the image her letter evokes of a decidedly personal, casual incident played out against the backdrop of the culturally sacral setting of the museum, gestures toward the way private experiences and museum culture are brought into relation throughout her work. Museums function in H. D.’s poetry as staging grounds for her explorations of personal, embodied, and affective ways of relating to art and culture that are enabled by, but must also leverage, the very existence of museums and galleries. This ambivalent relation is nowhere more evident than in H. D.’s ekphrastic descriptions of works of art – and in those moments in which H. D.’s speakers openly decide not to engage with this practice or revel in its limitations for adequately transferring images into language. Art’s institutions provide H. D. a space for testing these limits while offering essential conditions of possibility for refining her own poetic approach to describing both real and mystical aesthetic objects. The influence of museums and
museology suffuses H. D.’s poetry throughout her writing life, although the precise nature of this influence varies alongside her changing poetic styles. For instance, a number of the early imagist poems in *Sea Garden* (1916), her first collection of poems, were inspired by Greek friezes she saw on display in the British Museum and which she and Aldington sketched in the early 1910s. This volume’s organization as a series of ostensibly autonomous, enclosed imagist lyrics bears a more than superficial similarity to the discrete, framed art objects that line a museum gallery’s walls. Similarly, although H. D.’s later poetry eschews the imagist paradigm for the broader scope of the epic, the syncretic mythmaking of these long poems—in which Egyptian, Greek, and Christian mythologies are palimpsestically layered to reveal hidden continuities—strongly resembles the expansive heterogeneity of museum collections and the comparative frameworks upon which so-called ancient civilizations are often represented in them.3

Still, while certain elements of her poetry tacitly recall the curatorial and exhibitionary imperatives of museums, H. D. did not borrow uncritically from museological strategies: rather, her work attends to the aesthetic and personal histories that institutions of this nature typically neglect, and which much of her work aims to recover. This chapter claims that H. D.’s at once critical and creative relationship to the art museum and its collecting practices provided traction for her forays in ekphrasis, her description of artworks both real and imagined, and both present and absent in art’s institutions. In H. D.’s roman à clef *Asphodel* (1921-2), and then more

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3 Ancient Greek and Egyptian artifacts are often displayed in a continuous narrative (or in parallel) in museum collections, in effect seeming to be homogenous signifiers of an “ancient world” that both predates and shape the arts of later periods. In the British Museum a visitor can follow a snaking path that conjoins its Egyptian and Greek rooms, which suggests a circuitous but nevertheless concrete continuity across their cultures. When a visitor enters the main entrance of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on 82nd Street, she can choose to begin her path through the museum through either the Greco-Roman (to the left) or Egyptian (to the right) wings, collections that occupy nearly parallel spaces and which suggest their commensurate importance in the development of modern art. Carol Duncan claims that this historical organization situates classical Greek and Egyptian artifacts on a trajectory towards more advanced and enlightened forms that peaks at the Italian Renaissance, which is typically exhibited along the museum’s central architectural axis (32, 48).
expansively in her epic poem *Trilogy* (1944-6), museums at once provide H. D. with creative possibilities and expose her to the predominant modes of aesthetic experience in museology, influences she negotiates in order to gain access to voices and histories that early twentieth-century museum holdings commonly marginalized: specifically, those of women as both creators and observers in the artistic field.\(^4\) In these works, H. D. recontours the ekphrastic scene of art contemplation in a way at once appropriative and revisionary of museology, raising questions about the nature of institutionally sanctioned ways of seeing and, crucially, the blind spots and biases therein. In *Asphodel*, H. D.’s surrogate, Hermione Gart, articulates an affective need to reclaim private experiences with museum objects against the backdrop of an increasingly commercialized and mediated art culture that alienates individual museum-goers from meaningful connection with the art of the past. The mode of aesthetic experience that Hermione articulates recurs with heightened stakes in *Trilogy*, where it enables the speaker’s recovery, through the cultivation of sensuous poetic speech-acts, of a mystical-yet-familiar female god from the margins of a masculine-normative artistic tradition that systematically minimizes the cultural significance of female art, spirituality, and non-hierarchical ways of seeing. H. D.’s interest in the conservation of cultural history in poetry, a task that becomes imperative in her work written during and in response to the London Blitz and World War II, is entwined with a desire for private and personal responses to the discrete objects that constitute a culture. In *Trilogy*, this desire contours H. D.’s ambivalent engagement with the poetics of ekphrasis: while the superficial linguistic description of an aesthetic object is associated with imperialistic ways of seeing, H. D.’s poetic speaker cultivates alternative modes of registering the aesthetic in poetry instead rooted in relational interactions among the object, the observer, and her poetics. In

\(^4\) See chapter 2 for a discussion of Bourdieu’s concept of the “artistic field.”
H. D.’s writing, a relational ekphrasis—detached from the phallocentric, paragonal competition between the arts rooted in Lessing’s *Laocöon*, and which instead routes aesthetic meaning through the unfettered dialogic encounter between the verbal text and its visual other—is deemed necessary for glimpsing and poetically representing the mystical phenomena that H. D.’s speakers often discover in the sensible world and its institutions.

This chapter contributes to the ongoing critical project of disentangling H. D.’s poetry from orthodox definitions of modernist autonomy by addressing how, in her work, poetic discourse becomes a means of signifying social meanings beyond the text, specifically in acting for H. D. as an entry point into twentieth-century debates on the place of the public art museum in modern society. Criticism of this bent has had to contend with the (still lingering) assumption shared by many that H. D.’s hermeticism and investments in mythology and pre-modern religious culture in much of her poetry mitigates her immediate significance to recent reconsiderations of modernism as a movement defined and debated in public discourse, a critical approach emblematized by work in the New Modernist Studies. For instance, Lawrence Rainey, in an infamously oppositional reading of H. D.’s work and its circulation, takes H. D.’s “miniscule corpus of nonfiction” to indicate that she “felt little impetus to engage in an active and genuine dialogue” with her male contemporaries who contributed to the “production of

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5 This phenomenon is not exclusive to contemporary critical approaches to H. D.’s modernism, as a number of initial reviewers also claimed her poetry is at its best when at a measured remove from modernity and disengaged from poetic theorization: her poems are variously described as existing “with nothing political, no arguments, no denunciations” but rather “pure emotion” (Felton 40); “beauty independent of laws, holding but to its own hard and bitter perfection” (Fletcher 268); “pagan ecstasy … of a neophyte on a holiday, gone mad with a larger ration of beauty” (Anderson 18); and “perhaps less happy when dealing with more immediate matters … H. D. is most satisfyingly, most successfully herself when speaking through the lips of a Greek character” (Seiffert 163). Amy Lowell, friend to H. D. and sympathetic critic of her work, refers to the poet as having a “strange, dryad-like quality, she seems always as though just startled from a brake of fern,” characterizing her as a kind of antiquity that cannot be neatly integrated into modern life (251). She describes H. D.’s poems as “fragile as shells, and as transparent” with “echoes of a beauty long departed” that suggest H. D. “dwells in a world of her own longings” (256-7, emphasis mine).
critical and theoretical writings that articulated the historical, formal, or ideological grounds for the modernist experiment” (154-5). Of course, H. D. was notoriously reluctant to commit to any overt political statements in her poetry and shied away from direct engagement with social and political causes. When paired with the allegedly autotelic nature of many of her poems, this reticence about direct politicization might seem to justify the assumptions that H. D. was allergic to the kinds of aesthetic and political theorizing that writers at the center of the received high modernist canon (Pound and Eliot, say) considered an integral component of poetic craft, and which critics trying to dislodge modernism from charges of social disengagement have found essential to its rehabilitation.  

I question, though, if the relative absence of discretely theoretical prose in H. D.’s oeuvre is unalloyed evidence of her disengagement from the debates that, for many critics, have defined the way modernists enfolded activism and aesthetics. When taken monolithically, the notion that socially and theoretically attuned modernist writing must assume the kind of agonistic public voice familiar from the pillars of high modernism neglects other points of entry into institutional discourse that may be present in poetic texts. While H. D. would pen only one distinctly theoretical work, the opaque philosophical meditation Notes on Thought and Vision (1919), in her work poetic discourse—including the poetics of ekphrasis—enables her critique of the museological codes that mediate access to cultural traditions. In this chapter’s second and third

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6 For a discussion of H. D.’s resistance to collective political actions, see Friedman, “Modernism of the ‘Scattered Remnant’: Race and Politics in the Development of H. D.’s Modernist Vision.”

7 See Levenson, who in his Genealogy of Modernism (1986) conjures H. D.’s place as an influential modernist poet only for the force of her importance to be redirected towards Pound: “Pound saw some work of H. D., coined the name ‘Imagiste,’ and proceeded to formulate a doctrine to justify what she had written by instinct” (153).

8 This claim runs parallel to Friedman’s that women’s modernist poetry was expected to be continuous with the “short, passionate lyric” associated with Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti has enabled certain critics “to label [H. D.] … ‘escapist’” and thus irrelevant to modernism as a publicly engaged movement, effectively obscuring her poetry’s similarities to (and significance alongside) that of Eliot, Pound, W.B. Yeats, and William Carlos Williams (“Who Buried H. D.” 53).
sections specifically, I argue that the relational ekphrastic strategies of *Trilogy* represent a form of cultural theory, a theorizing in poetry that actively integrates a critique of museum-sponsored aesthetic experiences into constitutive elements of ekphrastic writing: the phenomenology of poet/object relations and the translation of sense perceptions onto the poetic line. My reading of H. D.’s ekphrastic poetics as a mode of cultural critique in *Trilogy* takes inspiration from Susan Stanford Friedman’s suggestion that “a conventional definition of political engagement as public activism has obscured the significant role of politics in the development of H. D.’s post World War I modernism,” and that for H. D. writing itself mobilizes action “against the dominant culture” (“Modernism of the ‘Scattered Remnant’” 94). While Friedman crafts this argument through close reading of H. D.’s prose fiction, I find it fruitful to shift terms and consider the ways in which H. D.’s poetics inform the cultural work of *Trilogy*.

It must be noted that what I identify in *Trilogy* as an aesthetic theory, insofar as H. D. suggests a particular way of experiencing art has the generative power to aid in the project of cultural rehabilitation following the London Blitz, is continuous with the relational emphases and assumptions that characterized her ways of encountering the phenomenal world in other contexts. As she diligently charted in her late writings, throughout her life H. D. experienced (and described in her writing) a series of inexplicable visions, including a serpent entwined with a thistle, dolphins swimming alongside the boat that she and her intimate companion Bryher took to Greece, the Winged Niké ascending a ladder, and a statuesque female deity descending a staircase. H. D. spent much time and energy decoding the private resonances of these phenomena, their connections to her own personal mythology, in psychoanalytic sessions with Sigmund Freud in the 1930s, séances with the spiritualist medium Arthur Bhaduri between 1941 and 1946, and ultimately, her literary writing during and after World War II, including the poetry
volumes Trilogy, Helen in Egypt (1961), and Hermetic Definition (1957-61, published 1972), and the memoirs and thinly-fictionalized novels The Gift (1941-3, published 1988), Majic Ring (1943-4, published 2009), and The Sword Went Out to Sea (1946-7, published 2007). This sustaining drive to unlock the personal encoded in the spiritual vision, the “spell … in every sea-shell” (Trilogy 8), becomes something of a poetic practice in Trilogy, structuring H. D.’s encounters with the material limitations of traditional art cultures to account for the nature of these visions, which she typically records in the imagery and terminology of visual aesthetics. As suggested by a number of discerning readers of H. D.’s poetry, matter and means often interpenetrate in her verse, where prosody and poetic argument are codependent and mutually determinative, and the very act of producing art is used to respond to major political issues of the first half of the twentieth century, including the Second World War, the social and cultural implications of shifting gender ideologies, and the status (and efficacy) of art in cultural modernity. This chapter extends such claims to consider the interplay between H. D.’s positions towards the public art museum and its practices for putting “rare objects” on display, and the poetics of ekphrasis as a means of describing such objects (H. D., Trilogy 4). In Trilogy, H. D. charts the cultural rehabilitation of the Lady against a typology of aesthetic representations that in their accretion take on the mantle of the western cultural tradition that the modern museum

9 In his introduction to The Majic Ring, Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos describes much of H. D.’s late writing as paligenetic literature, which attempts to enact rather than describe rituals (xxv-vi). Tryphonopoulos’ expert reading of the occult resonances of H. D.’s poetry during this period is a highly useful resource for understanding the work these poems perform for her, as ways of actively processing and interpreting (and reinterpreting) psychic phenomena.

10 Perhaps because of imagism’s association with modernist anti-formalism, and also perhaps because the revival of critical interest in H.D.’s work emerged in the 1970s, after the New Critical wave had crested, there have been fewer studies dedicated to the formal properties of H. D.’s verse relative to those of contemporaries like Pound, Williams, or Moore. For some exceptions to this trend, in addition to others discussed throughout this chapter, see Alicia Ostriker, “No Rules of Procedure: The Open Poetics of H. D.” (1990); William Wenthe, “‘The Hieratic Dance’: Prosody and the Unconscious in H. D.’s Poetry” (1995); and Laity, H. D. and the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle.
was established to protect, and in doing so, calls attention to the systemic and systematic gender imbalances that silently underwrite the supposedly egalitarian space of museums. In doing so, she also conveys a tacit argument about the cultural politics of ekphrastic description, by rejecting imperialistic and authoritative linguistic practices in favor of an ekphrasis made from the experiential effects of seeing and feeling the aesthetic, dispositions that her work explicitly juxtaposes against the masculine emphases of museum culture.

I. Gendering the Modern Museum

While the collections of universal survey museums make the promise of exhibiting a totalizing and objective view of cultural history, their evolutionary narratives of art’s development can only ever be incomplete; as recent feminist interventions in the field of museum studies have shown, it is often women whom are minimized or altogether excluded as active cultural producers and observers in museum collections’ implicit narratives of art and cultural history. We may be reminded of Griselda Pollock’s argument that the “central figure of art historical discourse … is presented as an ineffable ideal which complements the bourgeois myth of a universal, classless Man” around which ideas of culture and creative expression are organized (20). Pollock argues that such establishment-supported definitions of art and aesthetic value are informed by the asymmetrical involvements of men and women in the structuration of culture, an asymmetry aligned with uneven educational opportunities, access to culture, and working knowledge of the interpretive dispositions privileged by dominant aesthetic discourse. According to Pollock, this construction underwrites the institutional privileging of male artistic

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11 “The museum’s primary function is ideological. It is meant to impress upon those who use or pass through it society’s most revered beliefs and values … The museum’s physical prominence and monumental appearance signify its importance. Absorbing more manual and imaginative labor than any other type of architecture, the museum affirms the power and social authority of a patron class” (Duncan and Carol 449).
achievement and the reflexive construction of female-authored art as unworldly and unsophisticated, limiting accounts of women’s involvement in visual culture to being either producers of sentimental or derivative art or the muse to male artists.

The ritual exclusion of other cultural identities in the museum space naturalizes the white male artist as the prime mover of art history, thus organizing narratives of cultural, national, and social histories around this ideal artistic subject. This disparity—along with the commodification of women as models and muses in the dominant visual tropology of Western art—inexorably genders the phenomenology of museum visiting, ensuring that the museum and the objects exhibited within it cannot but signify differently to visitors of various gender and sexual identifications. Feminist approaches in museum theory often follow the example set by Pollock by examining the way these allegedly universal standards for aesthetic worth and the corollary assumption of the “ideal subject” to which art speaks inform museological practices. Gaby Porter, for instance, argues that museum curation is often interwoven with masculine ideologies that inform institutional taxonomies, “methods … [that are] presented as objective, neutral and rational, their goal to create completeness and a comprehensive historical and material record.” But these purportedly objective curatorial strategies implicitly “construct and maintain the male order, with women at its margins,” their representation in museum collections at best “haphazard and inconsistent” (112). Hilde Hein further claims that the museum space is gendered by the institutional shaping of visitor responses around traditionally masculine epistemological positions, including disinterestedness, power, and authority. By delegitimizing relational (or otherwise interactive) ways of experiencing objects, Hein argues, the museum structures the viewer/exhibition relationship around a “dualism of subject and object” that “maintains the non-

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12 For a discussion of the intersections of museums and aesthetic discourse, see, e.g., Bourdieu and Darbel 111-12.
equivalence between active and passive (agent / acted upon), knower and known” such that “objects do not ‘speak’; subjects interpret them, thereby wielding authority over them” (55). Thus coordinated, this mode of aesthetic experience contributes to the “sense of certainty and stability” one feels in museums, a latent expression of “patrician and patriarchal authority” that encodes an Enlightenment belief in the eminent comprehensibility and controllability of the object-world.

These approaches to museum theory call attention to the conservative, parochial cultural narratives that sustain the ideological infrastructure of museums. Furnished with this feminist paradigm, we can now look back at the museums of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century not just as the egalitarian spaces intended to foster a cultural education across genders and socioeconomic classes they were (or at least thought they were) intended to be, but also as institutional spaces in which normalizing forces produce allegedly objective ideas of culture and society that depend as much on what they exclude as on what they contain.¹³ H. D.’s ekphrastic poetics problematize this masculine orientation of modern museum culture by cultivating alternative means of responding to aesthetic objects beyond the museological “dualism between subject and object.” In Trilogy, the poetic representation of—and strategic refusals to represent—aesthetic objects depends on intense relational exchanges without institutional mediation, exchanges that generate meanings that fall beyond the ambit of establishment art cultures. While the gendered implications of this relational model of art perception are most vividly explored in Trilogy, the terms of her revisionary museology are earlier rehearsed in Asphodel, a narrative

¹³ On this point, Bennett writes that although a number of the museums founded in England during the nineteenth century were intended to educate people from different classes and allowed people from these different classes to share the same space, the museum’s representational strategies were far from class inclusive. Instead, these museums encapsulated and transmitted “the power of the ruling culture, a power which manifests itself precisely through its ability to exclude everything which, through its exclusion, is defined as other and subordinate” (118).
telling of H. D.’s early development as a poet in one of Europe’s robust expatriate artistic communities. H. D. may not have produced a large corpus of poetic criticism or theory, but *Asphodel* can be consulted for some insight into the personal beliefs, associations, and experiences that motivate her later poetry: while we must not too easily equate H. D. with her fictional counterpart, the text’s treatment of Hermione’s longing for spiritually enriching contact with art allows us to extrapolate something close to H. D.’s own thinking about the status of aesthetic experience within cultural institutions. In this dissertation’s single foray into fiction, I turn to *Asphodel* to ground H. D.’s poetic experimentations in ekphrasis within a broader aesthetic program that invests aesthetic experience with private and quasi-mystical resonances that foster artistic development and inspiration. Particularly, Hermione’s expressed belief that an art object, when personally experienced, can be an “answer to prayer” provides a rubric for the feminist practices of cultural renewal engaged in *Trilogy*.

II. “The Louvre and the British Museum Hold One Together”: *Asphodel* (1921-2)

*Asphodel*—one of the autobiographical fictions that compose the “Madrigal cycle,” along with *Paint it Today* (1921) and *Bid Me to Live* (1933-50)—is set in the expatriate community that clustered around Pound and Aldington before and during World War I. The roman à clef’s chronology closely follows events in H. D.’s life: her marriage to Aldington, his conscription into the military, and his extramarital affair; her brief romantic relationship with composer Cecil Gray and pregnancy with his child; and the welcome and welcomed entrance of Bryher into her life. The narrative comprises two sections separated by the war, which is referred to throughout the text as a social, epistemological, and spiritual “chasm.” In the first, “pre-chasm” (142) section, Hermione’s explorations of French culture and history are depicted in a visit to the...
Louvre, dialogues on art and culture with her impetuous fiancé George Lowndes (Pound), and her imaginative immersions in the lives of French female cultural icons Joan of Arc and Marie Antoinette. As the newly expatriated Hermione navigates Europe’s art cultures, she finds personal meaning in the private, affective experiences she has with artworks and artifacts encountered in museums.

Throughout Asphodel, H. D. focuses closely on the institutions—principally museums and churches—that define Europe’s cultural, intellectual, and touristic landscape. Hermione, as a recent expatriate but also an initiate into London’s artistic avant-garde (by virtue of her pre-existing relationship with George, the center of this social circle, from her earlier days in America), approaches these institutions with a double vision: she possesses at once the eye of the tourist outsider who approaches European culture from a distance and the eye of the native skeptic who distrusts the sense of cultural performativity these institutions radiate, their being presented as synecdoches of an idealized image of European culture on the touristic marketplace. The tensions between these two ways of relating to culture resolve in Hermione’s preference for personally felt cultural experiences derived by interacting with art in institutional spaces, a perspective that informs the ekphrastic episodes in H. D.’s later epic verse. Hermione gestures towards the value of such personal aesthetic experiences when she explains to Lowndes that visiting Europe’s art museums and viewing the classical artifacts in their holdings is palliative for Hermione’s personal anxieties regarding their expatriate community, her ill-defined relationship to George (the passage is initiated when Hermione inquires whether they are still engaged, to which George responds “Gawd forbid”), and the general conditions of modern culture:
Those pictures in the Louvre transported one and I felt the same way about the Nike. The winged Victory. I told the Rabbs I didn’t. I don’t mean that. What do I mean? I mean seeing the Elgin marbles this morning gave me the same feeling and I didn’t know, don’t know whether I’m in Rome or Paris. I mean the Louvre and the British Museum hold one together, keep one from going to bits. For one is all in bits. (41)

Hermione’s visits to the Louvre and the British Museum and encounters with two of these museums’ renowned antiquities—the Winged Victory of Samothrace and the Elgin Marbles, respectively—fortify her sense of personal identity. Although these artifacts are exhibited as signifiers of the grandeur of past artistic cultures, Hermione believes they transcend their historical contexts to communicate the permanence of art and humanity. That H. D. ties this sense of detachment from the past to the Winged Victory and the Elgin Marbles is perhaps appropriate given that these artifacts arrived at European institutions through archaeological excavations that were intended to recover Western culture’s foundations in antiquity. The controversy surrounding the British Museum’s acquisition and continued holding of the Elgin Marbles—“a veritable suspense story,” in Germain Bazin’s terms—also dovetail with H. D.’s broader concern with connecting to an authentic cultural past.14 This conceit is particularly revealing given the imminent threat of World War I in the novel, a cataclysm with the capacity to blast all “to bits.” As an ameliorative rejoinder to a larger sociopolitical climate in which

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14 The debates that still rage over Lord Elgin’s (and England’s) rights to the marbles originated almost from the moment of their first discover, when they were enjoined with conversations over their authenticity. As Bazin reports, when the Parthenon marbles were first brought to England and exhibited in Lord Elgin’s home, they “became the subject of a stormy dispute”: one antiquities expert “pronounced the workshop copies after Phidias and possibly even Hadrianic productions” while others “considered the masterpieces by Phidias. The dispute lasted until 1814 when it ended violently with Lord Elgin being accused of vandalism and scorned as a ‘marble pedlar’ … The opinion of the Dilettanti [who felt them fakes] contributed to the British Museum’s reluctance to buy them” (201-2). Eventually, the Museum did acquire the Elgin Marbles, where they would become the centerpiece of the museum’s collection in Greek antiquities.
personal (not to mention historical and cultural) safety was soon to be precarious at best, the feelings elicited when standing before classical art paradoxically clarify Hermione’s sense of self through an unsettling of her temporal and spatial orientations.

