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Self-Knowledge and "the end of man": The Paradox of Double Consciousness in American Literature

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American literature has an established history of interrogating subjective experience and what it means to be a person. As a result, American writers have produced a pattern of thought that expresses a fascination with both the possibilities and devastating consequences that attend to competing visions of the self. This dissertation explores various attempts to theorize and tolerate experiences of “double consciousness”—a term introduced by Ralph Waldo Emerson and made famous by W. E. B. Du Bois. Examining how Emerson conceptualizes double consciousness as an ideal state of being introduces a theory of consciousness that reveals the difficulties associated with merging different iterations of the self to achieve this ideal state. Emily Dickinson translates this theory of consciousness into a condition suffered by subjects.
Her meditations reveal that, while double consciousness may be something for which to strive, this condition comes with painful ramifications for individuated subjects. While Dickinson internalizes double consciousness as an experience felt by subjects, Henry James externalizes this condition to explore its effects not only on the individual subject, but also the ramifications of double consciousness on others with whom the subject forms social relationships. These meditations demonstrate how the experience of double consciousness not only devastates individuals, but also the systems of life in which they participate. Robert Penn Warren, on the other hand, strategically attempts to ameliorate the difficulties produced by states of double consciousness through the use of narrative technology and temporality so that an individual may achieve this state without necessarily suffering from it. “Self-Knowledge and ‘the end of man’: The Paradox of Double Consciousness in American Literature” thus produces an intellectual history that transcends period and genre demarcations to nuance traditional renderings of a subject’s ability to merge multiple and competing versions of self-hood.

INDEX WORDS: Double consciousness, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, Robert Penn Warren
SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND “THE END OF MAN”: THE PARADOX OF DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

AMBER L. ESTLUND

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences Georgia State University 2016
SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND “THE END OF MAN”: THE PARADOX OF DOUBLE
CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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DEDICATION

For my grandfather, without whom I never would have started this journey,

and

for Philip, without whom I never would have finished.
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1 INTRODUCTION: DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE AMERICAN LITERARY IMAGINATION

This project begins by examining the surprising correlation between the ways Ralph Waldo Emerson and W. E. B. Du Bois each develop an idea of double consciousness in their writing. Although Du Boisian double consciousness refers to an experience unique to African Americans and Emersonian double consciousness idealizes a sort of transcendent experience, the two iterations feature similarities in their very different conceptualizations. Exploring the connections between the two notions reveals a key feature central to each version: double consciousness, in each context, produces painful and violent consequences for the individual experiencing it. This is not to equate a double consciousness caused by racial discrimination and violence which the Du Boisian version emphasizes with the painful consequence that Emersonian double consciousness might have for individuals; instead, noting the shared tendency for double consciousness to produce violent ramifications illuminates how this psychic tension manifests the painful experience of subjectivity for other writers in different contexts and situations. Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and Robert Penn Warren, for instance, each produce a version of double consciousness in their writing. For each writer, the experience of double consciousness emerges as a problem of subjective experience that refuses our attempts to merge ways of seeing and knowing the self without devastating consequences to the person. Examining the ways in which canonical white writers such as these adapt and reframe the idea of double consciousness, which Du Bois famously employed for its description of a specific racial experience for black Americans, yields compelling questions about the challenges individuals face when trying to wholly know themselves as they strive to live and work in systems that trivialize the self.
Du Bois’s vision of double consciousness has become canonical within African American literary studies. As Ryan Schneider notes, however, Du Bois only used the term once in his entire writing career; it first appeared in “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” published in 1897 in The Atlantic Monthly and then again when the essay was included as the first chapter of the 1903 The Souls of Black Folk (Schneider 49). Du Bois defines double consciousness as:

a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (168)