While Hermione’s imagined withdrawal into antiquity in this passage may seem to confirm the frequent charge that H. D. desires to escape from the modern world and into the classical, the larger context of Asphodel reveals that the structure and substance of Hermione’s desired withdrawal is underpinned by a discerning critique of the material contexts within which individuals routinely encounter aesthetic traditions. Early in her time in Paris, Hermione has a religiously coded experience in the Louvre interpenetrated by questions about art, self, and society. The crowded galleries of the Louvre, Europe’s first public art museum, induce Hermione’s anxiety and call to her mind an analogy between museums and cathedrals, two centers of tourist activity in twentieth-century Europe: “O let me alone. God. God. This is worse than Cathedrals. Let me alone. Let me find for myself” (19). Hermione articulates a desire for private experiences within a Louvre that could be miraculously evacuated of the mass of tourists that presently inundate its halls, an overwhelming crowd that effectively distances her from the gallery exhibitions. Her sense of alienation from the cultural ritual of museum going is further suggested when her attention turns to the figure of the museum docent, who embodies Hermione’s distrust of the way museums mediate, regiment, and depersonalize the public’s experience of art, a sentiment that might recall the animus of Siegfried Sassoon’s poetic speaker in “In The National Gallery.” Hermione observes the docent leading a small group of American tourists—“a party from Kansas,” Hermione estimates—through the Louvre’s collection of antiquities:
The guide was saying “and here ladies and gentlemen in the glass case at the left” (he never varied his formula) “you have the authentic fragment of the foot, the bit of the hand and the arm and the lost apple.” How do you know it is an apple, how can you tell it is her hand or her foot? You can’t but nobody ever asked such simple questions. They accepted the dogma as good Presbyterians, good Methodists, good noncomformists or even good catholics have a way of doing without question, without grace or without bickering. (19-20)

Several elements of this guided tour are identified as particularly pernicious to the group’s experience of art: the formulaic manner of the docent’s routine and the reiterative, impersonal structure of aesthetic experience this formula promotes; the way piecemeal or incomplete knowledge is communicated as objective and authoritative; and the mediated, uncritical contact between museumgoer and cultural history these strategies promote (“without question, without grace or without bickering”). The members of the Kansas party are encouraged not to engage with the museum’s holdings directly, but instead to depend on the institution (and its apparatuses) for knowledge of the object before them. Hermione’s critique of the tour guide’s routine also outlines the broader parameters for H. D.’s revisions of the poetics of ekphrasis: the

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15 Although H. D. does not provide enough context to indicate which of the Louvre’s collection of classical statuary the guide is referring to, we may estimate that it is of Aphrodite, since representations of the goddess often depict her holding an apple to symbolize her victory in the Judgment of Paris. Hermione’s zeroing in on the tour group’s uncritical observation of a dismembered goddess can be read as an early iteration of the reconstitution of “the Lady” from denigrated cultural fragments in *Tribute to the Angels*, discussed below.

16 Hermione’s criticism of the museum tour engages with the forms of anti-touristic discourse common among a number of novelists and travel writers in twentieth-century literary circles. The rise of the tourism industry in the early nineteenth century, precipitated in part by the popularization of Baedeker travel guides and new transportation technologies, was perceived by a number of modern writers to encapsulate a degraded, because patterned and obligatory, form of cultural knowledge. James Buzard argues that such anti-touristic rhetorical strategies dichotomize touristic and anti-touristic experience around the discursive categories of superficial and authentic knowledge respectively. For the anti-tourist, “the *genius loci*” of places that were “lurking in secret precincts ‘off the beaten track’” and discoverable “only by the sensitive ‘traveller,’ not the vulgar tourist” represent the most genuine contact with culture (6).
complacency and superficiality in the way in which the guide turns the visual object into language, and consequently instructs the tour group in how to see and interpret it, will later be confronted and elided in Trilogy as H. D. pursues other strategies for representing one’s visual impressions in poetry.

Here, however, the focus is on how such forms of institutional mediation as the docent’s routine prepare the museum’s visitor to enact the “austere, quasi-scholastic disposition” that Bourdieu associates with the “purified, sublimated pleasures demanded by the pure aesthetic” (Distinction 272). To Bourdieu, the “pure gaze” delegitimates personal affective responses to artworks in support of a Kantian disinterestedness that validates only art perceptions that draw from a delimited body of sanctioned formalist aesthetic knowledges. The docent in the Louvre emblematizes and embodies Bourdieu’s theory of the pure gaze, with his interposition between the tour group and the statue focusing the tourists’ attentions on the artworks’ provenance (as an “authentic fragment”) and on its formal properties. To Hermione, when experienced touristically the modern museum estranges the museumgoer from having a direct relationship to the artifacts on display, seen both in the literal distancing brought about by the suffocating crowds and the epistemological distancing represented by the pedantic docent who orients aesthetic experience towards routine appreciation. Framed against the docent’s approach, Hermione’s anti-institutional rhetoric embraces a concept of the aesthetic gaze that instead metabolizes her private experiences of art and culture as a means of giving access to the museum’s hidden charms.

Hermione’s predilections may initially seem to chime with what Bourdieu identified as an haute bourgeois disdain for institutional devices of aesthetic pedagogy, the kinds of mass-market approaches to culture necessary for a petit bourgeois that must be taught the artistic
knowledge and interpretive dispositions that are an allegedly innate faculty for the true initiate.\footnote{See chapter four, “Cultural Works and Cultivated Disposition,” in Bourdieu and Darbel.}

To this point it must be underscored that Hermione’s distaste for the conditions of cultural experience in the modern museum is not expressed on the grounds of the tour’s contrived nature, that the information conveyed by the docent should be innately known by the true initiate who has no need for instruction. Rather, Hermione questions whether aesthetic experience ought to be intellectualized through formalized pedagogies at all. She expresses instead a ragged, embodied, and affective need for aesthetic experience that is antithetical to the bodiless optics of the pure gaze, which privilege appreciation without sensation. Hermione describes the Louvre’s essence as that which is not imminently visible in the “cold galleries and downstairs the marbles like ice, cut like ice,” but rather what they encapsulate, “something in their shapes that people didn’t see couldn’t see or they would go mad with it” (19). These buried significations are inherently affecting, appealing to the museumgoer’s sensuous perceptions and bodily responses: “if you prowled and prowled and waited for different days, little effects of shadow and light and half light caught you; depending on how empty or how full the room was, you got caught by something. That was the answer to prayer” (emphasis mine). In a moment that enfolds aesthetic experience within the ideas of the true religious life familiar from William James, Asphodel suggests that such experiences with art can only be personal, felt in their highest intensity beyond the pale of the crowd\footnote{The distinction Hermione makes between the individual who has a spiritual encounter within the museum and the mass of tourists trapped within a reiterative structure of second-hand experiences echoes that which James makes between the ordinary and true believers of religious life: while for “ordinary religious believers” structures of beliefs have “been made … by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit,” “original experiences” are reserved for “individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever” (14).}; her attention is trained not on the art objects themselves but on her imagined phenomenological and spiritual experience of them, a rebuttal to the “pure gaze” premised on the interrelation between objective sight and authoritative aesthetic knowledge.
The primitive imagery evoked in the description of the initiate who “propped and prowled” the museum’s gallery without discernible motive suggests that meaningful contact with art originates in a museumgoer’s raw, unmediated responses to the collection’s hidden essences absent the intrusions of institutional pedagogy: “Let me creep along your corridors. O God. If only I could come here at night when it’s empty and speak with you …” (20). This moment noticeably recalls the closing image in the Dial version of Marianne Moore’s “When I Buy Pictures,” the image of the connoisseur who takes art “in hand as a savage would take a looking-glass,” which makes a comparable suggestion that personal responses to aesthetic objects are, at the moment they materialize, always already at odds with the depersonalizing standards that predicate dominant artistic discourse. For what resonates so deeply with Hermione is not those aesthetic qualities and modes of art perception conventionally privileged in such discourse—“[n]ot always the beautiful things” (19)—but whatever qualities strike her at the moment of aesthetic experience. This is not to suggest, then, that Hermione’s vision of enriching relational experience involves the complete invalidation of museums’ claims to being generative loci for cultural experience, as would be argued in several of the other modernist anti-museum polemics discussed in this dissertation’s introduction. Rather, Hermione finds the conditions of possibility for an authentic relationship with culture in private and personal experiences within the public museum space – and, notably, in the very first public museum, the Louvre. While the guided museum tour that Hermione witnesses in the Louvre suggestively stifles the possibilities for personal response by locating cultural objects within impersonal, codified registers of aesthetic knowledge, Hermione nevertheless views the institution itself as a vital context for private aesthetic experiences.
This scene in the Louvre likely draws from an experience H. D. had there in 1911, during one of the visits with Frances Gregg recast in *Asphodel*. In her memoir *Tribute to Freud* (1944) she recounts a vision she had in 1904 or 1905, in either a sleeping or semiconscious state, of a serpent and a thistle carved into stone. Her research into the meaning of this symbol proved fruitless, until she encountered a signet in the museum engraved with this same symbol:

I found this design later but only once and in only one place … ‘Here it is,’ I said on one of our first visits to the galleries of the Louvre, ‘quick’ as if it might vanish like the original ‘brick.’ It was a small signet-ring in a case of Graeco-Roman or Hellenistic seals and signets. Under the glass, set in a row with other seal-rings, was a little grey-agate oval. It was a small ring with rather fragile setting, as far as one could judge, but the design was unmistakable. On the right side, as in the original, was the coiled, upright serpent; on the left, an exquisitely chased stalk, with the spiny double leaf and the flower-head, our thistle. I have never found this design anywhere else… (65)

H. D. imbues this encounter with the signet with metaphysical significance, as a confirmation of her dream-vision in material form. The serpent-and-thistle ring described in *Tribute to Freud* is not explicitly mentioned in *Asphodel*, but this personal detail (about which she seems to have been protective when it first occurred; as indicated in her *Tribute to Freud*, she told only Pound and Gregg about her vision) is far too similar to Hermione’s longing for spiritual communion with objects in *Asphodel* to be coincidental. In *Asphodel*, as in the description of this moment H. D. provides in *Tribute to Freud*, the museum functions as a space that can foster unanticipated spiritual communion between individuals and the artifacts on display. It is particularly telling that H. D. returns to this event nearly three decades after the fact in her memoir of her psychoanalytic sessions with Freud in Vienna and London in the 1930s, a project that she was
working on simultaneous to her drafting of the first of the epic war poems that would become *Trilogy, The Walls Do Not Fall*; as the two sections of this chapter to follow discuss, museums and the possibilities for numinous, unexpected, and emotionally moving experiences in them are crucial components of the poem’s charted path towards cultural renewal, a path traced continually through H. D.’s ekphrastic encounters with both material and mystical visual objects.

III. “Like Rare Objects in a Museum”: *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944)

*Asphodel* remained unpublished during H. D.’s lifetime (its first publication came in 1992) and the only extant typescript, archived in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, bears the ominous edict “DESTROY” across the title page in H. D.’s hand. Still, Hermione’s belief in the spiritual dimension of aesthetic experience found a “haven, / heaven” (*Trilogy* 59) in H. D.’s late poetry. Her poetry of the 1940s adapts Hermione’s critique of routinized and mediated art experience with an added emphasis on the feminist implications in the suggestion that art’s affective resonances can be “an answer to prayer.” In *Trilogy*, this preference for aesthetic experiences that elicit meaning from the observer’s metaphysical communion with the aesthetic object intertwines with the poems’ broader rejection of conventionalized ways of seeing and interpreting cultures. In *Asphodel*, Hermione’s sense of personal security and identity is reified by relational contact with art and denies a bourgeois cultural tradition that promulgates disinterestedness as the singular path to cultural knowledge; in H. D.’s war poetry this formulation is extended to reevaluate and problematize the institutional suppression of women’s involvement in artistic cultures.

*Trilogy* is H. D.’s tripartite response to the London Blitz and the status of myth and ritual in modernity, explored in the dialectical pressure between the poet’s personal experiences in
London and the larger historical and social forces that came to a head in World War II. H. D. remained in her London flat at 49 Lowndes Square with Bryher throughout the bombing campaigns despite the obvious risks, and her first-hand experiences of the devastation that war brought to the modern city, along with a vision she had of a flowering tree, provided her with the necessary impetus to begin to write poetry again after an eleven-year dry spell. Trilogy is comprised of three long poems broken into forty-three free verse cantos that are set (mostly) in couplets—*The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945), and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946)—each providing visions of the interstices of classical history and modernity with a particular focus on the fate of female spiritual figures in western culture. The cultural work of these three poems develops along a progressive trajectory from theory to praxis, as the degraded state of modernity is assessed in the first, the possibilities for redemption with the rejuvenation of female spirituality introduced in the second, and a revision of Biblical narrative to unlock a spiritual refuge undertaken in the third. My present reading of ekphrasis and institutional critique in Trilogy focuses on its first two book, for in *The Flowering of the Rod*, what H. D. termed her “peace poem” (*Between History & Poetry* 37), the more pointed critique of modernity gives way to visions of healing for those who “have shown / that we could stand” and “have withstood // the anger, frustration, / bitter fire of destruction” of the Second World War, and can now “mount higher / to love—resurrection” (113-5). This very possibility for cultural and spiritual rehabilitation that defines *Flowering* is prepared for by the cultural criticism developed in the first two books.  

19 Though *The Flowering of the Rod* is outside the ambit of the museological criticism I am interested in following in Trilogy, Susan Schweik has shown that *The Flowering of the Rod* is not so easily reducible to the idea of the autotelic “peace poem.” Her argument about feminist revisionary mythmaking in the poem calls attention to the fact that the birth of Christ, the crucifixion, and bundle of myrrh, all images invoked by H. D., are common tropes in Second World War poetry by male authors who more securely claimed the status of “war poet.” By reiterating these tropes to “demystify women’s parts within [them]”
H. D.’s characteristically discerning perspective on gender relations seems to have sharpened during World War II, as she witnessed many of the women around her (including her daughter Perdita and partner Bryher) adopt active civilian roles in support of the war effort and for ensuring the safe travel of refugees. But in Trilogy, where H. D.’s primary concern is the precariousness and necessity of the artist during war, this awareness of women’s crucial social role in wartime society is reassigned to modern art cultures, enabling her to consider the possibilities of female-authored art and aesthetic experience in the wake of such destruction. Moreover, in these poems H. D.’s attention to the gendered experiences of both art and war is traced into formal engagements with the poetics of ekphrasis, as the contemplation of works of art enables her poetic speaker both to evaluate the state of modern culture following the devastations of the Blitz and to cultivate conditions for cultural rehabilitation through the encouragement and sustainment of female-authored art. The Walls Do Not Fall initiates, in London’s ruined cityscape, a search for the conditions of possibility for renewal beyond the destruction, negation, and negativity represented by the war. To H. D.’s poetic speaker, World War II has had the unintended consequence of decentering traditional signifiers of masculine modernity, opening space for the recuperation of a set of previously disregarded values and practices—including mutability, alchemy, and poetry—that can rehabilitate the spiritual

(290), H. D. challenges the marginalization of women’s agency in the production of art that responds to war, a position common with the privileging of authenticity and the figure of the male soldier-poet during and immediately following World War I.

20 In H. D.’s writing of this period, the figure of the female mobile-canteen driver becomes emblematic of women’s participation on the homefront: in “Bunny,” a vignette written in January 1941, H. D. describes the activities of these women as “pushing forward in a new dance, a cosmic dance of heroism, such as the world has never seen nor dreamed of” (Within the Walls 110), and in “May 1943,” a young woman named Goldie, killed while driving an emergency vehicle, becomes an unexpected civilian war hero, her personal sacrifice supporting the national collective identity (“Goldie was one of us, / we are one with Goldie,” 160). Both “Bunny” and “May 1943” are included in the 2014 printing of H. D.’s unpublished World War II writings, Within the Walls / What Do I Love? Annette Debo’s introduction to this edition provides a crucial narrative of H. D. and Bryher’s experiences remaining in their London flat throughout the Blitz and World War II and the general living conditions in the city during the 1940s.
sensitivity to encountered phenomena that she believed the war had quelled. In *Tribute to the Angels*, these new values allow H. D. to arrange for the reclamation of female spirituality in the figure of the Lady, whose representation in the poem is inspired by H. D.’s vision, two decades earlier, of inexplicable flickering images on a wall in the hotel Angleterre et Belle Venise in Corfu. The Lady’s appearance projected against the hotel room’s wall is decoded against masculine imperatives to exhaustively know and compartmentalize her in received epistemological taxonomies and aesthetic traditions, through the creation of an ekphrastic description that circumscribes her identity to language; the speaker’s vision of the Lady belies such formulations, and she bequeaths to a gathered audience of three female poets a blank text, “the unwritten volume of the new” that marks the beginning of a neoteric historiography (103).

The relational thinking that subtends the poetics of *Trilogy* is explicitly formulated over and against concepts of museum display and the parochial cultural ideologies that these practices support. Particularly, *Trilogy* contends that such exhibition strategies have eroded understandings of the significance of female subjects in cultural history, reducing women to no more than objects of artistic representation who are kept from active participation in cultural rituals such as art making and museum-going.

In *Walls*, the elision of interpretive hierarchies enables transformations of masculine symbology to reveal hidden signs of healing and reparation. H. D. urges that we recalibrate our ways of seeing to be sensitive to the inner lives of things rather than to adopt the imperialistic,

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21 The vision in Corfu is continually reworked and reframed in H. D.’s writing, but she invariably attributes metaphysical significance to the experience. The visions are variously termed the “writing on the wall” (*Tribute to Freud* 3) and “hieroglyphs” (“H. D. by Delia Alton” 198). The final of these visions, of a Winged Niké, was interpreted by Freud during their psychoanalytic sessions to be a projection of “a desire for union with my mother” (*Tribute* 44). H. D.’s depiction of the Lady in *Tribute* as a deity who brings to the poet a renewed sense of her matrilineal heritage, rhymes with Freud’s interpretation. However, the Lady also suggests a more expansive framework for conceptualizing female attachments beyond the deterministic, tropological structure of psychoanalytic interpretation, as suggested by her appearance with an empty scroll meant for the creation of a new cultural symbology.
authoritative ways of seeing the poem associates with traditional museological assumptions and practices. This necessitates renouncing the rational and empirical—to “surrender … trivial logic, sterile reason” (40)—so as to be receptive to the transcendent and inexplicable. By means of this approach, the destructive “Sceptre, the rod of power” (with evocations of order, imperialism, and the phallus, and the very kind of object one may routinely find in museum collections) can be transformed into the winged Caduceus of the messenger God Hermes, the alchemical symbol for unity that has been adopted as a modern symbol for medicine (7). Under the poet’s watchful eye, a symbol of violent authority is reshaped into a reparative icon that “among the dying ... bears healing,” and in the poem it is the poetic contemplation of ameliorative possibilities hidden beneath modern symbology that has the potential to revivify affective life from the ruins of World War II.

The opening canto of Walls establishes the ruined state of London during the Blitz and sets the thematic terms that the poem will follow. This canto’s lineation sets it apart from the larger poem and indicates that it should be understood as a prologue to the rest of Walls: while the rest of Trilogy is composed in couplets, this canto is set in triplets that recall the terza rima of another three-poem epic, Dante’s Divina Commedia. And, like the opening of the Commedia, Walls immediately immerses its reader in the hellish conditions of London before charting the path towards redemption. H. D. situates us in the ruins of the burnt-out and destroyed London cityscape during the air raids; the opening lines, “An incident here and there, / and rails gone (for guns) / from your (and my) old town square” (3), adopt journalistic jargon to describe individual events while ironically tempering their gravity. The nonchalance of the qualifier “here and there”—perhaps a reflection of the stiff upper lip in the face of disaster stance promulgated throughout the war as specifically and characteristically British—effectively broadens the scope
and intensity of the incidents by not situating them within any predictable pattern of occurrence. Instead, the “zrr-hiss” (58) of the air raids is a ubiquitous harbinger of total annihilation throughout the poem, just as they must have seemed to a Londoner experiencing them firsthand. The “here and there,” though, also establishes a parallel between ancient Egypt and modern London, which is first suggested in the poem’s epigraph, “for Karnak 1923 / from London 1942” (1). H. D. calls upon her Egyptian tour with Bryher in 1923 to establish a visual analogy between the ruins of ancient Egyptian temples and London’s bombed-out buildings: “there, as here, ruin opens / the tomb, the temple; enter” (3). In addition to the visual correlation between destroyed buildings and ruined temples, though, the “there”/”here” pairing insists upon a thematic linkage between Egypt and London, with the suggestion that ruinous post-Blitz London has itself been transformed into something of an ancient civilization. Just as knowledge of ancient Egyptian culture is transmitted through a network of cultural signs that uses extant antiquities to signify the material conditions of the past, London’s cityscape is put on museological display as an inanimate signifier of a dead civilization. The speaker and her companion, walking through London’s streets, stop “trembling at a known street-corner, / we know not or are known” (4). The repetition through negation, the street-corner as both a place “known” and of which they “know not,” attests to the defamiliarization of the Blitz, its transformation of familiar spaces and places into the uncanny.

The image of the modern metropolis and its cultural history under attack during World War II that Sassoon anticipates in “A Premonition” recurs, with a difference worth remarking, in H. D.’s depiction of London during the Blitz in Walls. For while Sassoon’s image of the impending desecration of art and culture is idiomatically First World War—it is the mustard gas of Sassoon’s trench experiences that is “tarnishing each gilded frame” in the National Gallery in
his poem—H. D. articulates her image of war on the homefront through the specific conditions of the Blitz and its effects on London’s cityscape, an experience available to her but not yet to Sassoon, writing while the global conflict was still percolating in 1933. H. D. pauses on the image of a building that has been blasted by a German bomb, its exterior wall blown open and its contents revealed in eerie exhibition:

we pass on

to another cellar, to another sliced wall

where poor utensils show

like rare objects in a museum (4)

We can see here that the kinesthetic and epistemological conditions of museum visitation have been mapped onto the speaker’s poetic contemplation of London’s ruinous streets. The clause “we pass on” involves the viewer in a vector of mobility that necessitates regular movement from one site to the next in a manner resembling a procession through a museum’s gallery. But another common usage of “pass on”—the euphemism for the moment of death—provides an interrelated subtext here, suggesting that the poetic speaker and all those contained in the collective “we” have become spectral presences that bear memorial witness to the remnants of the Blitz. This metaphor depends on an idea of the museum as a cultural mausoleum, an idea not altogether distant from Theodor Adorno’s suggestion that museums “are like the family sepulchers of works of art” which “testify to the neutralization of culture” (175). H. D.’s London cityscape is envisaged as museological insofar as it is a space that can no longer accommodate the animation of lived experience, and the “visitors” as bodiless specters that can only gaze upon
the artifacts displayed. The ekphrastic scene of aesthetic contemplation is here negatively invoked through the metaphorical relation of the modern city in ruins to the cultural practice of visiting a museum to see objects in its collection.

That London is rendered a city inert and placed on display for examination foregrounds the primary homology between the cellar and “rare objects in a museum.” The utensils that seem to be on show were once intended for domestic, utilitarian ends: utensils are, etymologically speaking, things specifically made in order to be used, rooted in the Latin adjective utensilis for “fit for use, useful” (OED). The simile H. D. establishes between the utensils—made for use but now on display—and “rare objects in a museum” is sustained through a figuration of museum objects as things that are fundamentally detached from their original contexts and conditions. Svetlana Alpers has termed this transformation the “museum effect” in reference to the museum’s institutionalized “tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus transform it into art” (27). By constructing the analogy in this way, H. D. relies on a similar set of assumptions about the nature of museum objects: that the practice of putting a thing on display in such a way triggers its transformation into a cultural artifact. Divorced from their utilitarian context, these utensils resemble museum objects to the extent that they appear as markers of a historical moment, and more precisely of a living reality that has definitively passed. Of course, one can never have a historically authentic relationship to an object within a museum; as Tony Bennett suggests, viewing an object in a museum requires the observer’s participation in “its verisimilitude” with the past. H. D.’s speaker, like the observer in Bennett’s framework, is not “in a relation of direct, unmediated contact with the ‘reality of the

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22 As discussed in this dissertation’s introduction, the homology (both in terms of etymology and praxis) Adorno recognizes between the museum and the mausoleum depends on the idea that the objects housed in these spaces are not only dead, but are emptied out of any kind of meaningful relationship to the observer beyond their being a memorial to the larger structures that produced them – respectively, culture and the family name.
artifact and, hence, with the ‘real stuff’ of the past” (146-7; emphasis in original) but instead approaches the object as a signifier of London’s destruction.

_Walls_ may begin with the sobering representation of the modern city as a museum display encasing the artifactual remains of a once-living society, but the poem routes the path towards recovery through the renewal of an alternative ekphrastic poetics that can unlock and preserve the latent histories, traditions, and cultural practices that the old order had devalued. Commensurate to the modernist imperative to “make it new,” H. D. does not call for the total elision of the objects and artifacts that had constituted the old; rather, the cultural poetics of _Trilogy_ reanimate the inert signifiers of a degraded modernity so as to glimpse the hidden, alternative etiologies of modern culture they contain. Rather than search for a new geography, the poem expresses the belief civilization can be restored by navigating “the old highways / for the true-rune, the right-spell” to “recover old values” that modern culture had maligned (5). The art of poetry is deemed essential to this recovery effort; while modern civilization had privileged force—encapsulated iconographically throughout the poem with the image of the sword—as a signifier of authority, this has only culminated in the near total deconstruction of civilization’s foundations. Art, culture, and poetry were denigrated by this old order, expressed in the “burning of the books” and the repurposing of “folio, manuscript, old parchment … for cartridge cases” (16), but the collapse of the old allows for the kinds of cultural experiences that poetry occasions. For poetic language precedes the invention of the sword and will remain after the sword has been divested of its potency, a notion that H. D. exploits through the anagrammatic linkage of “swords” and “words”: “Without thought, invention, / you would not have been, O Sword, // without ideas and the Word’s mediation” (18). Poets, sensitive to language’s capabilities, have the discernment to decode cultural signs for the meanings that they conceal. Her argument for the
cultural value of poetry is enacted against a climate of hostility in which poetry is ridiculed for alleged frivolity:

we, authentic relic,

bearers of the secret wisdom,

living remnant

of the inner band

of the sanctuaries’ initiate,

are not only ‘non-utilitarian’,

we are pathetic (14)

Against attacks on poetry as “non-utilitarian” and “pathetic,” H. D. asserts that the poet’s role as a decoder of language is an essential cultural function in the seemingly aleatory conditions of modern culture in the aftermath of yet another horrendously costly war: “if you do not even understand what words say, // how can you expect to pass judgment / on what words conceal?” (14). Poets have this cultural value because, without exercising authority over the word and its significations, they can locate and coax obscured alternative meanings in a way that recalls Hermione’s expressed belief in the meaningfulness of the museum’s hidden essences “that people didn’t see couldn’t see or they would go mad with it” (Asphodel 19). H. D. uses the poetic text itself to enact on a phonological level this poetic sensitivity to language’s secrets, the latent meanings that “words conceal.” The consonantal patterning in the lines quoted above sonically links the glorification of the poet as an “authentic relic” with social critiques of poetry as
“pathetic.” This pattern diffuses the boundaries between celebration and aspersion, and in doing so leads us to consider another evocation in the word “pathetic”: from pathos, a sensitivity to objects and their affective valences, the very kind of sensitivity that the masculine order refused to accommodate.

H. D. further suggests the restorative value of these practices when she conceptualizes words as containers charged with possibilities awaiting their revelation:

We have had too much consecration,

too little affirmation,

too much: but this, this, this

has been proven heretical,

too little: I know, I feel

the meaning that words hide;

they are anagrams, cryptograms,
little boxes, conditioned

to hatch butterflies … (39)

The anaphora “too little”/“too much” in the second and third line openings, and the end-rhyme pairing of “consecration”/“affirmation” establish patterned dichotomies on both phonological and semantic levels; the sets of pairs suggest practices for evaluating the significance of phenomena (to consecrate, to affirm) and assessments of their prevalence (“too much”, “too
little”) that are so slippery that a reader has difficulty affixing them to concrete criteria (who is affirming or consecrating? How can affirmation have been at once too much and too little?). Such ambiguity has definite rhetorical purpose, though, as it problematizes the fixity of determinate ways of knowing to provide space for affective, somatic, and determinately personal aesthetic experiences. In these lines, to “know” is immediately bettered by a primary sensory experience, to “feel,” as the most direct approach to “the meaning that words hide.” The final line of this canto breaks the couplet pattern and the “too much”/“too little” linkage to reveal a third way, a fluttering of the butterfly released from its linguistic cocoon not by force or by discourse, but by a coalescence of knowing and feeling – a sensitive, affective, or “pathetic” approach to language.

Lest this notion of linguistic play as a means of writing, or interpreting, one’s way out of the violence of the modern condition be taken to signify the allegations of escapism that her poetry has been charged with, it must be noted that the poem insists these transformations are ongoing patterns rather than completable human activities. In making this claim, H. D. complicates notions of the transcendent as something universal, permanent, and final. Instead, in Trilogy the infinite may only be approached through the finite, through local approaches that emphasize particularity: “my mind (yours), / your way of thought (mine), // each has its peculiar intricate map,” which may ebb from the “the intellectual effort // of the whole race” but nevertheless flow within their own tributaries, following “its peculiar ego-centric // personal approach / to the eternal realities” (51-2). This ongoing activity is further alluded to in the use of the participle “conditioned” to describe the transformative potential of language “to hatch butterflies”; “conditioned” suggests these words have undergone a process of refinement so that their latent butterflies may be hatched. The path towards recovering the obscured alternative (and
potentially transcendent) significations within modern symbology, the “abstract value” in “every concrete object” (24), can only be traced through ongoing practices of particularized ways of knowing, which invest the individual observer with the agency to be an interpreter of cultural signs. Poetic expression is crucial to this redefinition of transcendence as particular rather than universal; poetry, taken by H. D. to be a site for the expression of an individual subjectivity, calls attention to the way individual minds approach “eternal realities.” But for H. D., it is poetry’s indefinable but inexhaustible interface between individuality and eternality that informs her understanding of the value of personal experiences of art and culture. Although Walls does not engage substantively with the poetics of ekphrasis, it does establish a theoretical framework for poetic writing that, in Tribute to the Angels, informs how her poetic speaker conceptualizes practices of interpreting visual objects. In Tribute, these emphases on the affective and spiritual dimensions of aesthetic experience underwrite H. D.’s speaker’s decision not to undertake exhaustive, rational linguistic descriptions of encountered phenomena, but rather to remain sensitive to the metaphysical possibilities hidden in the physical.

Although not archetypically an ekphrastic poem, Walls generates these meanings in an often differential poetics that conjures the verbal/visual interplay of this poetic mode. Visual icons are transformed into language, as the “swords” become “words,” and language metamorphizes into the image of the butterfly. The relational, non-binary slippage between these communicative modes informs the poem’s undermining of the dualistic, bellicose masculine modernity that has precipitated the Second World War. In Walls, this war represents the inevitable end of a culture that had privileged authoritative forms of knowing over the sensitive coercion of the poet who teases meaning out of language. Chiastically, the desecration of the “Sword,” which like the “Sceptre” is another object that might appear in a museum signifying
colonialism, imperialism, and other forms of hierarchical violence, has allowed for the renewal of the poet, the “Word,” and the non-hierarchical ways of seeing this slippage between the visual and the verbal represents (17). The sensitivity H. D. associates with relational approaches to objects deemphasizes interpretive authority in favor of phenomenological experience, suggesting that the most valuable cultural meanings radiate not from the butterfly’s dissection, but from our vision of its flight. In *Tribute*, these elements will become central to H. D.’s use of ekphrasis to evaluate the gender implications of such ways of seeing: her poetic speakers adopt the phenomenologically and sensorially descriptive practices earlier emphasized in *Walls* in order to contest the dominance of the notionally objective linguistic practices privileged by a male interlocutor who embodies official institutional culture. This brings issues of gendered difference to the center of the poem’s broader engagement with the institutionalization of art in the museum and the authority of its approved ways of seeing.

IV. “The Unwritten Volume of the New”: *Tribute to the Angels* (1945)

In *Tribute*, this revitalization of aesthetic experience motivates the recovery of female religious icons—and feminist artistic and cultural paradigms—from the margins of the artistic field. This recovery is first undertaken linguistically, in a ceremony of phonemic transformation that, as Carrie J. Preston points out, solicits the reader’s participation in the reconstitution of a divine mother through alchemical ritual. H. D.’s speaker directs a silent auditor to place into a polished crucible “a word most bitter still, *marah*, / a word bitterer still, mar.” Placing this crucible over a flame enacts the transformation of the “bitter sea” (*marah* being the Greek for

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23 Preston writes that this transformation asks the reader to reconstruct the poem’s references in order to fully understand the “associative logic” leading us towards “the realm of the goddess” (233). She suggests that the lack of explanatory notes in *Trilogy* sets this epic apart from Eliot’s *Waste Land*: while Eliot’s notes affix authoritative meanings that (at least in theory) clarify the poem’s allusiveness and ambiguity, *Trilogy* places the onus on the reader to make these determinations.
“bitter,” mar the Spanish word for “sea”) into a more holistic substance: these words “melted, fuse and join / and change and alter” into “mer, mere, mater, Maia, Mary, // Star of the Sea, / Mother” (Trilogy 71). It is the substance of poetry itself that enacts this transformation, with morphological play, sound associations, and etymological transformations enabling the excavation of a matrilineal genealogy across mythological, scriptural, and linguistic systems.

The semantic slippage here suggests that as the verb chain accretes the substance in the crucible approaches a state of divinity, the “alter”/altar that is the chain’s final link. The end product of this alchemy is a “bitter jewel / in the heart of the bowl” with a mystifying visual appearance that refuses reconciliation within any singular poetic description: the speaker’s questions posed to it, “what is your colour?” and “what do you offer / to us who rebel?,” are unresolved.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth cantos of Tribute, H. D.’s poetic speaker encounters this incomprehensible “bitter jewel” in the crucible with a male auditor known to the poem only as the “patron.” In this episode, the patron implores H. D.’s speaker to devise a name, and thus an identity, for the gem in the crucible. The patron’s fixation on devising names for this unnamable substance channels imperialist discourse, and recalls the androcentric worldview that phenomena exist for human interpretation. As Rachel Connor suggests, this episode seeks to unsettle the discursive authority of “the scientific, masculinist gaze” by juxtaposing it “alongside a non-hierarchical model of looking” represented by the female poetic speaker who resists participation in this exercise of authority through language (12, emphasis in original). While I certainly concur with Connor’s claim that this moment in Tribute amplifies the genders of these disparate

24 For a fuller discussion of the feminist linguistics involved in this episode of Trilogy, see Gilbert and Gubar, who argue that this canto’s focus on the resistance the gem poses towards traditional, masculine linguistic structures demonstrates H. D.’s greater purpose in seeking “a new language that will consecrate what has been desecrated by her culture.” This new language “empowers her to add her not-named words in an ongoing process of revelation” that finds value and meaning in ambiguity and resists hierarchies of knowledge and representation (193-4).
hermeneutics, it also has something important to say about the related (and commensurately
gendered) practices of looking at, and interpreting, works of art, and particularly in terms of the
available poetic modes for representing such practices. The designation of the auditor as “patron”
defines H. D.’s interest in the institutionalization of the arts, linking his voice to previous
aristocratic cultures and their formative (monetary) influence on the development of aesthetic
traditions, not to mention the reemerging patronage systems that Rainey has shown integral to
the history of modernist art.25 The title indicates his function as an agent in the artistic field, but
also as an institutionally sanctioned authority. In her letters and memoirs, H. D. referred to the
men to whom she was closely attached and credited with her personal and artistic development—
including Pound, Aldington, and Freud—as her “initiators”; the more impersonal designation of
the male voice as the “patron” signifies a certain sense of detachment that “initiator” does not,
and insists that this exchange be read in relation to larger questions surrounding the
institutionalization of the arts, the enmeshment of the artist within the economic structures of her
time, and given the structure of this episode, on the ways of seeing privileged within such
frameworks.

On the level of aesthetic discourse, the patron’s fixation on the speaker’s categorizing and
labeling the gem can be understood through Bourdieu’s idea of “artistic competence,” the
comprehensive “knowledge of the possible ways in which a universe of representations can be
divided into complementary classes” that when communicated signifies one’s cultural authority
(Bourdieu and Darbel 39). Artistic competence, according to Bourdieu, entails the ability to
categorize discrete aesthetic objects within classificatory schemas including artistic schools,

25 Although the traditional patronage system of arts subsidy crested during the Renaissance and eighteenth
century, Rainey has argued that it reemerged in the facilitation and popularization of modernist literature
during the early twentieth century. He writes that “what had once been an aristocracy of patron-
salonniers” during the Renaissance “would now be replaced by an elite of patron-investors” who would
work towards branding modernism as something of a commodity in the literary marketplace (39).
movements, and periods. It thus entails rationalizing the visual appearance of aesthetic objects
and their personal resonances, by making categorization the central purpose of art perception,
with evident homology to the museological application of organizational frameworks on its
collections. That the patron of Tribute occupies a position of cultural authority is clear when he
commands the speaker to demonstrate her artistic competence by situating the gem within
received aesthetic taxonomies; in doing so, he noticeably urges the poetic speaker to engage in
the practice of ekphrasis, as fulfilling these expectations of artistic competence would require her
to describe the mystical visual object in language. Their dialogue establishes the nexus in which
 ekphrasis, gender, and museology are put in play in Tribute: the notion of poetically describing
an object is framed as a means of claiming epistemological ownership over it, and is thus
inscribed in the very modes of masculine cultural authority that H. D. invalidates throughout
Trilogy. Indeed, his voice (and the cultural power it inscribes) is complemented by that of the
female speaker who is skeptical about the hierarchies such practices involve, and instead
safeguards the gem’s illegibility through alternative descriptive modes that emphasize the
phenomenological effects of her aesthetic experience without recourse to establishing
determinative epistemological frameworks for conveying it. Her refusal to taxonomize the gem
and her ultimate immersion in it recalls Hilde Hein’s suggestion that a feminist approach to
museum exhibition might do away with the power/knowledge nexus by providing opportunities
for relational exchanges between interpreters and objects; thus equipped, museums could
accommodate interactions “without borders … capable of challenging still deeply grounded
philosophical notions” in “sites for discursive exchange, where strangers can interact, trying and
testing ideas without precipitous commitment to them” (61-2). In these cantos, H. D. recontours
the ekphrastic situation in order to model a comparable scene of interaction “without borders”:
Hein’s idea that a museology that avoids supporting masculine ideologies must emphasize the materiality of cultural objects, enhance the museum-goer’s phenomenological experience of the museum space, and refuse fixed determinations resonates in H. D.’s speaker’s resistance to producing a name and identity for the gem in the crucible, and her decision instead to engage it in terms of subjectivity, sensation, and affective response.

The episode is initiated when the patron poses a question about the gem’s color to the speaker. The patron functions as an impetus to ekphrasis, as his question attempts to move the speaker towards a linguistic representation of the mysterious visual object. However, the speaker’s attempted critical description of “the jewel color” eludes fixed determinations and implies questions about the object’s ontology, as the identification of it as “white agate” is troubled when the gem is discovered to have a “pulse uncooled that beats yet, faint blue-violet” and an indefinable fragrance:

it lives, it breathes,

it gives off—fragrance?

I do not know what it gives,

a vibration that we can not name

Robert Duncan writes that the patron is, “if not Freud himself, very Freud like” (461). Such a correlation is founded upon Freud’s predilection for taxonomic interpretation, a predilection that H. D. willfully denies here. I believe, though, that this passage could also be in conversation with the empiricist cultural criticism that Ezra Pound prescribes in his theoretical writings. In his ABC of Reading (1934), for example, Pound uses the example of Louis Agassiz’ teaching and the infamous “parable of the sunfish” to suggest that the most accurate approach for studying poetry is “the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter.” In Pound’s description of the “anecdote of Agassiz and the fish,” a graduate student is told to produce an exhaustive critical description of a sunfish’s anatomy. Agassiz, his instructor, is dissatisfied by the student’s textbook knowledge and urges him to closely examine the fish’s visual appearance with the result that at “the end of three weeks the fish was in an advanced state of decomposition, but the student knew something about it” (18). Pound uses this anecdote to prescribe an objective heuristic to adequately and precisely describe visual experience. The encounter with the gem in Tribute to the Angels responds to such a heuristic by examining the position of power that “objective” interpretation requires of the observer.
for there is no name for it (76)

The object is irreconcilable within the very taxonomic categories that have been constructed for the purpose of describing and organizing perceptions. When the dissatisfied patron demands the speaker “name it,” her resistance is expressed on the grounds of the object’s unintelligibility within received nomenclature: “I said, I can not name it, / there is no name” (76). To the speaker, naming and categorizing the gem entails forcing it into an ideational container; her resolution to approach it outside of an organizational imperative is meant instead to preserve the pulsating, fragrant thing in its living state:

I said it was agate,

I said, it lived, it gave—

fragrance—was near enough

to explain that quality

for which there is no name (77)

H. D.’s speaker believes that her eidetic impressions are adequate enough to fully experience, and to adequately represent her experience of, the gem in the crucible. The idea that what is necessary for such an experience is not exhaustive comprehension of the object but rather being “near enough / to explain” its qualities recalls the asymptote invoked by Friedrich Engels to distinguish between concept and reality: “…the two of them, the concept of a thing and its reality, run side by side like two asymptotes, always approaching each other yet never meeting. This difference between the two is the very difference which prevents the concept from being directly and immediately reality and reality from being immediately its own concept” (qtd. in
Althusser and Balibar 89, emphasis in original). Ekphrastic representation is similarly recast asymptotically in this episode: linguistic categories can only approach, but not contain, the reality of the object. H. D. instead locates poetic material by refusing to produce superficial linguistic description of the object in preference to a poetics of being “near enough,” in which the verbal text approaches the visual object but never seeks to overmaster it or to make claims as to its meaning. Instead, categorical logic is elided in favor of affective sensitivity, and an awareness of the epistemological limitations of formalized aesthetic discourse informs the transcription of perceptions into language. This commitment to the primacy of sensuous intuition without deep epistemological excavation is resolved in the coalescence of speaker and object in relational harmony:

I want to watch its faint heart-beat, pulse-beat
as it quivers, I do not want to talk about it,
I want to minimize thought,
concentrate on it,
till I shrink,
dematerialize
and am drawn into it. (*Trilogy* 77)
The subject/object dichotomy here dissolves, and aesthetic meaning is derived from non-hierarchical, immersive contact. If the patron’s imperialistic commands reify the hierarchical power dynamics intrinsic to the subject/object dichotomy, this relational immersion locates a more harmonious route towards knowing and representing things perceived.