Double consciousness thus describes a psychological tension unique to the black experience in America. It represents the challenges of being African American: though one considers himself American, black Americans must also see themselves through the eyes of white America. More specifically, Du Boisian double consciousness highlights how “the freedman has not yet found in freedom in his promised land” and is constantly faced with disappointment (170). Black Americans, for Du Bois, have gained “self-consciousness, self-reflection, and self-respect” but that with this new awareness also comes a sense of “poverty,” the “weight of [. . .] ignorance,” and the “hereditary weight mass of corruption from white adulterers” that darkens the soul with “the shadow of a vast despair” (171-72). This means facing the challenge of maintaining a sense of self and pride in who one is outside of an American context, while still having to overcome systematic racism and degradation that white America constantly and consistently imposes upon them. These two perceptions of self—as proud, respected, and with plenty to offer the world and
as that of a group of people destined to ignorance, poverty, and servitude—rarely coalesce, rendering true or whole self-consciousness impossible because these two versions of selfhood are “unreconciled.”

Schneider’s book, *The Public Intellectualism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and W. E. B. Du Bois: Emotional Dimensions of Race and Reform*, while drawing fascinating parallels between Emerson’s and Du Bois’s lives as well as their individual brands of public intellectualism, examines what he calls the “reform narratives” of each to reveal “the emotional dimensions of race” in order “to delineate racial difference, examine problems of black-white relations, and explore models for reform” (2-3). He employs Theory of Mind (ToM) strategies to argue that the reform writings produce “affective-cognitive experiences” to “provide audiences with a sense of emotional familiarity, intensity, and substance, meaning they try to define and depict feelings that are recognizable, provocative, and relatively long-lived” (8-9). Although Schneider’s focus is on the reform writings of Emerson and Du Bois, his study is useful to my own readings of double consciousness as he emphasizes the emotional or affective qualities of such an experience and how these affective qualities significantly impact an individual’s or groups cognitive and lived experience.

Du Boisian double consciousness typically refers to what Schneider calls a “normative experience” for black Americans that employs double consciousness and two-ness synonymously (55). In other words, readers tend to view this passage as a collective experience for all African Americans, while other critics argue that Du Bois’s use of the term was specific to black intellectuals and artists. Although the term can be understood as “an essential element of African American subjectivity,” it was also used as “a specific marker of the affective-cognitive experience of black intellectuals and artists whose obligation is to uplift the race” (Schneider 12).
Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. notes that Du Bois used double consciousness to raise at least three different issues, but chief among those was the depiction of an internal conflict for an individual between “what was ‘African’ and what was ‘American,’” and for Du Bois this conflict relied heavily on the “essence of a distinctive African consciousness” immersed in spirituality, a spirituality based in Africa but revealed among African Americans in their folklore, their history of patient suffering, their faith.” Bruce says that “in this sense, double consciousness related particularly to Du Bois’s efforts to privilege the spiritual in relation to the materialistic, commercial world of white America” (301). The other two issues raised by Du Boisian double consciousness, for Bruce as well as Schneider, are “the real power of white stereotypes in black life and thought” and “the practical racism that excluded every black American from the mainstream of society” (Bruce 301).

Whether read as a normative experience relative to all African Americans or as a condition specific to black intellectuals striving for racial advancement, at the heart of Du Bois’s conceptualization is an experience of “two-ness” that cannot be assimilated. Schneider notes that there is a critical tendency to conflate double consciousness and two-ness. He argues that while this linkage “is certainly plausible given their shared thematic emphasis on duality,” Du Bois’s approach does not necessitate such conflation” and that “there is room for difference.” For Schneider, in other words, “double consciousness and two-ness could be the same thing; or they could designate closely aligned yet still distinct notions; or they could exist in a dynamic relation of cause and effect.” He goes on to note that Du Bois appears to cast double consciousness as “an abstract, potentially universal sensation,” while the description of two-ness appears “more closely linked to race and particulars” (51). What seems to be at stake in differentiating two-ness and double consciousness are types of experience. Schneider’s description of two-ness as
specifically linked to race and its particulars is the experience of what Du Bois calls the “contradiction of double aims” whereby “the black man’s turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness” (169). In reality, for Du Bois, this is the “double-aimed struggle of the black artisan” that on one hand must “escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water” while on the other hand he must “plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde” (168). The black American experiences two-ness, for Du Bois, because he has “but half a heart in either cause” (169). Conversely, the experience of double consciousness is a psychic one that results from an experience of two-ness in the material world.