The embodied, sensory, and affecting nature of this type of experience is central to the theory of aesthetic response H. D. theorizes throughout *Trilogy*, a “new sensation” granted not to everyone,

not to everyone everywhere,

but to us here, a new sensation

strikes paralyzing,

strikes dumb,

strikes the senses numb,

sets the nerves quivering (83)

This “new sensation,” the relational mode of aesthetic response staged in the episode of the gem, later underwrites the appearance of the Lady before the speaker and a coterie of female artists (the “us” who receives this “sensation”), who receive from the female god the artistic materials necessary for authoring spiritual renewal amidst modernity’s ruins. The Lady—whose inexplicable appearance at this critical moment in *Trilogy* comes at the center of its middle volume, and offers its most clarified vision of hope for future artistic productiveness in an inhospitable cultural climate—functions in the poem as something of a museum object, but with
the distinct difference of being one that transcends the normative boundaries of the artistic field so as to be immanently interactive with her public audience. The speaker’s ekphrastic description of the Lady’s physical appearance is positioned against a typology of Renaissance Madonna and Child tableaux, a portrait gallery of ladies (lowercase “l” intended) gathered on the poetic line, but suggests a revised function for these representations. The speaker’s inability to reconcile her identity within this typology suggests that the Lady’s mystical appearance exceeds the available artistic taxonomies for representing the feminine and, more broadly, for describing works of art in poetry. The Lady is not conjured by the three female artists who gather in the speaker’s drawing-room, but rather her visual manifestation is a voluntary exercise of her own will. While H. D.’s poetic speaker is “talking casually / with friends in the other room,” “the Lady knocked … and she was standing there, / actually, at the turn of the stair” (89). That the Lady requests permission to enter suggests the social relations established between the deity and the coterie of female artists are reciprocal in nature, in plain contrast to the patron’s attempted exercises of authority over the gem (and the poetic speaker). Although H. D. initially pronounces that the Lady’s appearance comes to her in a vision, that “this was a dream of course,” the certainty of this utterance is undercut several lines later when H. D. writes that “yet in some very subtle way, she was more there than ever” (90). The Lady occupies something of a liminal space between dream and reality: she is not exclusively the product of a dream-vision nor is she an entirely material entity. The Lady occupies, but also constitutes through her occupation of it, a palimpsestic space that allows for the coalescence of the physical and the metaphysical, blurs the logical arrangements of space and time, and collapses any distinction between the materiality of the aesthetic (her physical presence) and the ethereality of dream (the impossibility of her being “there, / actually”).
The poetic speaker understands the Lady’s divinity immediately upon her entrance into the poem not only because of the mystical nature of the vision, but also due to her resemblance to a continuum of artistic representations of female religious icons in a high art tradition that in many ways depends upon the depiction and aestheticization of the feminine. “We have seen her / the world over,” the speaker comments:

Our Lady of the Goldfinch,

Our Lady of the Candelabra,

Our Lady of the Pomegranate

Our Lady of the Chair (93)

Of course, “Our Lady” is a referent for the Virgin Mary, the English equivalent of the Italian “Madonna,” ma (my) and donna (lady). Moreover, the gathering of “Our Lady” references encodes a greater art historical context: we are encouraged to read these “Our Lady” utterances as markers of the Madonna’s appearance in visual culture, a suggestion amplified in the reminder that she has been “seen the world over” in these various tableaux. As the canto continues, H. D. accentuates the centrality of visual media for establishing and remediating popular understandings of femininity and spirituality, with the recurring references to acts of seeing in this canto underscoring the saturation of this visual typology in various guises and artistic cultures: “we have seen her, an empress”; “we have seen her / with a single flower”; “we have seen her snood / drawn over her hair”; “we have seen her head bowed down / with the weight of a domed crown”; “we have seen her, a wisp of a girl / trapped in a golden halo”; “we have seen her with arrow / with doves”; “we have seen her in fine silks”; “we have seen her sleeve / of

27 According to the OED, the term Madonna accrued an inflammatory slang meaning of a prostitute during the seventeenth century. This context recalls the Lady’s recovery in Trilogy as a corrective to the “knaves and fools” who have done her name “impious wrong” (74).
every imaginable shade” (93-4). The sheer accumulation of these references foregrounds the ubiquity of the female muse paradigm throughout art history, while also tacitly providing a catalogue of some of the possible materials for ekphrasis the speaker might invoke for conceptualizing her appearance in the drawing-room. However, the speaker instead emphasizes that the Lady’s appearance also exceeds the examples of the extant visual icons, with the suggestion that the Lady’s actual appearance approximates these representations but cannot be resolved into any of them. Anaphora is among H. D.’s favored techniques for representing an unanticipated excess through poetic repetitions-with-a-difference, and here the citational “Our Lady” and “we have seen” constructions construe the Lady as less a composite entity that emerges in the synthesis of these representations than as the originating center of a panoply of artistic manifestations that are ultimately irreconcilable with her.28

Beyond demonstrating the Lady’s appearance in numerous iconographical tableaux, however, this moment brings into relief the means through which understandings of female spirituality have been constructed and communicated in art. H. D. describes her initial vision of the Lady in notes taken during her séances with the psychic medium Arthur Bhaduri in 1943 and 1944,29 and this description further underscores the dynamic interplay with art and spirituality that constitutes her appearance. Artistic language is invoked in H. D.’s description of “seeing her slightly foreshortened, as if I were standing below a statue-base,” but aesthetic discourse is revealed to be insufficiently descriptive, as she was decidedly “not a statue” after all:

28 In the commonly anthologized poem “Oread,” for instance, H. D. uses anaphora in the opening lines – “Whirl up, sea – / Whirl your pointed pines” – to invoke the nymph’s hybridity as an inhabitant of both forests and seas (H. D., Collected Poems 55).
29 H. D. collected these notes – a series of letters to Hugh Dowding, a British airman involved in spiritualist circles to whom H. D. took some (mostly unreciprocated) interest in, and diary-style entries – under the title Majic Ring, but never published them during her life. These opaque manuscripts were published in a 2009 edition, edited and annotated by Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, by the University Press of Florida.
That is the odd thing. I looked at my Lady and she was a white statue, but she was not a statue, she was not white stone. I thought of snow, of rock, I thought, she is like a snow-queen … she was alive, she was not-alive, she certainly was alive, she did not move but she could move. There she stood. She might have been dredged from the Aegean or she might have stood in a niche in Chartres Cathedral, but she was not Greek; she was not archaic and she was not medieval. She was something quite apart, quite different and if I could compare my feeling of joy with any recognized joy, I should have said that she was familiar to me, I had long, long wanted to contact her… (Majic Ring 55).

When considered in relation to a longer history of ekphrasis as the elaborate rhetorical description of an object within any linguistic medium (including fiction, art history, and oratory), this passage nicely encapsulate the ways in which H. D. reconstitutes this rhetorical figure in pursuit of new ways of framing female spirituality within and beyond the aesthetic. The Lady is framed as at once both aesthetic and almost certainly not: “she was a white statue” but “not a statue,” “she was alive” and “not-alive,” she was “familiar” but resembles a lost artifact “dredged up from the Aegean.” This disorienting clash between artistic and not-artistic resonances, also stressed in Tribute, suggests that the route towards determining the Lady’s identity must necessarily pass through the extant types, familiar aesthetic tropes for representing the female divine in Greek and Christian religious cultures, but that ultimately, the Lady exceeds these received formations. The muse may inhabit real physical spaces, from the drawing room here to the museum space suggestively invoked in Trilogy, but that, ultimately, the sensuous ekphrastic description of the Lady’s appearance opens up at once both aesthetic and spiritual possibilities.

While a number of critics have mined the “Our Lady” incantations in Trilogy for the symbolic resonances of each of the Lady’s visual manifestations, none has gone so far as to
search out the actual aesthetic artifacts that each of the iterations might invoke. However, it is no coincidence that each of these titles for the Lady seen “the world over” corresponds to a painting from the Italian High Renaissance: Botticelli’s *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1487), and Raphael’s *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1505-6), *Madonna of the Candelabra* (1513), and *Madonna of the Chair* (1513-4). H. D. would have likely encountered at least three of the paintings named above in person during one of her extended stays in Florence, first with Richard Aldington in 1912 and again with Bryher a decade later in 1922: Botticelli’s *Madonna of the Pomegranate* and Raphael’s *Madonna of the Goldfinch* were on display in the Uffizi, and Raphael’s *Madonna of the Chair* in the Palazzo Pitti, during those times. Keeping in mind the correspondence between the poem’s linguistic references to various Madonna tableaux and the repetitious nature of these invocations, the uninterrupted sequential invocation of “Our Lady” tropes and “we have seen” references can be read as a poetic figuration of a portrait gallery, adorned by a collection of artistic representations of the feminine presented serially and without commentary across the poem’s lines, akin to the curated object collections in Moore’s ekphrastic galleries discussed in Chapter 2. Museums are indeed referred to as one of the institutional spaces in which such images of the Virgin are typically displayed:

you find

her everywhere (or did find),

in cathedral, museum, cloister,

at the turn of the palace stair. (93)

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30 After that early stay in Florence in 1912, Aldington composed a poem based on Fra Angelico’s luminous *Annunciation* fresco in the San Marco Monastery, another common trope for the Virgin’s representation in Western art. H. D. kept this poem in her personal diary (Guest 53).
That H. D. refers to museums in conjunction with cathedrals and cloisters recalls Hermione’s belief in *Asphodel* that museums can foster the same deeply felt spiritual experiences that one expects of churches. The enfolding of cultural and religious institutions carries a more decidedly negative valence in *Trilogy*, however; H. D. invokes the Madonna iconography in these spaces so as to delineate the Lady’s *difference* from the kinds of representations that have been privileged in dominant institutional cultures. While the Lady’s appearance approximates the gallery of Madonna citations, the speaker makes clear that the aesthetic representations can only approximate, but not fully encapsulate, her identity, just as any attempted ekphrastic description of the gem in the crucible fails adequately to convey its reality.

There is much evidence that Virgin Mary iconography had particular and particularly deep private significance to H. D., beyond her acknowledged interest in religious iconography and gender symbolism. Both Bryher and the experimental artist Sheri Martinelli gave H. D. icons of the Virgin as gifts: a homemade Madonna and Child bookmark and a Miraculous Medal respectively, objects that remain among her personal effects in the Beinecke. Moreover, H. D. attached a small color reproduction of Raphael’s *Madonna of the Chair* to a December 1944 letter to her friend Viola Baxter Jordan, an indication that Madonna and Child icons were in H. D.’s mind as she was getting *Tribute* into print (Viola Baxter Jordan papers, fig. 4.1). Affixing this reproduction of the Virgin and Child to the letter is contextually appropriate given its composition near the impending Christmas holiday, but the image’s juxtaposition against the letter’s contents—banal personal and business matters such as Bryher’s preparations for the holiday, a glass swan collectible breaking in their flat, and Oxford University Press’s agreement to publish *Tribute to the Angels* that spring—imbue the icon with a definitively domestic sentiment. In the context of the letter, the image of the Madonna and Child presents the Virgin as
Dear Viola,

Just to thank you for two lots of magazines that have come. I have not yet had time to read them—one New Yorker and one Booknews or Book review. I had a N.Yorker clipping sent me with the one you sent and some others that were all that I could desire in the way of reviews. If you see anything else, no matter what, just post me. We are very cold and Br is rushing around; I say she is treating Christmas like a commando raid. We are preparing almost hour

Dec. 9.

[Signature]

H. D.
an intimate hearth goddess, a familiar deity presiding over domestic matters. Including the
reproduction of Raphael’s painting with this letter is a private act that nevertheless resonates with
the Lady’s miraculous manifestation in the speaker’s private space in *Tribute*, cutting across
aesthetic hierarchies to fuse the maternal-universal with the domestic-personal.\(^{31}\)

The Lady’s appearance in the private domestic space allows H. D. to poetically
distinguish her from her more public aesthetic representations, the two-dimensional painterly
tableaux invoked in the “Our Lady” citations, as “none of these, none of these / suggest her as I
saw her” (96). The emphasis on the visual and of the speaker’s contemplation of these many
icons underscores the ambivalence with which H. D. undertakes ekphrastic description in
*Tribute*: while for the male interlocutor it represented a means of stabilizing cultural orthodoxy
and subordinating the mystical to the rational and thus masculine-normative, for H. D.’s poetic
speaker the refusal explicitly to describe, but instead to experience the vision, provides access to
a heightened register of aesthetic meaning. This is not say that H. D. elides the poetics of
ekphrasis entirely, but rather that she reframes its representational resources to triangulate the
Lady’s difference from a pictorial tradition. The speaker remarks that she
can say truthfully,
her veils were *white as snow*,

\(^{31}\) H. D. makes clear in *Tribute* that Christian iconography is not the only aesthetic tradition that delimits
the significance of female spirituality. Characteristic of the expansive syncretism of her late poetry, H. D. shifts quite precipitately from the Renaissance to classical artistic cultures by invoking the caged Sibyl of
*Petronius’ Satyricon*, the imprisoned oracle who concedes a desire to die before a vicious mob. H. D. writes that the Lady is “not shut up in a cage / like a Sibyl” but rather “she is Psyche, the butterfly, / out
of the cocoon” (103). This episode’s significance to modernist literary discourse comes mostly from its
being taken up by T.S. Eliot as an epigraph to *The Waste Land* (1922), where it functions as a dumb show
for the degraded status of prophecy and belief in modernity. H. D.’s reference to the caged Sibyl’s
lamentable fate, however, brings into focus the Lady’s difference from the masculine art cultures that
have debased the feminine. Like the butterfly that bursts from its linguistic cocoon in *The Walls Do Not
Fall*, the Lady’s emergence from the Sibyl’s cage marks her transcendence of male art culture and the
many ideational containers that it has constructed for her.
so as no fuller on earth

can white them; I can say

she looked beautiful, she looked lovely,
she was *clothed with a garment*

down to the foot, but it was not
girt about with a golden girdle,

there was no gold, no colour
there was no gleam in the stuff

nor shadow of hem and seam
as it fell to the floor (97, emphases in original)

The interplay between verbal and visual media evident in H. D.’s representation of the Lady can be seen in the shift from the present perfect “have seen” used to describe representations of the feminine in art to the “can say” that marks the speaker’s depiction of her, which both emphasizes the linguistic translation of sight into language and suggests that this moment is authorized by the Lady. Moreover, the acts of ekphrastic description here are meant to differentiate the Lady in actuality from how she typically appears in art, with the suggestion that neither linguistic descriptions nor the visual attributes they signify are enough to convey her appearance (“no gold, no colour”). While the Lady “bore // none of her usual attributes,” the most marked disparity
between the Lady and the Renaissance Madonnas is that “the Child was not with her” (97). The elision of the Child implies a rupture with traditional Christian iconography, as it reroutes the theological purpose of the female icon away from a scriptural economy that situates Mary as a fulcrum for the solidification of male bonds through the unity of Father and Son. In doing so, the poem compromises one of the more prevalent social effects of Virgin iconography, its entwinement with patriarchal systems; Paolo Tinagli, for instance, attributes the surge of the Virgin’s prominence in sixteenth-century Italian visual culture to “contemporary preoccupation with family and lineage,” as ideals of female piety and the continuation of the Christian family through good marriage and childrearing became tied to the spiritual value of her image (159).

The Lady’s appearance in Trilogy is described in terms that go beyond this masculine representational nexus, as the Christ child’s conventional space in the Virgin’s arms is instead filled by a blank tome meant for the composition of new cultural scripts to be written by the female artists in the room, the “straggling company of the brush and quill” (H. D., Trilogy 100). In this way, the substitution of the Christ child with a blank scroll takes on a rather iconoclastic air, signifying in aesthetic terms that the collapse of the old, masculinist order and its “tome of the ancient wisdom” provides space for the inscription of a revised cultural worldview calibrated to account for female agency in “the unwritten volume of the new” (103).

This climactic moment of Trilogy foregrounds the importance, and ambivalence, that H. D. assigns to visuality and poetic representation in the poem. For while ekphrastic descriptions of mystical, supernatural things—from the gem in the crucible to the Lady in the drawing-room—are consistently deemed inadequate representational practices, at Tribute’s close H. D. nevertheless constructs an alternative image of the Lady, reconceiving patriarchal iconography to illustrate—and verbally convey—her appearance before the “straggling company of the brush
and quill.” In the process, H. D. also locates a path to seeing and interpreting the aesthetic beyond the gendered hierarchies that her work repeatedly assigns to museum culture. Recalling artistic representations of female religious icons seen in museums but also exceeding these received types and the institutions that contain them, the Lady’s appearance in the drawing room amounts to a new kind of museum exhibition, defined by the aesthetic and gendered values articulated throughout Trilogy. Spatially, this group of women gathered around the Lady resembles the familiar gathering of publics around renowned objects in museums, such as the crowd that surrounds the Venus de Milo in Asphodel. Moreover, in encouraging future creative work from the female artists gathered around her, the Lady serves an artistic-pedagogical function comparable to that of museums like the Victoria and Albert, founded partly to enhance the strength of the applied arts in Britain and refine the skills of British artisans. As a source of inspiration for specifically feminist artistic futurity, the Lady prompts creativity beyond the strictures of traditional centers of cultural authority and its attendant aesthetic forms. In light of the masculine ideologies inherent in conventional museological images and discourses throughout Trilogy, and the aestheticization of the Lady as a museum-piece-but-not-one, we can understand her appearance in Trilogy as a revisionary museological moment. The speaker’s experience recapitulates what, for H. D., museums can mean if freed from normative, hierarchical values and ways of seeing.

The arrival of the Lady in this climactic moment of Tribute affirms the experiential, epistemological, and affective potentialities that H. D. attends to in the relational ekphrastic moments present throughout Trilogy. The image of the Lady’s emergence out of a typology of painterly representations compromises the patriarchal centricity of art culture and the subject/object dichotomy that contours museum display practices. The animate and interactive
Lady, as an aesthetic artifact that transcends the limitation of the frame, mobilizes a concept of empowered female spiritual and aesthetic identity beyond the restrictive, circumreferential boundaries of masculine artistic representation. By describing the Lady’s visual appearance over and against the suggestively museological gallery of Madonna tableaux the poem invokes; moreover, by coding the Lady’s appearance as a site of interactivity and artistic production, H. D. reimagines the poetics of ekphrasis to model aesthetic experiences that are also forms of artistic creation predicated on direct, relational contact with the work of art. H. D.’s approach to the conditions of culture in the twentieth century may be teleological but she resists eschatological determinism, a resignation to cultural collapse after World War II. Instead, her interest in relational ways of seeing cultivates buried cultural, and particularly feminine, meanings through the description and animation—indeed, the animation through poetic description—of so many objects that had been otherwise deadened in the process of being placed on display.

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In H. D.’s writing, museums are not spaces that must be abandoned if one hopes to foster an authentic relationship with one’s culture. In fact, in the conditions of modernity, museums represent to her one of the few remaining alcoves for cultural experience, represented vividly in Asphodel in Hermione’s affective desire for relational contact with art in the Louvre’s galleries. To H. D., more effective than the elision of museums is a revision of the conditions through which individuals access culture, a re-harnessing of the energies the museum represents towards the intensification of personal aesthetic experiences. By reclaiming the Lady over and against traditional art cultures as a potent site for renewed feminist-artistic productivity, she disrupts the univocity of a dominant artistic tradition that privileges objective, disinterested, and
universalized discourses of aesthetic knowledge and denies female observers a sense of cultural ownership; her work instead emphasizes the value of affective responses to art that reject such authoritative accounts of aesthetic experience. H. D.’s epic of cultural crisis is laced with scenes of ekphrastic contemplation, moments in which her poetic speaker cultivates hope through ways of seeing and poetically representing aesthetic objects that resist confirming the masculine-normative optics of Western culture. In his late modernist epic *Harlem Gallery: Book One, the Curator* (1965), Melvin B. Tolson, the subject of my final chapter, invokes a comparably unorthodox way of seeing to invest aesthetic experience with the possibility of dismantling ingrained and constraining cultural hierarchies. With a focus on the politics of racial inclusion in the modern museum, Tolson shares H. D.’s conviction that art at once transcends the everyday but yet can clarify and reshape it, and he draws on the poetics of ekphrasis to convey the importance for cultural institutions of doing so.
Chapter 5

Black Aesthetics in the Public Art Museum: Tolson’s Art World Ekphrasis

I do know that a picture gallery magnetizes me with a potent fascination. Sometimes I have a strange urge to seize a brush, but I have never succumbed to this inner pull of the ego…

- Melvin B. Tolson, “A Poet’s Odyssey” (194)

In Melvin B. Tolson’s late modernist epic *The Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator* (1965; hereafter *Harlem Gallery*), the poetics of ekphrasis become a means for imagining the representation in the art museum of a long history of African American art rooted in the cultures of the African Diaspora and extending to the contemporary moment. *Harlem Gallery* follows the Curator, known to us and to Harlem only by his professional title, as he opens his Harlem Gallery to the public, philosophizes on aesthetics and the nature of being with a cadre of interlocutors, acquires black modernist art for the Gallery, and ponders the future cultural importance of an institution dedicated to the preservation of “paintings that chronicle / a people’s New World odyssey / from chattel to Esquire!” (*HG* 173). In the process, *Harlem Gallery* represents a dynamic field of black cultural production that, by its very existence and flourishing, contests the relative racial and ideological homogeneity of the actual midcentury art world that was slow to engage or engage effectively with black art and experience. *Harlem Gallery* was published at a critical juncture in the movement to democratize the American art museum both through special exhibitions of African American artists and with the formation of new institutions dedicated specifically to black history and cultures. Tolson draws on these relatively recent developments in his book’s interrogations of the cultural capital of black art and aesthetics, building a claim for the responsibility of museums to foster social progress through the inclusion of a more expansive range of cultures, aesthetics, and histories than were typically accommodated in the twentieth-century art museum.
In *Harlem Gallery*, as well as the earlier unpublished manuscript that served as its source, *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* (c. 1935), Tolson draws on the resources of ekphrasis to demonstrate that the inclusion of black art and cultural history in the museum can foster the radical anti-racist thought these poems deem essential for facilitating the social progress of African Americans. Formal innovation, aesthetic interpretation, and institutional critique intertwine in Tolson’s play with the poetics of ekphrasis, in which this genre’s conventions are reconfigured to depict the contemplation of a broad range of visual texts, from the real and imagined art objects that are the conventional subjects of ekphrasis, to the physical space of the Harlem Gallery itself. In doing so, Tolson shifts the typical subject matter of ekphrasis from the singular visual object to that object as it resides and circulates in the midcentury art world, its aesthetic ideologies, and its institutions. Each of the ekphrastic episodes in Tolson’s gallery poems offers him situations for reimagining the conventionally racially homogenous museum into an institution that includes racial diversity and fosters racial uplift. Ekphrasis provides Tolson contexts for producing a theory of the art world through poetry. His conversions of aesthetic images into poetic language lay bare the broader ideological matrix that defines modern museum culture and reifies the logic of its collecting practices, including the relative occlusion of black artists and the attendant diminution of the legacy of the African Diaspora. And when Tolson turns the physical space of the Harlem Gallery into the subject of prolonged poetic contemplation, as he does in one of the most dramatic occasions of modernist rewritings of ekphrasis, he provides a sense of the museum itself as a visual text ripe for the very modes of antiracist and anticolonial critique that undergird the poetic argument in *Harlem Gallery*.

Throughout this dissertation I have explored various ways modern poets reconceive ekphrasis to revaluate the art museum’s hypostasized practices of collecting, defining, and
exhibiting cultures. Each of the poets considered previously locates ekphrastic poetry within institutional spaces and attends to speakers’ local and critical acts of looking at the art on display in order to contest the museum’s neglect of the art and experiences of female, queer, and working-class subjects. Although representing art experience in the museum provided these poets ideational traction for their institutional critiques, Tolson approaches his interrogation of museum culture within a more expansive framework: he takes as primary subject an entire field of African American cultural production, from the Curator to the “Regents of the Harlem Gallery” who subsidize his work, the museum’s demanding public, an African nationalist who philosophizes on aesthetics, and a roster of controversial artists. In doing so, Tolson radically magnifies the representational possibilities for ekphrasis by contemplating works of art as they are created, circulate, and are critically evaluated within this cultural sphere. While ekphrasis is typically understood as the poetic description of an art object, in Tolson’s work it becomes the poetic contemplation of art objects contained within this entire art world and its museum culture. In his epic, engagements with modernist art produced, collected, and seen by Harlem’s community both revalue the place of black art in the modern museum and envision new, holistic modes of racial inclusion. In addressing Tolson’s formal experimentation with the poetics of ekphrasis, I draw on a body of contemporary scholarship that contests the prevailing critical framing of modern black poetics as a coherent set of racialized aesthetic strategies for writing against a predominantly racist culture (such as the use of black vernacular and of blues forms, and a distrust of traditional poetic forms), in order to recover the ways African American poets have drawn on and reconstituted conventional poetic formalisms in pursuit of cultural critique.¹

Tolson invokes, only to remediate, customarily racially homogenous cultural forms—such as the museum and the practice of ekphrastic poetry—as means of challenging racial exclusions systemic in the modern art world.