The experience of double consciousness then for black Americans is thus a struggle “to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” where the person “wishes neither of the older selves to be lost” (168-169). Keeping Schneider’s distinction between double consciousness and two-ness in mind, Du Bois’s condition of double consciousness as an experience that prevents the merging of selves in order to develop into a full or true state of self-consciousness, without relinquishing a previous self, recalls the logic of human consciousness developed by Emerson.¹

Many of Emerson’s essays describe human consciousness as split between various binary oppositions as a person strives toward transcendence. Joel Porte calls this split a core challenge faced by Transcendentalists as the human psyche is separated between “Reason and Understanding” (42). More specifically for Emerson, knowing the self in two ways may appear

¹ Scholars of Du Bois are appreciative of the Emersonian influence on his use of the term. Werner Sollors has noted this influence in Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) as has Anita Patterson in From Emerson to King: Democracy, Race, and the Politics of Protest (New York: Oxford UP, 1997). Schneider even goes so far as to argue that as Du Bois’s version of double consciousness is a “multidisciplinary phenomenon” that there are “more references to Emersonian double consciousness” in criticism of Du Bois “than one finds in the extant body of Emerson criticism” (50).
in one essay as a difference between the “idealist” and the “materialist,” “Nature” and the “Soul” in another, or any other number of ambiguous configurations. Across these iterations, Emerson demonstrates an impulse to merge these divergent, often antagonistic, constructions of self in order to achieve what he calls for in *Nature*—“an original relation to the universe” (7). Of course Emerson seldom discusses the psychic and corporeal violence of American racism that frames double-consciousness for Du Bois. But this impulse toward “original relation” nevertheless reflects the desire for what Du Bois would later call “a better and truer self” or a complete and whole sense of self: that is, a self capable of seeing the two opposing and separate versions amalgamating in order to coexist.

Du Bois’s use of double consciousness recalls this Emersonian desire to attain true self-consciousness. Interestingly enough, like Du Bois, Emerson only uses the term double consciousness twice over the course of his career, despite consistent descriptions of a fractured and split consciousness. He first uses it in 1842’s “The Transcendentalist,” where he says that the “worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead really show very little relation to each other; [. . .] and, with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves” (205-206). Emerson again uses the term in the 1860 essay “Fate” where he states that “one solution to the mysteries of the human condition, one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge, exists; the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness. A man must ride alternately on the horses” of

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2 Emerson’s public reflections on race are sparse. One example, and the one cited most frequently by Schneider, is his 1844 “Address on the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British Indies.” Emerson also directly addresses American racism in 1854’s “The Fugitive Slave Law.” Though explicit commentary on race in America is rare for Emerson, many critics examine his private letters as well as his other, more popular essays and addresses as a commentary on the problem of slavery and racism in America. For more on Emerson as a reform writer and his reflections on slavery, abolition, and women’s rights, see *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, edited by Gregory Garvey (U of Georgia P, 2001) and Sam McGuire Worley’s *Emerson, Thoreau, and the Role of the Cultural Critic* (State U of New York P, 2001).
this dichotomous relationship (which appears in this essay as one between man’s “private and public nature”) (792). These passages demonstrate that Emerson, before Du Bois posits double consciousness as a condition suffered by African Americans—whether collectively as a race or solely amongst those belonging to what he would refer to as “The Talented Tenth”—, recognizes the difficulty, and perhaps even impossibility, of assimilating two divergent modes of self-knowledge even as he advocates that individuals strive towards this reconciliation in an effort to achieve the original relation to the universe.³

There are clear similarities between Emerson’s use of the term double consciousness and Du Bois’s. I want to re-emphasize here that by highlighting the ways in which Emerson’s and Du Bois’s use of the term appear similar or that Emerson first used the term, I am not suggesting that the term be appropriated from African American literature and culture and credited solely to Emerson nor am I suggesting that the Du Boisian configuration of double consciousness be applied to situations outside of the cultural and historical context for which he sought such a metaphor. Yet, at the heart of each writer’s use of the term there is a comparable inability to mediate or reconcile alternative versions of the self. In the Du Boisian version, this fractured sense of self tears one “asunder;” likewise, in the Emersonian version that appears in “Fate,” double consciousness causes a man to be “the victim of his fate” and “ground to powder by the vice of his race” (792). Both notions of double consciousness then also share a sense that a divided self has the potential to cause violence to the person experiencing such a fractured state of mind.