Reading Tolson’s work within a tradition of modernist ekphrastic innovation returns us to debates about Tolson’s status as a modernist poet and as a black poet contemporary with *Harlem Gallery*’s initial publication, debates about artistic identity that many midcentury critics were unable or reluctant to resolve. The critical reception of *Harlem Gallery* was largely deprecatory, as many of its reviewers expressed displeasure with Tolson’s turn towards the poetics of high modernism, evident in the book’s rich strata of obscure literary and philosophical allusions, layered metaphors, tangled syntax, and arcane language, features guaranteed to send even the most learned reader scrambling for the *OED*.² Crucially, *Harlem Gallery* was written at the height of the popularity of the Black Arts Movement and its formative appeals for a black aesthetic grounded in vernacular culture and independent of white evaluative hierarchies, an aesthetic that shaped critical taste for explicitly political black literature throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. As Rita Dove remarks of *Harlem Gallery*’s frigid reception:

the timing was bad for such a complex piece … black consciousness had permeated every aspect of Afro-American life, including its literature. Black writers rejected white literary standards, proclaiming a black aesthetic that was distinctly oral, where poems and fiction

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² In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), an early and still foundational recovery of the aesthetic merit of early twentieth-century African American literature in the context of literary modernism, Houston Baker largely takes as given Tolson’s status as a black modernist poet. In the opening vignette of this study, Baker depicts a conversation with an interlocutor at Yale who is “adamant that *only* Melvin Tolson among the vast panoply of Afro-American writers had become a successful ‘modern’ writer (before, say, Baldwin or Ellison)—by which he mean that Tolson, in his view, sounded like Eliot, or Joyce, or Pound, or…” (xiii, emphasis in original). Tolson is never again referenced in the text, as Baker proceeds to explore other strategies used by the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance to navigate a prejudicial American culture. As critics have since amply demonstrated, however, Tolson’s relationship to high modernism is more ambivalent than Baker’s study concedes.
used the language patterns and vocabulary of the street to arouse feelings of solidarity and pride among Afro-Americans … the suspicion had already been raised that Melvin B. Tolson was the white critics’ flunky. (xviii)³

However, this suspicion that Tolson’s turn to high modernism automatically indicates a rejection of his racial identity disregards what for Tolson was a vibrant, even sustaining, racial dynamic underpinning his poetics: that taking inspiration from Anglo-European literary norms meant not a capitulation to a white literary elite, but rather a challenge to the racial univocity of the standard markers of literary achievement in the academy. If Tolson sought critical recognition for the daring of his poetic invention, he sought it in the argot of his racial identity and its history; as he describes it, “I, as a black poet, have absorbed the Great Ideas of the Great White World, and interpreted them in the melting-pot idiom of my people. My roots are in Africa, Europe, and America” (“A Poet’s Odyssey,” 184). The belief that the insertion of black poetics in the formal styles of the “Great White World”—from the high modernist epic and the museum to the poetics of ekphrasis—does not erase racial difference but rather, to adapt Pound’s famous remark, makes both new, underwrites Tolson’s formal innovations. In *Harlem Gallery* particularly, it enables his poetic exploration of the ways in which bringing black art and culture into the museum can dismantle (racialized) hierarchies of aesthetic worth, establishing productive points of comparison and tension across traditionally isolated domains of Western

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³ Dove quotes from a number of these reviews in her introduction to the 1999 edition of Tolson’s collected poems. For instance, Paul Breman argues that Tolson “postured for a white audience, and with a wicked sense of humour gave it just what it wanted: an entertaining darkey using almost comically big words as the best wasp tradition demands” (qtd. in Dove xix). Sarah Webster Fabio echoes this sentiment, claiming that “Tolson’s language is most certainly not ‘Negro’ to any significant degree. The weight of that vast, bizarre, pseudo-literary diction is to be placed back into the American mainstream where it rightfully and wrong-mindedly belongs” (qtd. in Dove xviii). These critiques noticeably echo the criticisms levied against *Harlem on My Mind*, discussed below, by framing the book as a presentation of black culture mediated in ways meant to appeal to a white critical gaze.
and non-Western cultures, and especially in the long history of the African Diaspora that leads to contemporary African American experience.

My analysis focuses primarily on Tolson’s experimental modes of ekphrasis within the robust art world imagined in the volume, and contextualizes Tolson’s ekphrastic poetics in relation to contemporary calls to bring black art and experience into the public art museum. Tolson’s very incompatible with the two major literary paradigms to which it is often contrasted—Anglo-European high modernism and the Black Arts Movement—provides an enriching perspective on how black poets participated in the revaluation and remaking of cultural institutions and traditions in the long modernist period, including both the twentieth-century public art museum and the poetics of ekphrasis. Tolson draws on a number of concerns at the heart of modernist ekphrasis: the function of the modern artist as a cultural curator, and the curator as an artist; the social function of art and aesthetic experience; debates over whether the museum is an elite or democratic space, a temple or a forum; and the possibilities for formally experimental poetry to disrupt the exclusionary matrix that defined twentieth-century museum culture.

I. The Museum’s Racial Politics

Harlem Gallery was written during a decade in the history of the American public art museum which was defined both by racial progress and racial turbulence, as the museum was one of the myriad public institutions that were subject in the 1960s to revaluation and critique for their sequestration or total exclusion of African American voices. Several museums dedicated exclusively to African American art and history had been founded during the late 1950s but this institutional type only fully blossomed in the 1960s, when museums opened in Chicago (The
DuSable Museum of African American History, 1961), Detroit (Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, 1965), and New York City (The Studio Museum, 1968).\(^4\) Established universal survey museums were comparably slower to respond to calls for the decolonization of their collections and exhibition practices than were the local communities that established these entirely new institutions. As Susan E. Cahan writes, “prior to 1967 one could count fewer than a dozen museum exhibitions that had featured the work of African American artists, with the exception of museums at historically black colleges and universities” (1). One of the implicit functions of the universal survey museum within the art world is adjudicating what art and cultural productions are valuable or significant enough for preservation and exhibition, and, consequently, what artistic expressions belong in the agora of national culture. The particular methods that survey museums adopted in their efforts to include (and sequester) African American art are thus indicative of the broader ideologies that shaped the relationship of aesthetic value and racial identity in Civil Rights-era America. In *Exhibiting Blackness*, Bridget Cooks argues that mid-century art museums tended to adopt one of two methods for incorporating African American art and cultural history: that of the ethnographic display, in which black art is presented in terms of its difference from canonical art history and separation from Western notions of aesthetic value, and that of the “corrective narrative, which aims to present the works of significant and overlooked African American artists to a mainstream audience” (1). However, as Cooks shows, despite their methodological differences both of these practices are at least theoretically premised on the isolation of African American cultural heritage from the mainstream of national culture: either as a cultural sphere that necessitates

\(^4\) As Lena Hill notes, though these institutions marked the first independent museums dedicated to African American art and history, the first such instances appeared on the campuses of historically black colleges such as Hampton, Howard, and Fisk (152).
different, detached acts of looking (the ethnographic display) or as one that is given special
treatment that attests more to the political generosity and liberal social capital of the institution
than to any holistic effort to recalculate art history to incorporate black art and culture (the
corrective narrative).

Among the most singularly controversial attempts to surmount the divide between the
African American experience and the art museum falls into the realm of “ethnographic display”: New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition *Harlem on My Mind: The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968*, which opened in January 1969 following weeks of activist protest and sensational media coverage. The now infamous vision of the Met’s recently hired director Thomas P. Hoving for responding to contemporary cultural issues within the museum (as well as for securing community support for the museum’s planned expansion further into Central Park), *Harlem on My Mind* was the Met’s first explicit attempt to engage with African American experiences in a large-scale exhibition. As its title and subtitle suggest, *Harlem on My Mind* was intended to represent the history of Harlem’s black community and its centrality in African American history in general as the “cultural capital” of Black America, an allusion to James Weldon Johnson’s “vision of Harlem as a center of intellectual, cultural, and economic power, exerting influence throughout the world” (Cahan 39). Yet the overwhelmingly negative reception of this exhibit—dozens of black artists and activists, most famously members of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, protested prior to its opening and throughout its first weeks, and it was largely seen as a failure among critics and reviewers—suggests that something was decidedly amiss in the “cultural capital,” in Bourdieu’s sense, of *Harlem on My Mind*. Indeed, as Cooks explains, at the heart of the overwhelmingly adverse reception of this exhibition was the Met’s decision not to engage at all with black art or to involve black artists in
its planning. Rather than include any cultural productions by black artists, the organizers instead opted to “display African American people through oversized photo-murals,” and members of the community were excluded from the exhibition’s creative team. In *Harlem on My Mind*, “Black culture emerged in the Met not as creative producer, but as ethnographic study” (53). At this time photography was yet to be legitimized as an art form at the same level of distinction as painting or sculpture, and most of the photographers whose work was represented in *Harlem on My Mind* were not members of the Harlem community; the curatorial decision to exclude African American self-representation tacitly insinuated that black cultural productions were not up to the same aesthetic standards as the predominately Anglo-European objects in the Met’s permanent collections.⁵ *Harlem on My Mind*, as Andrew McClellan has succinctly put it, simply offered “the white man’s conception of black history and experience” (“A Brief History” 29-30).⁶

Yet the vision proffered by the Met of the irreconcilability of actual black culture within the high cultural spaces of the contemporary American art world was anticipated—and challenged—a number of years before the opening of *Harlem on My Mind*, anticipated just several dozens streets north of the Met, in Tolson’s imagined institution of black art and history, the Harlem Gallery. Tolson’s two “Gallery” volumes engage most directly with the place of

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⁵ Writing a decade following the opening of *Harlem on My Mind*, Bourdieu still identifies “art photography” as a less legitimate artistic form compared to painting and sculpture, referring to it as a “cheap substitute for chic objects and practices” that appeals largely to “petit bourgeois aestheticism” but not those richest in traditional forms of cultural capital (*Distinction* 58). The Department of Photography did not open at the Met until 1992, to provide one example of the relatively recent history of its legitimation in fine arts museums.

⁶ Though it was an unmitigated social, cultural, and critical failure, *Harlem on My Mind* was also a signal occasion in the democratization of the American art museum; in the years following, several of its tacit but formative assumptions—that black culture should be judged with a separate measure from Anglo-European culture, and that black artists and intellectuals move in a cultural sphere separate from that of the twentieth-century art world—would be contested by exhibitions at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (*Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston*, 1970) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (*Contemporary Black Art in America*, 1971). Cooks’s revaluation of the legacy of *Harlem on My Mind* concludes with the important point that the oppositional activist energy surrounding the exhibition was crucial in opening museum administrative positions to African Americans and to the rapid expansion of museums dedicated to African American art across the country during the 1970s.
African American aesthetics in art world spaces that, like the Met, reflected and engaged with dominant cultural beliefs and values, rather than with the successful museums of specifically African American history that were founded throughout the 1960s. While institutions such as the DuSable Museum and the Studio Museum were (and are) primarily situated in, and continuous with the values of, the communities in which they were founded, functioning as what Cahan calls “culturally specific” museums or galleries, Tolson instead imagines a museum of African American history that engages with the beliefs subtending the major “universal survey” museums discussed earlier in this dissertation: with the aesthetic values and artistic practices that have been given highest cultural legitimation (Cahan 11). Although in *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* and *Harlem Gallery* Tolson considers the institutional status of black art produced from the African Diaspora to the present in a robust Harlem art world shaped by the contributions of a range of black cultural producers, professionals, and audiences, he does so with an eye towards investing these aesthetic productions with the universal meaning signified by universal survey museums. Importantly, Tolson’s poetics do not isolate discourses of aesthetic worth from the interests and experiences of the broader communities represented in his poems—an isolation of art from life for which many have criticized the modern museum—but rather seek to erode the separation of high and low cultures to endow the legacy of the African Diaspora with the cultural distinction that comes from being included in the art museum.

Tolson’s poems, and particularly *Harlem Gallery*, mark some of the few instances when twentieth-century American literature takes as its subject the full scope and functioning of an art world: its artists, critics, administrators, audiences, and formative theories of aesthetic value. Nearly all of Tolson’s creative work takes as its primary theme the status of blackness in American public life, and *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* and *Harlem Gallery* represent his most
sustained and imaginative engagements with the relationship between black creativity and modern institutional culture. These two volumes bookend Tolson’s writing career and, as such, provide a framework for considering how his poetic concerns evolved in the thirty years’ separating their compositions. As he developed an increasingly opaque and allusive poetic style, reworking the premise of *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* while radically revising its content into *Harlem Gallery*, his engagements with institutions of art become increasingly complex: the gallery and its place in Harlem’s cultural life becomes the poetic subject, and the roster of personae who define the conditions of seeing and interpreting black cultural productions expands dramatically. In bringing about this transformation, Tolson increasingly derives anti-racist potential from the ekphrastic contemplation of art objects when located in the space of the art museum.

Tolson was no stranger to the institutional matrices that shaped aesthetic education and discourses of artistic value. He was a Professor of English at two historically black universities, Wiley College and Langston University, and served as coach of Wiley’s nationally famous debate team (a role that was the inspiration for the 1997 film *The Great Debaters*, in which Tolson was portrayed by Denzel Washington); he earned an M. A. degree in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University (his thesis was one of the first comprehensive critical studies of the literature of the Harlem Renaissance); he was named Poet Laureate of Liberia in 1947, which occasioned the composition of his first poem in the high modernist style, the ode *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953); and in 1966 he received an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In his “Gallery” volumes, and in *Harlem Gallery* in particular, the public roles of intellectuals and cultural institutions—roles with which Tolson was well familiar in his own life—become the primary vantage point from which
Tolson explores, but never definitively answers, the question that motivates both volumes: “What is a Negro?” (HG 154).\(^7\) The characters of *Harlem Gallery* conduct their poetic inquiry into this question through the prism of art and aesthetics, rather than through the objective lens of disinterested cultural analysis favored by museum exhibitions such as *Harlem on My Mind*. In having them do so, Tolson turns the ekphrastic trope of contemplating a visual artwork variously into an organizational structure for his poetic manuscript, a set-piece for revolutionary political discourse, and a rich site for debate among the contemporary black artists and cultural critics who populate his poem.

II. *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*

Tolson first steps poetic foot into the museum in *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, an unpublished manuscript of 162 poetic vignettes, each of which focuses on the story of a single modern Harlemit. Although certain of Tolson’s characters may have been modeled after living personages, as Keith Leonard and Robert Farnsworth have shown, for the most part *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* depicts the lives of imagined Harlem denizens from across a range of social classes, races, and lived experiences: poets and artists, cabaret dancers and prostitutes, visiting African dignitaries, a white university researcher, the chief surgeon of a Harlem hospital, a petty thief who quotes Virgil in the original Latin, and Marzimmu Heffner, the last living emancipated

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\(^7\) Tolson’s understanding of poetry’s public function has been frequently examined by critics of his work, an important endeavor given the evident difficulty of much of Tolson’s poetry. Tolson’s biographer Robert Farnsworth writes that “Tolson discounted and at times denied the significance of merely personal experience. He did not savor the intimate personal detail about himself or others, the ‘art of privacy,’ unless it had relatively clear public significance” (*Melvin B. Tolson* 6). In *African American Writers and Classical Tradition* (2010), William W. Cook and James Tatum relate this distrust of the “merely personal” to Tolson’s bardic persona and belief that art was valueless unless it intended social impact.
slave. A Gallery of Harlem Portraits pursues the diversity and vibrancy of Harlem in the era when the Harlem Renaissance had begun to crest, and does so with an eye to rendering in aesthetic form and vernacular speech the local culture and personae of this predominantly African American neighborhood. Tonally and thematically, most of these portraits are rooted in the “dark laughter,” dramatic storytelling, and ironies of the blues (Farnsworth, Afterword 266). Yet by titling this collection A Gallery of Harlem Portraits, Tolson also implies that his representations of the experiences and voices of Harlem’s residents engage with the ways in which arts and cultures are curated and exhibited in institutional spaces, including museums and galleries. In doing so, Tolson rhetorically frames A Gallery of Harlem Portraits as an ekphrastic text by encouraging readers to attend to the poems not just as individual textual objects, but also as aesthetic objects that reside in the volume’s composite exhibition space. In contrast to the robust art world Tolson will imagine in Harlem Gallery, in A Gallery of Harlem Portraits his engagements with the visual arts are relatively infrequent, as in this manuscript Tolson instead aims to convey a more comprehensive survey of Harlem’s social life. In its title, paratextual references to visual aesthetic practices, and introduction of the character of “the Curator,” A Gallery of Harlem Portraits represents Tolson’s overture to what will be the central theme of the later Harlem Gallery: the responsibilities of cultural institutions to conserve the living culture of their communities by collecting, preserving, and display their artistic productions.

Tolson signals this interest in the aesthetic representation and institutional preservation of contemporary Harlem’s culture milieu in the opening poem of A Gallery of Harlem Portraits,

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8 Leonard identifies portrayals of Marcus Garvey (“Grand Chancellor Knapp Sackville”), W. E. B. Du Bois (“Napoleon Hannibal Speare”), and Madame C. J. Walker (“Madame Alpha Devine”), but stresses, as I do, that more important than direct historical correlations is the place of these figures within the larger constellation of Harlem’s diversity (207-8). Farnsworth also speculates, though less confidently, about potential historical referents in his Afterword to A Gallery of Harlem Portraits, suggesting that Alain Locke, Jean Toomer, and Countee Cullen may have also served as models for Tolson (261-2).
“Harlem.” The only poem in the volume not titled with the name of an individual Harlemite, “Harlem” functions as both preface to and framing device for the manuscript. In its closing moments, it also recommends reading practices for the manuscript’s poems: that they be understood as depicting visual artistic depictions of Harlem’s residents, and as such, that they can be read as ekphrastic poems. “Harlem” begins in a manner meant to startle, with the immediate presentation of sordid images of criminal and moral indecency involving characters whose stories will later be treated more expansively in individual poems: “Diamond Canady / Was stabbed in bed by Little Eva Winn. / Deacon Phineas Bloom / Confessed his adultery on his deathbed” (3). Tolson represents these incidents with the air of the disinterested observer who merely records historical events without comment. The poem pivots in the following stanza, however, to situate these local characters within a broader cultural mythology:

Dusky Bards,
Heirs of eons of Comedy and Tragedy,
Pass along the streets and alleys of Harlem
Singing ballads of the Dark World:

*When a man has lost his taste for you
   Jest leave dat man alone.*

*Says I . . . a dawg won’t eat a bone
   If he don’t want de bone.*

The juxtaposition of the free verse quatrain echoing early Eliot with the italicized vernacular song performed by the “Dusky Bard” mingles high art with low, and black cultural forms with an Anglo-European high modernism. While this effect recalls the inclusion of lyrics from popular songs and snippets of working-class dialogue in the ur-poem of high modernism, Eliot’s *Waste*
Land (1922), Tolson here takes the modernist desire to elicit unified meaning from the fragments of cultural modernity in a different direction: he resists the impulse to isolate the demotic and quotidian from the modern poet’s efforts to tap into “eons” of cultural traditions to transcend the modern condition. Instead, high and low are brought into nonhierarchical relation. The “Dusky Bard” of the “Dark World” may sing not in grand Homeric cadences but rather in vernacular song, yet Tolson sets these lyrics in iambics that suggestively harmonize old and new, established and popular aesthetic practices. He also here adumbrates one of the primary functions of museology: historicizing individual objects and experiences (such as the fates of Diamond Canady and Deacon Phineas Bloom) within temporal frameworks, the “eons of Comedy and Tragedy.”

Following the conclusion of this blues song, Tolson’s speaker catalogues a number of the volume’s other personae—drawing on yet another classical poetic device, the epic catalogue—before finally introducing the volume’s organizing principle and resident man-behind-the-curtain, the Curator:

- Radicals, prizefighters, actors and deacons,
- Beggars, politicians, professors and redcaps,
- Bulldikers, Babbitts, racketeers and jig-chasers,
- Harlots, crapshooters, workers and pink-chasers,
- Artists, dicties, Pullman porters and messiahs …

The Curator has hung the likenesses of all

In A Gallery of Harlem Portraits. (GHP 4)

Although these lines offer the manuscript’s single explicit reference to the Curator, whom Tolson will eventually endow with a history and personality in Harlem Gallery, the idea of the curator
as the poetry collection’s silent organizer demonstrates Tolson’s interests in the institutionalization of cultural and community history and the relationship between the visual and verbal arts. By associating the poet’s work with that of the curator, an association underscored also in the manuscript’s title, Tolson at once situates curation as an artistic practice and the curator as an artist, and suggests a homology between the collection of poems and the exhibition of paintings. In this way, Tolson calls upon the traditional reading practices for ekphrasis, in which the poetic text is approached as a verbal description of a visual object, as appropriate for the poems contained in *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*. This notional intermingling of visual and verbal representational strategies draws on the conceit of the portrait-poem popular among modernist poets for imagining the poem as a visual object, including the “Portrait of a Lady” poems of Ezra Pound (“Portrait d’une Femme,” 1912), T. S. Eliot (1915), and William Carlos Williams (1920), as well as Gertrude Stein’s “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Pablo Picasso” (1923). As Francis Dickey argues, the portrait-poem functioned as a staging ground for modernist explorations of interiority, or absence of interiority, of a “sitter” or poetic subject, in which the act of producing a poetic portrait was thought to provide the artist with special insight into the sitter’s subjectivity. Although Tolson’s collection of portrait-poems in *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* similarly explores the subjectivity of a myriad of Harlem denizens, its curator/gallery metaphorical arrangement points to Tolson’s ultimate investment in the institutional preservation of these gathered representations. That is, in its accretion of poetic portraits the manuscript preserves an image of a community told through the curated voices and experiences of its residents.

The paratextual arrangement of *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* supports this interpretation, as it is divided into four sections, each titled with the name of a visual aesthetic
practice or mode: “Chiaroscuro,” “Silhouettes,” “Etchings,” and “Pastels.” The underlying logic of these section divisions has troubled Tolson scholars to date, as there appears to be no evident means of differentiating the poems under each heading either by style or content. Why invoke visual aesthetic practices for the section headings if only to disregard them in the actual poems they purport to categorize? More significant than the organizational logic, I’d wager, is the nature of the taxonomic categories that Tolson constructs: his decision not to order the portrait-poems in terms of his subjects’ personality, occupations, regional locales, ages, or any other principle derivable from their characterizations, but rather from the aesthetics of the artist’s depiction of them. The headings construct visual frames of reference for reading the volume, turning the poems not only into imaginary portraits, but into imaginary portraits to be visualized through their specific modes of aesthetic representation. These visual indices imply Tolson’s creation of what Hollander refers to as “notional” ekphrastic poetry, in which a poetic text describes the appearance of a non-real visual object. Moreover, the organization of the poems by visual aesthetic practices recalls the taxonomic categories established by museums to produce frameworks for the observers’ experiencing, interpreting, and learning from the institution’s collections. Finally, by incorporating these museological elements in his notional “gallery,” Tolson invokes the cultural capital of the art world by attending to established portraiture practices that have been given critical and institutional legitimacy: the chiaroscuro associated with the Renaissance Old Masters, the silhouettes of nineteenth-century genteel art, the art of etching popular among the great European printmakers (including Francisco Goya, whose work Tolson will substantively engage in *Harlem Gallery*), and the pastels that were the primary medium for portraiture in eighteenth-century France. If these section headings encourage us to

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9 See, e.g., Farnsworth, *Melvin B. Tolson* 43; and Leonard 208.
interpret Tolson’s portrait-poems as ekphrastic poems, they furthermore encourage us to situate these interpretations under the aegis of high cultural artistic practices. This is to say that in this poetic manuscript, intimations of ekphrasis allow Tolson to angle the poem’s populist visions of Harlem’s African American community within the ideological and cultural hierarchies that constitute museum culture.

In its presentation of a range of voices from across Harlem’s community, *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* enacts a comprehensive vision of the community through the curation and exhibition of its disparate individual voices, voices suggestively located within a mixture of high, middle, and low aesthetic styles.10 Tolson’s investment in crafting so many portrait poems that, as they accumulate, offer a generalizing representation of Harlem’s social and cultural life echoes the practices of universal survey museums that are intended to convey a comprehensive sense of the arcs of human achievement since antiquity.11 However, in being so thoroughly invested in the particular cultural life of contemporary Harlem, and in constituting its presentation of this cultural life through the individual voices and local experiences of each of

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10 It is worth noting that Tolson stated his motivation for *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*—and later *Harlem Gallery*—was to produce a poem of Harlem epic in scale. In a much-quoted passage, he describes its genesis while he was studying at Columbia for his M. A.: “As you know, the Twenties gave birth not only to the Lost Generation but to the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro. Jazz became a fad—ancient African art, a novelty of the intelligentsia. I was in the middle of this literary revolution before the panic of 1929. One day I showed my young white friend a sonnet that I had written. It was titled ‘Harlem.’ He read it two or three times, and then said fretfully, ‘Melvin, Harlem is too big for a sonnet.’ That was the genesis of the *Harlem Gallery*” (“A Poet’s Odyssey” 194). On Tolson’s engagement with the epic tradition, see Leonard, *Fettered Genius* (2006).

11 Carol Duncan, for instance, refers to public art museums as sites for the enactment of a universal “secular knowledge … because of their status as preservers of the community’s *official* cultural memory” that have “the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community” (8, emphasis mine). Timothy W. Luke similarly argues that the museum is a field in which culture wars are played out, defining personal and community identities through stories and creative expressions that are given legitimacy through their inclusion: “Museums are, like neighborhoods, schools, or churches, a place where Americans first learn, and later reassure themselves, about their culture, history, environment, or technology,” yet works of art shown in them “are products of an ongoing struggle by individuals and groups to establish what is real, to organize collective interests, and to gain command over what is regarded as having authority” (xvi, xxiv).
the portrait subjects, Tolson suggests a revised function for this kind of museum, as something of a universalized local institution that tells the full story of a community directly through the experiences of its residents. This ethos shapes Tolson’s poetics and reveals some of the models on which he drew to create it: the language is for the most part vernacular, the rhythm is that of the blues, the metaphors and images are relatively accessible, and the main poetic interlocutors are Walt Whitman and Edgar Lee Masters, the latter of whom’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1916) Tolson indicated was a source for *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*.

In the vein of Whitman and Masters, Tolson induces a democratic vision of community through the curation of the voices and experiences of the masses unconstrained by boundaries of race, class, or gender. A populist ideology inheres in the form of the community poetic anthology, much as in Masters’s precedent, to the degree that it provides Tolson a space in which to apportion equivalent attention to each of his disparate characters. In the acts of curation and organization essential to it, the anthology form is also analogous to the cultural institution signaled in Tolson’s manuscript’s title: as Marianne Moore calls it, “that sometimes disparaged, most powerful phase of the anthology, the museum” (*Collected Prose* 182).

The individual poems that constitute *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* are of less immediate interest to me here than are the ways in which Tolson extends the idea of the museum as a conceptual framework for the manuscript. Several of these poems introduce artists, writers, patrons, and connoisseurs whose representations preview some of the principal themes of *Harlem Gallery* three decades later. Particularly, they convey Tolson’s interests in how art reaches broader communities of viewers and readers, how art is interpreted and mediated, and

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12 In a 1965 interview, Tolson described this then unpublished collection: “The first finished manuscript of the *Harlem Gallery* was written in free verse. That was the fashion introduced by the Imagists. It contained 340 pages. The *Spoon River Anthology* of Edgar Lee Masters was my model. Browning’s psychology in characterization stimulated me. Walt Whitman’s exuberance was in the marrow of my bones” (“A Poet’s Odyssey” 194-5).
how the racial dynamics of a modern art world created the paradoxical conditions in which
African art was made in vogue among wealthy white collectors while contemporary black visual
artists and writers struggled to secure financial stability or institutional credibility. “Vergil
Ragsdale” conveys the story of an impoverished “dishwasher at Mr. Maranto’s café” who, in
private, seeks to compose “the epic of his people” but dies prior to its completion (GHP 100);
Tolson recycles much of Ragsdale’s situation, including his squalid apartment, lack of critical
recognition, and untimely death, in his representation of the modernist painter John Laguart in
Harlem Gallery. “Abraham Dumas” tells of an elderly patron of black writers who struggles in
helping the younger generation appeal to multiracial audiences with their work; Dumas appears
as a faithful and exacting supporter who is ultimately unable to help them overcome a racial
cultural climate unprepared or unwilling to value black aesthetics, despite his convictions and
best efforts. Instead, recalling Emerson’s renowned appeal for the true American bard in “The
Poet,” Dumas waits “for the coming of someone-- / Perhaps . . . a black Whitman . . . a Balzac . .
. a Tolstoi” who can truly capture a multiracial audience (GHP 10). Tolson contrasts Dumas and
his support for black artists with Miss Felicia Babcock, a white Manhattanite who on a
“slumming trip to Harlem” finds “a city of refuge / In the Renaissance of Negro Art. / She
opened her salon to the Harlem intelligentsia, / Established the Babcock Exhibition of African
Cultures, / And granted the Annual Babcock Awards in Negro Art.” This satirical portrait of a
stereotypical white cultural connoisseur who partakes in the then contemporary vogue for
Primitivism will be renewed in Harlem Gallery’s diasporic treatment of black cultural history
and challenge to Western appropriations of black history. More pointedly, Babcock might
represent a New York-surrogate for modernist tastemaker Gertrude Stein, who was a patron to
many of the artists who contributed to the vogue for the African “primitive” and whose infamous
assertion that “the Negro suffers from nothingness” Tolson turns to in his later work. He directly contends with his high modernist forebear in Harlem Gallery when, amidst the vibrancy of the Zulu Club and the performance of the poet Hideho Heights, the Curator asks rhetorically “Listen, Black Boy / Did the High Priestess at 27 rue de Fleurus [sic] / assert ‘The Negro suffers from nothingness’?” (HG 74).

In their themes and content, these three poems suggest the bent of Tolson’s investment in the racial politics attendant to the institutionalization of art, his concern for how black aesthetics and artists move within an art world shaped by the aesthetic values and interests of Anglo-European high culture, a climate in which the work of contemporary artists like Vergil Ragsdale and Abraham Dumas’s mentees are undervalued by this art world while primitivism is all the rage. However, the aesthetics of A Gallery of Harlem Portraits resist the univocity of this art world and its racial dynamics. In drawing on the idea of the picture gallery as an organizational and framing device for his representation of Harlem’s community, Tolson forwards an argument about the responsibilities of cultural institutions to elevate the values, interests, and beliefs of their particular communities over standardized evaluative hierarchies and discourses of artistic worth. A Gallery of Harlem Portraits seeks to evacuate neither the aesthetic nor the living community of its meaning, but instead offers a space in which high artistic practices (as signaled in the presence of the Curator and the section headings) and community voices (as represented in the individual poems) harmonize. This synthesis is comparable to that achieved by Marianne Moore in her curatorial poems and in the ideas of progressive museum administrators with which her work engages, including John Cotton Dana. But Tolson’s contributes an additional term to this democratic museology that was often sidelined in the progressive museum literature of the early twentieth century: that of racial inclusion in high cultural institutions. In the three decades
that Tolson spent sporadically revising *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* into *Harlem Gallery*, this was one of the only facets of the former that he chose to retain as he reconfigured the project nearly entirely to foreground Harlem’s art world, including the Curator, contemporary black painters and poets, and the Gallery’s financiers. In the process, Tolson’s engagements with the ekphrastic contemplation of a work of art were transformed, too. While in *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* Tolson insinuates that the poems should be read as ekphrastic verse but does not directly grapple with visual culture in the content of its poems, in *Harlem Gallery* the ekphrastic description of the work of art becomes the primary medium through which Tolson engages the situatedness of the work of art within the twentieth-century art world.

III. *The Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator*

Tolson was unsuccessful in finding a publisher for *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* and placed only a few of its poems in *The Modern Quarterly*, a magazine edited by Tolson’s friend V. F. Calverton. (The complete manuscript of *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* would be published in full only in 1979, thirteen years after Tolson’s death.) In the decades following the manuscript’s completion, desiring to find a receptive audience in the leading critical mandarins and publishing outlets of the mid-century, Tolson dramatically remade his poetic style and reconfigured his influences. Although his first published book, *Rendezvous with America* (1944), taps into the same Whitmanesque populism of *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, the later *Libretto for the African Republic* and *Harlem Gallery*—the volumes on which Tolson staked his reputation and for which he desired recognition from the literary establishment (for instance, he solicited Allen Tate and Karl Shapiro, respectively, to compose prefatory essays; both did so)—
In the process of reshaping his aesthetic practices into a style commensurate with high modernist poetry, Tolson also reconsidered the importance of cultural institutions to his interrogations of the place of African American art in the modern art world. While in the earlier manuscript the art gallery was a metaphor and organizing principle, in *Harlem Gallery* Tolson expands the gallery into an actual institutional space that is vital to the cultural life of Harlem and to its community’s knowledge of the rich cultural heritage of the African Diaspora. Farnsworth writes that Tolson’s creative imagination remained galvanized by “the idea of Harlem as a city, and more particularly of a gallery within the city, being a measure of the civilization, in the fullest sense of the word, that a people had achieved” (*Melvin B. Tolson* 221).

Tolson’s vision of Harlem as the cultural capital of Black America—comparable to the Met’s *Harlem on My Mind* in the spirit of its claim, if not in the substance of its representation—undergirds *Harlem Gallery*’s exploration of the place of African American artists in a modern museum culture charged with shaping dominant discourses of aesthetic taste. Tolson initially planned for *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator* to be the first volume in a poetic saga tracing black cultural achievement from pre-modern Africa to contemporary Harlem, but it was the only one of the projected volumes he was able to complete prior to his death in 1966, less than a year following its publication. *Harlem Gallery* indeed functions as a preface to what would have been the broader series, as it develops a historical framework for understanding black progress since

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13 Tolson recalls of this transformation in his poetic practices that, after stashing “the manuscript [of *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*] in my trunk for twenty years … I had read and absorbed the techniques of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Baudelaire, Pasternak, and, I believe, all the great Moderns. God only knows how many ‘little magazines’ I studied, and how much textual analysis of the New Critics” (“A Poet’s Odyssey” 195).

14 See also Hill 151-2 on how the evolution of Tolson’s poetic concerns proceeds alongside a shift in his engagement with museum culture, and Leonard on Tolson’s synthesis of the African Diaspora with the “Western pantheon” of artistic achievement in *Harlem Gallery* (199).
the Diaspora and airs debates on aesthetic value in and through the gallery space. *Harlem Gallery* follows the Curator, who is of mixed race and passes for white outside of Harlem (thus recapitulating one of the major literary tropes of the Harlem Renaissance), as he presides over the opening of an exhibition of black art and culture, and as he moves throughout Harlem interacting with figures such as John Laguart, the ill-fated modernist painter; Hideho Heights, the “poet laureate of Lenox Avenue”; Doctor Obi Nkomo, an irreverent African nationalist with a penchant for posing philosophical conundrums; and Mr. Guy Delaporte III, a wealthy resident of Sugar Hill with a financial stake in the Gallery.

While in *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* the poetic portraits are notionally gathered by a Curator who dissolves into the text following its prefatory poem, in *Harlem Gallery* the Curator has a history and subjectivity, and is explicitly (and ambivalently) embedded in the art world. As *Harlem Gallery* progresses through its twenty-four cantos, each titled with a letter of the Greek alphabet, the Curator explores the relationship between art and community in several scenes of aesthetic experience that occur within the poem’s narrative. Tolson thus returns to the conventional use of ekphrasis in the Western epic tradition, in which narrative progress is interrupted by a digressive contemplation of an aesthetic object that either metaphorically or literally forwards the poem’s plot, such as in the “Shield of Achilles” episode in Homer’s *Iliad*.15 *Harlem Gallery* is not itself an ekphrastic text in the way in which this term has been typically defined in literary criticism, even though the book is peppered with prolonged scenes of aesthetic experience and description that are integral to its plot; rather, these ekphrastic moments function within the book’s broader narrative exploration of the politics of racial inclusion in the art museum. The epic focus of *Harlem Gallery* has led even its most attentive critics, like Elizabeth

15 See, e.g., Hollander 7-23; and Cheeke 19-20.
Bergmann Loizeaux, to claim that Tolson does not “construct his museum via ekphrasis” (172). Yet, as I show below, Tolson’s forays into this poetic mode do provide the imaginative architecture supporting his vision of the importance of art and its public display for promoting racial uplift and dismantling hegemonic racial norms. The poem’s many characters engage with real and imagined artworks that function as aesthetic manifestations of revolutionary thought, the contemplation of which intimates possibilities for an egalitarian and anti-racist American future. The Curator’s Harlem Gallery represents a space in which high and low, elite and popular, and white and black aesthetic practices are placed in conversation, conjuring such dualisms only in order to dissolve them. By the poem’s conclusion, these oppositional categories are exposed as no more than the founding fictions of a racist regime of power. Harlem Gallery suggests the authority of these categories can be undone, however, through the recognition and celebration of black artistic achievement in the high cultural space of the museum.

The Curator within the Art World

The first five cantos of Harlem Gallery present a conundrum that the Curator will work through in the remainder of the poem, a conundrum that shapes its ekphrastic engagements with works of art: does art belong to a cultural elite or to the masses? In the opening cantos, The Curator approaches this inquiry from the perspective of his professional practices of selecting and interpreting art for the public; this in turn informs the positions he later adopts in philosophical conversations with Doctor Nkomo on the relationship among art, politics, and ontology. In the poem’s opening canto, “Alpha,” the Curator is stirred to consciousness by private musings on art’s place in modern society and, more pointedly, the possibilities for art to actualize social revolution through racial uplift:
The Harlem Gallery, an Afric pepper bird,
awakes me at a people’s dusk of dawn.
The age altars its image, a dog’s hind leg,
and hazards the moment of truth in pawn. (*HG* 19)

*Harlem Gallery* begins, on the morning of the gallery opening, with the Curator’s sense of the triumphant awakening of his people. This image is proclaimed through the Romantic poetic trope of the bird’s song that stirs poetic inspiration. Tolson remixes this convention, however, by invoking not Shelley’s skylark or Keats’s nightingale but the “Afric pepper bird” that signifies a different set of aesthetic concerns. The pepper bird was not only the national bird of Liberia, the nation for which Tolson served as Poet Laureate, but as Sidney de la Rue writes, it carried the metaphorical significance in African folklore of having a song that rouses a people’s awakening: “The pepper bird’s mission in life is to wake up West Africa at sunrise … He is the original alarm clock. As all things have a meaning to the mind of Africa, long, long ago the reason for this morning clamour passed into the tribal folklore” (v). In de la Rue’s recounting of the folk story, the song of the “Pepper Bird” acts as a clarion call to “Old Father Night” to return a slumbering African nation to the day. In Tolson’s symbolic appropriation of this tale, the awakening from slumber indicates the Harlem Gallery’s political potential to rouse the individual to participate in the “people’s dusk of dawn.” The reference to W. E. B. Du Bois’s

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16 “When the sun drops behind the trees, Old Father Night steals through the ‘softly softly trails’ of the jungle, and gathers all his tired children in his arms. In that soft embrace, they rest content, secure from toil and trouble. Old Father Night comforts them with happy dreams that seem to have no end. But there is Father Day who claims these children also. As the sun rises with each new dawn, Mr. Pepper Bird perches on Old Father Night’s shoulder, and tells him that he must return the people to Father Day. Old Father Night cannot bear to give up his people to the burdens and torment of Father Day, so he holds his children tighter and pretends not to hear. Pepper Bird shrieks louder and louder: ‘Father Night, Father Night, —get up, here's Father Day.’ He yells and calls until Old Father Night opens one eye, ‘small small,’ and sees Mr. Sun glaring at him; then he knows he cannot pretend any longer, and hands over his beloved African children to Father Day” (De la Rue v-vi).
autobiographical study *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of the Race Concept* (1940), in which Du Bois constellates an examination of American race relations around his personal and familial histories, forwards what is to be a central tension in *Harlem Gallery* between private self-identifications and American racial politics that depend on the formalization of white and black as distinct categories. For the Curator, the opening of the Harlem Galley is a moment inflected with danger but redolent with possibilities for personal fulfillment and spiritual rejuvenation: the provocative misspelling (or re-spelling) in the phrase the “age *altars* its image” implies that the Harlem Gallery is a space in which revolutionary change (alter) is invested with the aura of spiritual transformation (altar). As Hill writes, the ambiguous spelling “heightens [the Curator’s] sense of the religious responsibility pervading his role at the gallery” (162). This responsibility is ultimately redemptive, as truth remains “in pawn,” discarded but available for reclamation. Woven into this characteristically opaque tissue of literary reference, folkloric allegory, and metaphor is a theory of aesthetic experience as a means of personal and political revolution, and particularly in the context of the Harlem Gallery, of a vision of racial progress actualized through the medium of art. The spiritual vision made manifest through aesthetic experience provides the motivation for Tolson’s experiments in ekphrasis throughout the poem.

The first of the poem’s ekphrastic moments occurs in the very next stanza in “Alpha”:

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The Lord of the House of Flies,
jaundiced-eyed, synapses purled
wries before the tumultuous canvas,

*The Second of May*—

by Goya:

the dagger of Madrid```
vs.

the scimitar of Murat.

In Africa, in Asia, on the Day

of Barricades, alarm birds bedevil the Great White World,

a Buridan’s ass—not Balaam’s—between no oats and hay.

Note, first, that Tolson immediately situates the work of art in the context of being contemplated by an observer. This observer, the “Lord of the House of Flies”—perhaps an evocation of William Golding’s allegory of the horrors of the human love of power, *The Lord of the Flies* (1954), as others suggest, but more likely a figure that signifies an elite’s representation of the interests of the disempowered (with “House of Flies” recalling the House of Representatives or House of Commons)—is posed before a painting that depicts the violent uprising of colonial subjects: Goya’s *The Second of May 1808* (1814, fig. 5.1), a patriotic composition representing the Spanish people’s daring revolt against the invading Napoleonic army in the Dos de Mayo Uprising, which was a precipitating event of the Peninsular War. Tolson’s poetic lines certainly do not recall an archetypical ekphrastic poem, as the description of Goya’s canvas is glancing and relatively simple, distilling its many tortured bodies into a single conflict between “Madrid” and “Murat.” However, Tolson does retain certain of the key premises of ekphrastic poetry: the intimation of a prolonged contemplation of a work of art, the identification of important graphic details in the pictorial composition, the intermedial translation of these details into poetic language, and the observer’s eliciting usable aesthetic meaning from this intermedial transfer. The textual representation of Goya’s painting is thus rendered graphically in Tolson’s ekphrasis in a manner that translates the sense of dynamic motion that defines the composition.
The Second of May 1808 features a throng of contorted bodies on either side of the battle while a French soldier on a horse—who, it seems, Tolson has chosen to identify as the French Admiral Joachim Murat—cocks his knife. Recalling the tradition of the shaped poem, the lineation of this stanza spatially replicates the opposition on which the painting’s motion is centered, in the paratactic lines that cascade down the page, punctuated by the vertically and prosodically balanced lines of

the dagger of Madrid

vs.

the scimitar of Murat.
What the Lord of the House of Flies glimpses in this painting are the instruments that engender revolutionary violence, the “dagger” of the people and the “scimitar” of the colonizer. As *Harlem Gallery* moves from Goya’s canvas to the contemporary institutional space, the tools for such acts of subversion will shift from the dagger and scimitar to the painter’s brush and the poet’s pen, and in the process, from signs of explicit revolutionary violence to the symbolic violence enacted by the radical artist. Thus while this moment lacks the elaborate poetic description of the art object traditionally expected of an ekphrastic poem, Tolson nevertheless renders an art object poetically in a way that emblematizes the first canto’s broader message: that soon another revolutionary moment will arise, a new “Day / of Barricades” that will dismantle the hegemony of the “Great White World.” The act of contemplating an artistic masterwork presents the observer with a frame of reference for viewing the world; such contemplation is placed only at a short remove from artistic creation in its potential for disturbing calcified, hierarchical cultural paradigms. That is to say that Tolson positions the possibilities for revolutionary thought at the interstices of artistic production and artistic consumption, and this faith in the observer’s reawakening through exposure to radical art grounds much of the poem’s exploration of art, aesthetics, and cultural institutions.

Tolson’s use of ekphrasis as a means of glimpsing art’s revolutionary meanings gives shape to *Harlem Gallery*’s broader investment in the responsibilities for cultural institutions and intellectuals to promote the needs and interests of their communities. Indeed, Tolson’s ekphrastic poetics not only sustains the poem’s exploration of racial identity in institutional culture but, I argue, is only fully legible when seen as imbricated with it. The choice to refer to the Curator not by name but by his professional title places paramount significance on his institutional position
and the cultural authority it inscribes.\textsuperscript{17} It is in his role in the Harlem Gallery but also as a member of Harlem’s black community that the Curator gains perspective on the possibilities for the Gallery to meet the pedagogical needs and interests of its public; his social function is comparable to that of Gramsci’s “organic intellectual” who emerges from and is embedded in the cultural structure of his community.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, the Curator’s responsibilities involve preparing the Gallery in such a way that its public is able to receive and appreciate revolutionary art, a practice that Tolson casts against an encompassing climate of racial prejudice beyond its walls. The Curator recounts his travails gathering materials from around the world for the Gallery’s collection, relating that while collecting “dead wool and fleece wool / I have mustered up from hands / now warm or cold: a full rich Indies’ cargo” he is harrowed by an ominous

\begin{verbatim}
dry husk-of-locust blues
...

syncopating between
the faggot and the noose:

“Black Boy, O Black Boy,
is the port worth the cruise?” (20)
\end{verbatim}

The literal violence enacted upon African American bodies, rendered symbolically in terms of “faggot and noose,” looms over the Curator’s movement through space, his performance of his professional duties, and his engagement with works of art. His description of his professional

\textsuperscript{17} As Joy Flasch, Tolson’s colleague at Wiley College and later biographer, clarifies, the decision “was done with an ironic awareness that among the black bourgeoisie, such a title would be deserving of great respect” (108).
\textsuperscript{18} In her illuminating study of Tolson’s use of tropes of visual instruction, Hill identifies a precedent in this framing of the museum as a space that promotes racial uplift through public pedagogy in Tolson’s “career as an English professor” and debate coach at historically black colleges, experiences that “impelled him to pen poetry that dramatizes the art exhibition’s dedication to challenging a visitor’s perspective” (148).
practices recalls a great American tradition of white collectors’ expeditions to Europe, indulgence in the artistic heritage of the Old Masters, and returns with paintings, as Henry James depicts in *The Golden Bowl* (1904), and as is represented in Gertrude and Leo Stein’s actual acquisitions of modern art around the same moment. However, while these endeavors immersed American at once in foreign historical traditions and contemporary innovation, the Curator’s actual and symbolic mobility throughout the poem—as he navigates high and low cultural spaces across Harlem, reveals himself conversant with both academic and demotic cultural discourses, and recovers revolutionary potential from both historical and modern paintings—is instead intended to recover and present the vitality of his own African American cultural heritage.

In the poem’s initial cantos, the Curator conveys the sense that his position in the field of African American cultural production is, ultimately, a marginal one: “In the drama *Art, / with eye and tongue, / I play a minor vocative part*” (*HG* 23). What the Curator refers to as his supporting role in his community also tacitly underscores his integration within it, in the sense of the Latin “vocative” case, that is, as a means of direct address to an audience. This audience, however, is not one whose interests or expectations wholly align with the Curator’s preference for revolutionary art. The “idols of the tribe” and the “bulls of Bashan” represent two factions that, despite their differing motives and cultural capital, complicates the Curator’s practices. The “idols of the tribe” is Tolson’s shorthand for an unintellectual cortege of petit bourgeois patrons who plead for an exhibition of art that does not challenge, but rather confirms their ingrained beliefs:

    The idols of the tribe,
    in voices as puissant as the rutting calls
    of a bull crocodile, bellow:
We have heroes! Celebrate them upon our walls!"  (*HG 34*)

The “idols of the tribe” contravene the Curator’s intentions because they desire that the Harlem Gallery reproduce, rather than challenge or expand, their biases. While the “idols” aim to celebrate black heroism, the “bulls of Bashan”—the haute bourgeois patrons of Sugar Hill who “suffer the carbon monoxide of ignorance” and influence the economic fortunes of the Harlem Gallery (“leave my budget as the corpse of a chance”)—favor uncritical and unrevolutionary art that, if it challenges the status quo, does so only gently (*HG 40*). In response to these demands for an art that gratifies by confirming the preexisting order of things, the Curator instead presents an aesthetic theory that acknowledges, paradoxically, that aesthetic meaning and value can never be captured within any single concept of aesthetic worth. Instead, the Curator asserts that “Art is a babel city in the people’s Shinar / with a hundred gates / and busybody roads / that stretch beyond all dates” and “a harbor of colors / (with a hundred mosaic sale) / like Joseph’s coat” (*HG 26, 28*). If there is an irreducible plurality of ways to value art, then art itself (and its institutions) should be seen to accommodate multiple practices and perspectives. At the same time, art’s value is seen to be in hazard, for if Joseph’s coat is a metaphor for the splendors of the aesthetic it also signifies the jealousy and violence that befalls him at the hands of his brothers in Genesis. Throughout *Harlem Gallery*, Tolson’s invocations of the ekphrastic situation derive aesthetic meaning from just this interface between the observer and the work of art, but also

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19 Notably, the pleas of the “idols of the tribe” to celebrate their heroes “upon our walls” echoes what Evie Shockley analyzes as the constraints that the “Black Aesthetic”—the notion of a racially essential set of stylistic practices and genres organic to black literary production, an outgrowth of the Black Arts Movement—imposes upon the modern African American artist: “an emphasis on and celebration of black music, black speech, *black heroes*, and black history [that] should and do determine both the form and content of black poetry” (2, emphasis mine).

20 The “bulls of Bashan” is Tolson’s scriptural metaphor for boorish adversaries who seek to circumscribe one’s progress. See Psalms 22:1, “Many bulls have compassed me: the strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round.”
locate art’s then contemporary possibilities at a crucial, precarious cultural juncture in which its proper appreciation is essential for African American racial uplift in the Civil Rights Era.

The canto in which this idea is theorized, “Gamma,” indeed concludes in an ekphrastic exaltation of two artistic masterworks that punctuates the Curator’s notion of aesthetic worth:

O hail

Paolo’s doomsday Sodom that brasses

caricatures of patterns and colors and masses

fluxing away from the cruxing incandescence convulsing

the engouled town!

Tintoretto’s Paradise,

lustrous and pulsing,

red and ivory and brown! (HG 28)

The Curator’s poetic description embraces totalities and tonalities, taking evident pleasure in the vibrant aesthetic surfaces of the two Old Master paintings to which he refers: Paolo Veronese’s Lot and his Daughters Flee from Sodom (c. 1585, fig. 5.2) and Tintoretto’s majestic Paradise

Fig. 5.2: Paolo Veronese, or Workshop of Veronese. Lot and His Daughters Flee from Sodom (c. 1585). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
Although these paintings are vastly disparate in subject and scale—the former, an apocalyptic scene of modest size, and the latter a massive and theatrical representation of divine salvation—they both present graceful but intense takes on their Biblical subjects. And for the Curator, engagements with this aesthetic brilliance supersede any engagement with content; unlike the “idols of the tribe” and the “bulls of Bashan,” his veneration of these paintings is not grounded in the worship of “heroes” or of the paintings’ monetary values, but rather in their aesthetic resplendency. The description of each is reduced to depictions of the aesthetic surfaces and their phenomenological effects: “patterns and colors and masses,” “incandescence,” “convulsing,” “lustrous and pulsating,” “red and ivory and brown.” Tolson’s emphasis on the formal elements and effects of these Old Master paintings ostensibly reimagines them as the kinds of abstract modernist paintings that were then all the rage in the midcentury art world, and which the Curator likely collects for the contemporary art collection of his Harlem Gallery. At
the same time, despite the resemblances of the Curator’s poetic description of these Italian Old
Master canvases to the techniques of painterly abstraction, this episode does not rely on the same
modes of disinterested formalist critique that Clement Greenberg and others invoked to
champion abstract expressionism in the post-war art world; rather, for Tolson’s own critical
mandarin, the aesthetic demands attention for the intense, and intensely personal, pleasures it
elicits.

Tolson’s own poetics here reinforce the Curator’s sense of the role of pleasure in
aesthetic experience. His initial apostrophe to the aesthetic object (“O hail!”) recalls the
apostrophic celebration of works of art conventional in ekphrastic poems, such as in Keats’s
“Ode on a Grecian Urn” (“Thou, silent form!”). Although these lines are relatively irregular
prosodically, his play with their rhythm and rhyme construct a rich sonic and semantic field that
conveys the phenomenological effects of the art object on the receptive observer. The feminine
end rhymes (“brasses”/“masses”) and internal rhyming (“fluxing”/“cruxing”/“convulsing”), for
instance, accelerate one’s reading of these lines in a manner that resonates with the Curator’s
heightened feeling at the moment of artistic experience; moreover, by displacing the rhymed
beats from their conventional place at the end of the poetic line (as in masculine end rhymes) to
these terminal and internal trochaic feet (and, in the case of “convulsing,” an amphibrach),
Tolson deepens our attention to the affecting nature of the aesthetic object. The rhythm
modulates as the lines cascade down the page, as the number of unstressed beats steadily
decreases into the concluding exaltation of the color of Tintoretto’s Paradise. Woven into this
ekphrastic description are the spiritual, devotional, and ecstatic dimensions of aesthetic
experience (“O hail”) that evoke a heightened states of phenomenal reception. While these
paintings are not ostensibly engaged with the kinds of racial or revolutionary messages of the art
world that Tolson otherwise privileges throughout *Harlem Gallery*, the Curator’s experience of
them and their juxtaposition underscore the broader stakes of the poem’s agenda of racial
progress—suggesting two competing paths, one leading to a people’s annihilation like the
Sodomites, and the other to a people’s salvation—and furthermore the potential for art to
stimulate an observer’s imagination and make him receptive to these deeper meanings. Tolson
deploys the particular representational resources of poetry (prosodic arrangement, apostrophe,
the evocative play of poetic language), and ekphrastic poetics specifically, to textually convey
these aesthetic effects. As *Harlem Gallery* moves from the Curator’s interior ruminations and
into the actual space of the Harlem Gallery, this receptivity, encapsulated in ekphrastic
representations of aesthetic experience, underwrites the poem’s expressions of hope for social
and political reawakening.

**Black Bourgeoisie and the Harlem Gallery**

The poem’s sixth canto, “Zeta,” is the first to bring readers into Harlem’s art world. We
initially encounter the destitute “half-blind painter” Laguart, the antisocial modernist whose
“catacomb Harlem flat” is overrun with vermin (*HG* 37). A version of Vergil Ragsdale, the ill-
fated poet of *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, Laguart must similarly negotiate urban squalor in
order to fulfill his inner artistic vision; yet while Ragsdale’s uncompleted poem was intended to
be an epic record of African American history, Laguart’s work is a caustic social commentary
that targets social stratification in Harlem’s African American community. Taking up the mantle
of historical painters such as Frans Hals, whose economic impoverishment provided him
perspective for representing the social power of the upper classes, in *Black Bourgeoisie* Laguart
delivers an incisive critique of the upward mobility of a black middle class striving for the literal and symbolic enrichments of white forms of cultural capital:

Although

the Regents of the Harlem Gallery are as eye-

less as knitting needles, Black Bourgeoisie

(retching foulness like Goya’s etching,

She Says Yes to Anyone)

will wring from their babbitted souls a Jeremian cry! (38)

It is in Laguart’s flat that the Curator first glimpses Black Bourgeoisie, the title of which is almost certainly Tolson’s reference to E. Franklin Frazier’s controversial sociological study The Black Bourgeoisie (1957), which posits that a significant percentage of the black middle class then “accepted unconditionally the values of the white bourgeois world: its morals and its canons of respectability, its standards of beauty and consumption” (qtd. in Flasch 108). The social group that Frazier terms the “black bourgeoisie” is comparable to the wealthy “bulls of Bashan” of Tolson’s poem, those who desire art that does not unsettle revered aesthetic or social norms. The Curator’s first sight of Black Bourgeoisie in Laguart’s apartment suggests it to be a revelatory, paradigm-shattering composition:

Perhaps the isle of Patmos

was like this.

Here emerges the imago

from the impotence of the chrysalis

in the dusk of a people’s dawn—

this, this
thought I as I gazed at his *Black Bourgeoisie*:

colors detonating

fog signals on a railroad track,

lights and shadows rhythmizing

fog images in a negative pack:

*this*, somehow, a synthesis

(savage—sanative)

of Daumier and Gropper and Picasso. (*HG* 38, emphases in original)

Much as in the earlier ekphrases of paintings by Veronese and Tintoretto, the description of *Black Bourgeoisie* places initial emphasis on the sensuous, affecting nature of the aesthetic experience over any narrative content. The syntactical arrangement of the above lines is indicative of the values the poem ascribes to such aesthetic experiences, and of Tolson’s own priorities in his ekphrastic description of it. The episode begins in revelation, indeed, with the paradigmatic Biblical scene of revelation: “the isle of Patmos,” the Grecian island that was the scene for John of Patmos’s vision of Christ in the *Book of Revelations*. That the Curator positions his experience of *Black Bourgeoisie* as comparable to this Biblical scene frames it as a moment of mystical, apocalyptically transformative instruction, implying that the painting’s observers will gather from it a message akin to that which John receives from Christ in the scriptural episode. That, for Tolson, this message portends revelation in a particularly racialized context is indicated in the reiterated reference to Du Bois’s *Dusk of Dawn*, here in the emerging “*imago / from the impotence of the chrysalis / in the dusk of a people’s dawn.*” The implication of insect metamorphosis, of shedding old impotent skins for an invigorated and transformative present and future, reverberates with the same revolutionary ethos glimpsed in “*Alpha*” in the reference to
Goya’s *The Second of May*; here, as there, it is the poetic contemplation of the work of art that promises an awakening to the future.

The stanza turns upon the paratactic and energetic “this, this” followed by the clarification that the poetic description of the painting depicts the particular aesthetic response felt by the Curator: “this, this / thought I as I gazed at his *Black Bourgeoisie*.” He reads the painting like the learned art aficionado he is, focusing on its historical associations, possible inspirations (“Daumier and Gropper and Picasso”), and aesthetic form. In moving from the Curator’s aesthetic response to details of *Black Bourgeoisie*’s actual composition, Tolson does not displace his attention from the baroque detailing that defined the former for a disinterested academic gaze, however; as the Curator—and the reader, through the poetic medium—gaze upon the canvas, its represented scene is reduced to color and shade that at once excite the imagination and convey social commentary. Later, in “Theta,” the Curator expands on a theory of the interpenetration of aesthetic form and social content that provides a useful framework for understanding Tolson’s ekphrastic description of *Black Bourgeoisie*. Riffing on the famous line of Robert Frost, who Tolson counted as a friend after they first met during Tolson’s 1954 fellowship at the Bread Loaf School of English, Tolson writes:

*Something there is in art that does not love a wall.*

Idea and image,

form and content,

blend with pigment

in a flesh color. (*HG 54*)

Although the claim that something in art “does not love a wall” is a curious one when uttered by a museum curator, it also addresses the limitations of cultural institutions whose walls close out,
rather than include, its community. In suggesting that art “does not love a wall,” Tolson reiterates the idea that art’s purpose is ultimately a public one. Moreover, these lines recapitulate the Curator’s conviction that the “form and content” of an aesthetic object are ineluctably entwined, a theory that underwrites the ekphrasis of Black Bourgeoisie in “Zeta.” The “fog signals on a railroad track” and “fog images” suggests that Laguart’s aesthetic is comparable to that of the urban impressionism of modern painting, and particularly the aesthetics of James Abbott McNeill Whistler. These descriptions are particularly redolent of Whistler’s Nocturnes, the “colors detonating” perhaps referring to Whistler’s Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket (c. 1875). The seemingly contradictory emphasis on both “colors detonating” and “fog images” might also bring to mind the work of Chicago Black Renaissance painter Archibald Motley, whose energetic scenes of Jazz Age nightlife often draw on the seedy cabarets and smoky clubs of the modern city. The figures in Laguart’s canvas are reduced to a “negative pack,” a suggestion not only of sketchily painted figures but also, in the sense of the filmic “negative,” that the blackness of the black bourgeoisie is merely an inverse form of whiteness. With this metaphorical gesture, Tolson draws on the particular representational strategies of his own medium—the evocative play of poetic language—to convey the social commentary of the original (though imagined) painting by John Laguart. Laguart will not survive long enough to witness the critical response engendered by his Black Bourgeoisie (“He was robbed and murdered in his flat, / and the only witness was a Hamletian rat,” HG 42), but the Curator accurately anticipates that, when Black Bourgeoisie is exhibited in the Harlem Gallery, it will be received adversely by the social class Laguart represents in it.

We first enter the Harlem Gallery on its opening day in “Iota,” as the Curator and Doctor Nkomo welcome just these patrons, “each ohing, ahing guest / among the gobbler-breasted
matrons and their spouses / whose busheled taxes tax strange interludes of rest” (57). Tolson returns again to the metaphor of the pepper bird to convey the Gallery’s revolutionary potential, as the Curator posits the idea that despite the Gallery’s primary appeal to the black bourgeoisie, like the “pepper birds / clarion in the dusk of dawn” it will

quake the walls of Mr. Rockefeller’s Jericho

with the new New World Order of things,

as the ambivalence of dark laughter rings

in Harlem’s immemorial winter.

“Mr. Rockefeller’s Jericho” of course connotes the industrial and political reputations of the Rockefeller family, but in the context of Harlem Gallery it also brings to mind Nelson A. Rockefeller’s shaping hand in several of New York’s dominant cultural institutions: for instance, his role as trustee and two-time president of the Museum of Modern Art, and most germane for Tolson’s concerns, his 1954 founding of the now-defunct Museum of Primitive Art, which showcased collections of indigenous and tribal art (much of it from Rockefeller’s own collection). Thus the “walls” that the Harlem Gallery sets quaking might include those of the traditional Anglo-European control over the representation of the art of so-called “primitive” cultures, including the African artifacts that were significant components of the Museum of Primitive Art’s permanent collection.

To survey the Gallery’s challenge to dominant regimes of cultural representation, Tolson enacts his most dramatic transformations in the poetics of ekphrasis in “Iota.” Here, the poem’s by-now familiar refrain of art’s potential to dismantle hierarchical social and economic orders becomes rooted more firmly in the Gallery’s ability to actualize such possibilities for its public. This canto describes the Harlem Gallery’s four wings, each of which is dedicated to the display
of a different collection, and in his elaborately detailed survey of each of the museum’s wings, Tolson reconfigures ekphrastic conventions to represent the Curator’s contemplation of a different kind of visual text: not the singular art object, but the museum space itself. In doing so, Tolson also turns the central ekphrastic conceit of describing a visual object in poetic language into a means for conveying the effect of wandering the Harlem Gallery as if the poem’s speaker (and reader) is one of its patrons. To read this ekphrastic episode is thus to take an imaginary stroll through the Gallery and to experience its celebration of black cultural achievement as the Curator has organized it. The primary taxonomic principle in each of its wings is not that of the objects’ historical periods or places of origin (the two prevailing taxonomies of art museums), but rather their aesthetic styles, recalling the categories Tolson used in *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*. The East Wing exhibits frescos of “rigors and vigors in varicolors” that depict “paean and laments of identities / signed in the thought and felt hinterlands of psyches— / now impasted and sprayed and fixed / with waterglass / on dry plaster” (58). Although not explicitly set within a historical framework, the Gallery follows an evolutionary trajectory along its horizontal axis, moving from the traditional art of the East Wing to the modernism of the West like the sun’s path after the people’s dusk of dawn. The West Wing is dedicated to modern artworks that engage with the aesthetic practices of “primitivism,” or the early twentieth-century vogue for objects from Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands that formatively shaped the aesthetics of mainstream Western modernist artists and writers including Pablo Picasso, Gertrude Stein, Henri Matisse, and Ezra Pound. Yet these modernist artworks are set alongside the original African artifacts, a practice that undermines the primacy of the reductive and often brutalizing Western gaze on non-western traditions:

the listening ear can hear,
among the moderns, blue
tomtoms of Benin;
the seeing eye can see fetishes unseen,

via

rue Fromentin and Lenox Avenue. (59)

Tolson invests the West Wing with a decolonizing, demystifying animus: whereas modernist primitivism depended largely on the appropriation of non-Western and pre-modern aesthetics to signify a symbolic break from artistic tradition and retreat into alternative cultural contexts deemed elemental, precivilizational, and anti-technological, the Harlem Gallery demystifies these aesthetic practices by making visible to the “seeing eye” the modernist “fetishes unseen.”

In its placement of then contemporary Western art alongside African artifacts within the space of the art museum, the West Wing revises the exhibition practices of institutions such as Rockefeller’s Museum of the Primitive and even the Met of Harlem on My Mind by integrating the legacy of the Black Diaspora into the institutional domain of the fine arts. The ekphrastic description of the West Wing thus also signifies as an anticolonial and antiracist theory of art, enacting in poetry the imagined wing’s message: its exposure and dislodging of the Eurocentrism of works of modernist primitivism that were given privileged place in the modern art world.

Much as the West Wing amends—quite reasonably, given its spatial location—Western artists’ oversimplifications of the richness of African cultures, this revisionist museology is

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21 See chapter 3 in North, Dialect of Modernism. North’s case study of Picasso’s African Period and Stein’s short story “Melanctha” demonstrates that exposure to African masks and sculpture offered modernist artists a pretext to “step away from conventional verisimilitude into abstraction” through the “figurative change of race”; for North, the primitive aesthetic functioned as a surface that permitted contradictions of abstraction and tradition, fantasy and reality, and authority and rupture to proliferate (59). Richard Arrowsmith, Modernism and the Museum and Cooks, Exhibiting Blackness present important histories of the origins of primitivism in early twentieth-century museums and ethnographic exhibitions.
continued in the North Wing’s display of “burnt-in portraits” that “enmesh Negroid diversity – / its Kafiristan gaucherie / its Attic wit and nerve” (60). The North Wing is the space of the Harlem Gallery that most closely approximates *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* in function, as it is devoted to exhibiting the diversity of black identities and experiences in much the same way as the earlier manuscript had sought to provide a scopic vision of Harlem’s personae. The North Wing, perhaps recalling Harlem’s location to the north of the “Great White World” of Manhattan, similarly provides space “for every actor in the Harlem cast” to be consecrated through institutional display. As Raymond Nelson clarifies in his notes to *Harlem Gallery*, these portraits are primarily “in encaustic, the medium appropriate to the intense compassion of the racial vision expressed there” (398). Finally, the Gallery’s South Wing is dedicated to paintings of African American heroes and legends, a seeming capitulation to the “idols of the tribe” whose paean, “We / have heroes! Celebrate *them* upon our walls!” is reiterated in “Iota” (*HG* 61). In contradiction of the Curator’s values, this wing underscores the Gallery’s function as an institutional space meant to represent the interests and beliefs of the totality of Harlem’s community. In the space of the Harlem Gallery, Tolson’s Curator arranges the collection in a way that reflects the irreducible diversity of the African American experience, gives space for the art and experiences of African Americans, and contest the ways in which the hegemonic modern art world has tended to place African aesthetics—and black heritage—into cultural discourse. This canto’s prolonged contemplation of the aesthetics of the Harlem Gallery turns the institution itself into the subject of the ekphrastic gaze, and furthermore of a gaze attuned to the Gallery’s vision of racial uplift through its nonhierarchical curatorial practices and epistemologies.
Central to the thematic and narrative progression of *Harlem Galley*, “Iota” emblematizes Tolson’s experimental reformulation of ekphrasis and its racial politics. Throughout the poem, the Curator contemplates art objects not singularly but as they exist within the modern art world, its governing ideologies, and its diverse publics. This canto’s prolonged description of the physical space of the Gallery itself represents the most dramatic instance of Tolson’s expansion of the subject of ekphrasis, an expansion in which he uses the ekphrastic gaze as a means of interpreting the museum space to reveal its multivalent social function: its challenge to the authority of the Western gaze and the predominance of Anglo-European aesthetic practices, its decolonization of modern art, and its appeals to the diverse interests of its community. Tolson thus turns the ekphrastic description of the visual object into a mode of institutional critique that envisions a museum space that can accommodate the diverse, conflicted, and multivalent legacies of the African Diaspora in the art museum: from reductive Western appropriations to vibrant black aesthetics, and from African ritual objects to representations of contemporary African American life. The curation of the Harlem Gallery is framed as a creative practice, read as a visual text, and presented as a challenge to traditional museological practice, and Tolson’s reformulations of ekphrasis are crucial for realizing each of these elements of the poem’s broader critique.

**Defining Art’s Publics**

Central to Tolson’s ekphrastic poetics is an issue that is absolutely fundamental to this practice, that of audience: how art is presented for, and received by, its publics. Ekphrasis would be impossible without this public function, as it assumes a situation in which an artwork is seen by an observer (whether this be an actual, embodied individual, or more commonly in pre-
modernist ekphrastic poetry, an abstract entity associated with the art of poetry writ large). While the publics invoked in each of Tolson’s ekphrastic episodes shift, from the allegorical Lord of the House of Flies to the Curator to the reader-as-patron in the Harlem Gallery, each of these moments investigates how the reception of the work of art can convey personal and political meaning to an observer. This takes on heightened meaning within the Harlem Galley, a space explicitly dedicated to connecting art to its publics.

As *Harlem Gallery* progresses, the Curator’s understanding of this institution’s role in providing difficult, paradigm-shattering art to its public is clarified and extended in interactions with two other characters: Hideho Heights, the popular poet, and Doctor Nkomo, who functions as a Socratic interlocutor for the Curator throughout the poem. Confident (perhaps to a fault) in his claims about the social impact of his art form, throughout *Harlem Gallery* Heights functions as the emblem of the modern artist whose work satisfies but fails to impact his audience. He is a fashionably late arrival to the Harlem Gallery’s opening, and upon his entrance immediately challenges the social value of the art exhibited by chiding the Curator and his institution for what he feels to be its oversaturation in high cultural capital: “when you gonna close this dump? / Fetch highbrow stuff for the middlebrows who / don’t gave a damn and the lowbrows who ain’t hip!” (68). The “poet laureate of Lenox Avenue” declares the superiority of his chosen art of poetry to the paintings that line the Harlem Gallery’s walls:

“In the beginning was the Word,”

he challenged, “not the Brush!”

The scorn in the eyes that raked the gallery

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22 Mister Starks remarks of the Curator and Nkomo’s relationship that “I used to say if I knew the differences between / The Curator and Doctor Nkomo / I’d know the ebb and flow of tides and color” (*HG* 121).
was the scorn of an Ozymandias. *(HG 68)*

The reduction of poetry and painting to their primary communicative instruments, the word and the paintbrush, recalls the “dagger” and “scimitar” opposition emphasized in the Curator’s ekphrasis of Goya’s *The Second of May 1808*. Here, Heights places the artistic tools of the painter and the poet into conflict regarding what he sees to be their unequal abilities to stir the masses. By framing the relationship between the arts as one of conflict for representational supremacy, Heights echoes the neoclassical paragonal theory of ekphrasis, the notion that painting and poetry are not complementary but antagonistic art forms, each of which seeks to become the supreme art through the refinement of its particular means of representation. This notion of interartistic antagonism between poetry and painting was given its most influential airing in Lessing’s *Laocöon*, but Lessing’s terms were often returned to in works of modernist aesthetic theory such as Irving Babbitt’s *The New Laoköon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910) and Greenberg’s “Towards a Newer Laocöon” (1940), which features his memorable pronouncement that “There can be … such a thing as a dominant form of art” (24). Heights’s interjection in the Harlem Gallery thus locates him squarely within this paragonal aesthetic discourse, as he frames the competition between the arts in the terms of their disparate strategies for soliciting audiences and achieving particular aesthetic effects. Much as individual paragonal theories of the arts have involved claims for the superiority of one art form over the other (for Lessing, poetry, and for Greenberg, painting), Heights’s interruption is also an argument for the value of his chosen aesthetic practice.

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23 Lessing’s *Laocöon* establishes the parameters for the paragonal theory in its claims that painting and poetry occupy disparate representational domains, with painting a spatial art and poetry a temporal one. Babbitt and Greenberg each return to Lessing’s appeal for the erasure of the “confusion of the arts” and retrenchment of each in their particular formal domains, Babbitt to contest the decadence of writers such as Oscar Wilde and Joris-Karl Huysmans and Greenberg to develop a theoretical matrix for the promotion of abstract expressionism. For competing discussions of the paragonal theory as, respectively, a formative and a constraining interpretive model for ekphrastic poetry, see Heffernan 6; Hedley 24.
Yet for Tolson’s Curator, and it seems for Tolson himself, such claims of the relative importance of one art form over another are of less concern than is the issue of how the disparate arts reach and affect their publics. In the numerous ekphrastic episodes throughout *Harlem Gallery*, interactions between the arts—mostly in the form of the linguistic description of paintings—convey just this desire for art’s social utility, as they provide intertwined contexts for representing the effects of aesthetic experience on individual observers and for the political utility of art as a means of social awakening. In this way, Tolson capitalizes on the pedagogical dimensions of ekphrasis, of what Brian Glavey describes as its poetics of “seeing and sharing”: of representing a subject’s desires for, attachments to, identifications with, and instruction by, the work of art (6). Usable aesthetic meaning is not derived, for the Curator, in one’s dogged entrenchment in one art or another, but in the web of ekphrastic signification constituted by the visual object, the aesthetic experience, and the poetic language of this experience’s articulation. Notably, and humorously, Tolson turns to the language of ekphrasis to describe Heights at the moment of his interjection, with the reference to his exhibiting “the scorn of an Ozymandias” an overt nod to Shelley’s canonical ekphrastic poem, “Ozymandias” (1818). In Shelley’s poem, the statue’s pedestal makes demands of how it is to be received—“Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”—that, by the twentieth century, would also come to predicate critical approaches to ekphrasis: what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “ekphrastic fear,” the hardening of the formal distinctions between the arts in “the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative” (154). This notion is operative upon Heights’s entrance, too, in his declaration of the ancillary status of painting in relation to his chosen art of poetry. By associating Heights’s appearance in this moment to that of the Ozymandias ruins of Shelley’s poem, with its pronouncement of unassailable power juxtaposed
against the eroding force of history, Tolson also tacitly proposes that Heights’s proclamation of competition between the arts is an ultimately self-defeating proposition: that getting caught in the weeds of debating the supremacy of one art over the other keeps one from what *Harlem Gallery* continually foregrounds as the more important work of learning and growing through exposure to art regardless of medium or cultural status.

Following Heights’s entrance, the poem moves from the high cultural space of the Harlem Gallery to the afterhours Zulu Club, a homosocial gathering space for masculine intellectual exchange in which the Curator, Doctor Nkomo, and the “Zulu Club wits” discourse on aesthetics and ontology, while Heights performs his popular poetic ballads amidst an adoring public and scantily attired dancers who sporadically distract the Curator’s attention. The conditions for aesthetic production and experience in the Zulu Club are markedly different than they were in the Harlem Gallery. Heights presents his poetic ballad “The Birth of John Henry” before the Zulu Club audience in a participatory, interactive performance: he invites his audience to shout questions and declarations, simulating the call-and-response style of African aesthetics to make “the poet and the audience one, / each gears itself to please” (*HG* 81). Heights’s ballad presumably represents a democratic aesthetic, with its popular subject matter, openness to audience collaboration, and suggested erasure of the boundaries between artist and public; indeed, it satisfies many of the criteria that Jacques Rancière puts forth for understanding the emancipatory possibilities of art that dismantles subject/object distinctions and incorporates the observing subject into the aesthetic.24 Yet by the conclusion of Heights’s performance, Tolson has us see instead that a democratic aesthetic that placates rather than challenges its public, such as that performed by the “people’s poet,” is destined to reify rather than undo hierarchies.

24 See Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. 
Although the Zulu Club patrons are involved in this aesthetic performance, their participation is highly scripted and is prompted by cues familiar from Heights’s regular presentation of “The Birth of John Henry” to this audience. Heights himself seems alert to the fact that the audience’s uncritical consumption of his poetry does not exactly make for a font for social awakening, as he ends up

slumped in the shoal of a stupor,
slobbers and sobs,
“My people,
my people—
they know not what they do.” (92)

His lament returns us to the dichotomy of popular and elite art that is interrogated throughout the poem, the shifting italics on “people” and “my”—and specifically in the final emphasis on the possessive “my”—announcing not a democratic harmony of poet and public, but rather a hierarchy organized around the artist as cult of personality. The mixture of two Biblical references—Luke 23:24 (“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”) and Micah 6:3 (“My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me.”)—seems to underscore Heights’s place as a quasi-prophetic, organizing figure within the community. Yet given this episode’s emphasis on the structure (if not the substance) of a dialogic aesthetic performance, the fact that the utterance “My people” is not followed with the accusatory “what have I done to you?” or the command “Answer me,” but rather seems to express his regret at his public’s inability to participate, underscores the failure of his performance to challenge his audience to expand their ways of thinking, knowing, or feeling as does the Harlem Gallery. Heights’s democratic impulse is embedded in its dialectical inverse, and as such manifests what
Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer identify as the central function of what they call “the culture industry”: the artistic interface that exchanges aesthetic merit for popular reach and, in the process, create a passive and mass-produced public. That Heights’s performance dulls the masses rather than instantiate the “people’s dusk of dawn” the Curator pursues dovetails with the argument forwarded by the Curator throughout the poem: that the work of art, no matter its place in received aesthetic hierarchies nor the racial identity of its curator, succeeds to the degree that it challenges the observer to critically analyze and dismantle previously held beliefs. These more propitious forms of aesthetic experience are modeled in Tolson’s ekphrastic poetics that attend to the observer’s acts of looking at, and making meaning from, works of art that are in stark contrast to the uncritical and creatively unproductive aesthetic experiences of the Zulu Club’s audience.

It is tempting to read the rebuke of Heights’s performance as a rejection of popular art in favor of an elite aesthetic, a thought made even more provocative given Harlem Gallery’s contemporaneity to the rise of Warhol and Lichtenstein, pop art and postmodernism. However, in a later dialogue between the Curator and Doctor Nkomo in the Zulu Club, Tolson refines his protagonist’s position on the artist’s dual responsibilities both to the public and to his inner vision, in the process building a claim for the value of a challenging aesthetic that is nevertheless carved into the grain of mass appeal. This dialogue is the centerpiece of an elaborate subplot of Harlem Gallery, in which a famed Harlem musician, Mister Starks, wills to the Curator a copy of his modern poem Harlem Vignette that depicts Starks’s impressions of several of the characters in Harlem Gallery. Tolson receives Starks’s manuscript (which is evidently modeled after Tolson’s own unpublished Gallery of Harlem Portraits) following Starks’s murder, and finds in the volume that the musician has recorded a conversation between the Curator and Nkomo one
evening in the Zulu Club. Their discourse revolves around the best practices for engaging and elevating the African American public through art, whether through the devices of an elitism that establishes a standard it expects the underclass to reach, or through a populism that awakens the masses at its own level. The Curator and Nkomo debate art’s sociability in the allegorical terms of cream and homogenized milk, expressing their respective preferences for the elite aesthetics that rise to the top of the art world, like cream, or for the popular art that remains “below,” the milk of the masses. At the outset the Curator is of the party of elite art, referring to himself as a “lactoscopist” who is

fascinated by

the opacity of cream,
the dusk of human nature,

“the light between” of the modernistic (HG 123)

The Curator wraps himself in the cloak of the high modernist aesthete who finds value in the subtleties of esoteric art, a posture that the Africanist Nkomo chides as the elitism of a Western worldview: “Garbed in the purple of metaphors, / the Nordic’s theory of the cream separator / is still a stinking skeleton!” (HG 123). The terms for this debate reiterate the broader racial implications in Tolson’s handling of aesthetics, with “cream” and “dusk” both familiar racialized epithets for African American skin color. Nkomo’s reprimand of the Curator for his fascination with “the opacity of cream” faults his interlocutor for a fetishization of elitism that maintains hierarchies, including the racial hierarchies of the “Nordic” race. His sidelong censure of the “purple of metaphor” might be read, too, as Tolson’s reflexive critique of his own allusive poetic practice. Ultimately, their disagreements resolve in their shared belief that, rather than oppositional terms, the difficult and the popular must be placed into relation to effect racial
uplift: that, as the Curator puts it, one must *taste* the milk of the skimmed / and *sip* the cream of the skimmers” (125, emphasis in original). High and low, elite and popular, and white and black criteria for aesthetic value are situated as two sides of the art world’s single coin, and as *Harlem Gallery* approaches its conclusion binary oppositions fall away as Tolson roots his vision of the black field of cultural production in the creation and promotion of difficult art that empowers its audience by challenging it. This discourse also emblematizes the cultural politics of Tolson’s revaluations of ekphrasis: the idea that the exhibition of challenging works of art can stimulate the masses into a “people’s dusk of dawn” is central to Tolson’s poetic representations of aesthetic objects as well, in which the harvesting of revolutionary meanings from works of art premises just this kind of personal and racial awakening.

“Black Boy, White Boy”: Uplift through Inclusion

Although most of *Harlem Gallery*’s early critics chided it for its supposed racially unprogressive continuities with high modernism, the book’s concluding cantos revel instead in a patently postmodern, reflexive demystification of the binary categories it had earlier established. For instance, it is revealed that beneath Heights’s cultivated veneer as the “People’s Poet” lies “the bifacial nature of his poetry: / the racial ballad in the public domain / And the private poem in the modern vein.” Heights is an inveterate performer of public ballads for an indulgent and indulging audience, yet the Curator finds in Heights’s apartment one evening a poem “in the modern idiom / a poem called *E. & O. E.*” This poem expresses Heights’s self-doubt regarding his public persona and reveals his (dubious) claims to having been a modernist expatriate who
had drunk “with Salmon, Apollinaire, / MacOrlan, and Picasso” (145-6, 150). Comparably “bifacial” is the Curator, whose skin color is fair enough that he can pass as “White in deah ole Norfolk” while being recognized as a “Negro in little old New York” (162, 160). Tolson frames the Curator’s racial identity as a challenge to the symbolic structure of the modern art world, as he recollects that “At the Olympian powwow of curators, / when I revealed my Negroness, / my peers became shocked like virgins in a house / where satyrs tattooed on female thighs heralds of success” (164). As Harlem Gallery approaches its denouement, Tolson continues to revise what had initially appeared to be essential structures of identity and character, a process which culminates in the poem’s concluding inquiry into the relationship among race, artistic expression, and aesthetic experience: the overarching question, “What is a Negro?” (154). In the penultimate canto, “Psi,” the Curator alternately apostrophizes “Black Boy” and “White Boy,” theorizing the possibilities for black cultural production in an art world still distorted by racial prejudice:

Black Boy,

in this race, at this time, in this place,

to be a Negro artist is to be

a flower of the gods, whose growth

is dwarfed at an early stage (153)

The artist’s racial identity predicates the conditions for his reception and success in the art world. However, the Curator reveals that these distinctions between white and black are not determinative of the artist’s self or his creative practices, but are rather the fictional constructions of the “Great White World.” He recalls Nkomo’s declaration that race is no more

25 Notably, “E. &. O. E.” is the title of a poem of Tolson’s, which he published in Poetry 78 (September 1951), and the Curator quotes a number of passages from Heights’s manuscript that are drawn verbatim from Tolson’s poem. On the significance of this metatextual moment, itself a patently postmodern gesture, see Farnsworth, Melvin B. Tolson 261-3.
than a “Hardyesque artistry / of circumstance,” a product not of ontology but of the prevailing ideological climate of the present moment, “a dish” prepared “in the white man’s kitchen.”

With whiteness and blackness revealed to be the founding fictions of racial hegemony, in “Omega” the Curator shifts to addressing his symbolic interlocutors, the White Boy and Black Boy, in single apostrophes that alternate in their arrangement between “White Boy, / Black Boy” and “Black Boy, White Boy.” This form of direct address collapses racial hierarchies through the coalescence of the otherwise binary racial taxonomy of white/black; instead, it intimates the poem’s concluding vision of racial progress through interracial alliance. The modified apostrophic arrangement of “Omega” places the “Black Boy” and “White Boy” into relation, and this arrangement prepares for Tolson’s return to the terms of the Curator’s earlier discourse with Doctor Nkomo on elite and popular art, as to whether he should “skim the milk of culture for the elite / and give the ‘lesser breeds’ a popular latex brand” or expose the masses to potentially alienating modernist art. Yet the Curator expresses his newfound resolve that “the binnacle of [the artist’s imagination] / steers the work aright,” a commitment to allowing the work of art to sing for itself without any intervention that compromises its complexity (HG 167). While the Curator was earlier burdened by his felt responsibility for mediating the public’s experience of esoteric modern art, in “Omega” this dilemma is settled by means of the notion that the Harlem Gallery can challenge received knowledge through the display of innovative art and the decolonizing of the modern art world. For, as the Curator argues, “freedom is the oxygen / of the studio and gallery alike,” and the presentation of difficult art for the museum public constitutes a more democratic scene of aesthetic experience than do the performances of Hideho Heights that, while participatory, only reify the audiences’ previously held convictions. For the Curator, instead, the democratic ethos underwrites his work much as it does that of the artist, for “freedom
is the oxygen / of the studio and gallery alike”—a reminder, once more, that curation itself is a creative act that can change the mind of the individual and elevate the masses—and the complexity of art is justified by the notion that if a “chef-d’oeuvre is esoteric” it merely reflects the intricacies of the natural world beyond the museum’s walls: “Is it amiss or odd / if the apes of God / take a cue from their Master?” (169). The Curator’s responsibility encapsulates the social responsibility of the Harlem Gallery, in promoting democratic access to “esoteric” art that does not depart from, but rather helps clarify, the comparably complex lived world. The concluding cantos can be seen as representing Tolson’s apology for his own difficult modernist art, for as Cook and Tatum suggest, “at no other place in the Gallery does Tolson come closer than he does here to suggesting that the Curator is speaking as much of Tolson’s own work, the Gallery, as he is of art in general” (258). 

Harlem Gallery indeed concludes at the “cross street … / where curator and creator / meet – / friend yoked to friend at the candle end” (HG 170). The leveling of art world hierarchies such that artists, audiences, and museum professionals are presented on the same plane encapsulates the revisionary thrust of Tolson’s handling of ekphrasis: as the poetic descriptions of aesthetic objects are invested with potential for dismantling racial hegemony, the boundaries that separate artists and observers, painters and poets, and direct ekphrastic description and headier aesthetic meditations, all diminish in importance. What remains when these boundaries dissolve is a means of glimpsing a future of racial harmony through the medium of art, represented in Harlem Gallery in its several scenes of ekphrasis. Underwritten by the axiom that “the present is only intelligible in the light of the past,” the emancipatory aesthetic experiences privileged by the Curator—and epitomized in the poem’s ekphrastic moments—promises racial progress through just this reparative vision of the rich history of black artistic production. Moreover, this vision is not merely to be the purview of a singularly African
American audience, but rather holds value for both the “Black Boy” and “White Boy” that the poem addresses, exposing a heterogeneous public to the diverse and global history of black art and culture:

this allegro of the Harlem Gallery
is not a chippy fire
for here, in focus, are paintings that chronicle
a people’s New World odyssey
from chattel to Esquire! (173)

Written during a cultural moment in which the institutional fate of African American art was still largely undecided and the art museum was subject to debate and revaluation for its marginalization of black experiences and cultural productions, Tolson’s Harlem Gallery presents an argument for racial inclusion in the modern museum through its remediation of the aesthetic forms and practices of Anglo-European high culture. These cultural forms and practices include the art museum and the epic, but also ekphrasis, which in its representations of aesthetic experience conveys the social importance of this “chronicle” of “a people’s New World’s odyssey” as it reaches and affects its potential publics.

Epic in its length, its scope, and its message, Harlem Gallery explores new formal responsibilities for the poetics of ekphrasis, expanding the subject of poetic contemplation to consider an entire museum gallery and a collection of art objects that reside within the modern art world and challenge its ingrained hierarchies of aesthetic value. While my consideration of Tolson at the end of my dissertation’s historical overview of modernist ekphrasis acknowledges his temporal position as a late modernist poet, it also gestures to the truly radical nature of
Tolson’s reimagining of the aesthetic possibilities for composing poetry about visual art. These formal innovations manifest both in the expanded space for ekphrasis he constitutes in applying it to the physical place of the Harlem Gallery, and in the direct connections he locates between ekphrastic contemplation and an emancipatory racial politics. By the conclusion of the epic, Tolson’s Curator reconceives of the museum as both a creative space and a visual text, and thus considers his own professional practices as a form of artistry in the modern cultural field. This framing explicitly places Tolson’s *Harlem Gallery* in line with the poetry of Marianne Moore, who also situates her poetic practices as a form of imaginative curation. More broadly, though, Tolson’s late modernist epic encapsulates and renews the particular intersections between formal innovation and institutional critique that give modernist ekphrasis its unique character, shaped by an inquiry into the possibilities for aesthetic experiences that challenge the exclusionary matrices of modern museum culture, and the formal possibilities of ekphrastic poetry for representing such forms of experience. In *Harlem Gallery*, the emancipatory aesthetic experience indeed dovetails with an emancipatory politics: each of Tolson’s ekphrastic episodes meditate on the relationship between art and revolution, from Goya’s *The Second of May 1808* to the imagined *Black Bourgeoisie* to, ultimately, the Harlem Gallery itself as a visual text. These ekphrastic moments highlight the simultaneously personal and political stakes of aesthetic experience, and the familiar 1960s axiom that the personal is political, by situating Tolson’s speakers and his poem’s readers in imminent relation to revolutionary aesthetics. In the process, Tolson reconceptualizes the Eurocentric representational frameworks of both ekphrasis and the museum to constitute a vision of racial uplift through the experience of esoteric modern poetry and modern art – and, crucially, in their interactions in the scene of ekphrasis.
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