The inability to merge iterations of the self as well as the potential violence that follows underlie both Emersonian and Du Boisian conceptions of double consciousness. Both writers tend to use the term strategically to address this inability of merging versions of the self though they do so for different ends. For Emerson, double consciousness, even as he argues that we strive for it, becomes a strategy for naming the fractured sense of self that emerges from the individual’s incapacity to achieve an understanding of the whole that generates and evades human experience. For Du Bois, double consciousness, because it results from the experience of two-ness, names the debilitating implications of racism on the individual consciousness. Because Emerson and Du Bois use the phrase double consciousness so minimally, I argue that it is this common feature that generates a logic for thinking about and understanding a type of psychological tension an individual faces when trying to understand and assimilate multiple forms of seeing and knowing the self.

By positioning double consciousness more specifically as a logic for determining the challenges associated with knowing oneself, the terminology itself can be removed from specific historical and cultural moments of significance to be understood and applied more broadly to breaks in consciousness as they appear in a wide spectrum of literature produced by American authors. This approach is not meant to undermine existing applications of double consciousness by Du Bois or any other writer, but rather to develop the term in a larger context that will ultimately offer a tool by which to read and offer more nuanced versions of double consciousness in texts that are already recognized as featuring a version of this experience as well as in texts that are not traditionally associated with this term. Read in this manner, double consciousness becomes more than just a term with a solid or fixed definition to describe one particular condition, but rather transitions into a way of reading experiences of subjectivity. Used
as a tool for reading these experiences, double consciousness also helps to establish an intellectual history in works of American literature that uncovers a pattern of thought about the experience of subjectivity that often transcends genre and period demarcations.

Since Du Boisian critics generally recognize Emerson’s influence upon Du Bois, to generate what I am calling a logic of double consciousness, this project argues that it is Emerson as he tries to work towards a state of being that resembles transcendence, despite his infrequent use of the actual term, that develops a logic or theory for this psychological tension over the course of his writing career.4 Again, I am not trying to appropriate the term from Du Bois, but am suggesting that Emerson’s project conceptualizes double consciousness as a necessary state of being that later writers such as Du Bois reframe as an actual condition experienced by individuals living and participating in the world. In other words, understanding the Emersonian logic of double consciousness may help to better understand the debilitating effects of something like the experience of two-ness that Du Bois describes. Starting with Emerson then, double consciousness evolves from an idealized experience to a potentially devastating and even fatal condition once experienced. Double consciousness becomes a term that I am applying to an Emersonian way of thinking about consciousness and subjective experience and then arguing manifests, in the work of other American authors, as not only a condition experienced by individuals, but one that has dangerous consequences.

In the first chapter, “Toward a Theory of Emersonian Double Consciousness,” I examine the development of this psychological tension as it emerges throughout Emerson’s writing career in order to seek a definition of double consciousness. The chapter begins with a reading of Emerson’s early essay Nature where he opens with a call for individuals to “enjoy an original

4 For full-length treatments on Emerson’s influence on Du Bois as well as the ways in which the two men share as well as diverge in their ways of thinking about individualism, race, and politics see Schneider and Patterson.
relation to the universe” (7). He goes on to say that “Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable” and that “every man’s condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth” (7). In other words, we already know how to enjoy an original relation to the universe as it is inherent—we simply have to decipher our internal hieroglyphics. But how does an individual do this? The first section of the chapter asks not only what an original relation to the universe looks like, but how we can achieve such a relation. I examine how essays like “Self-Reliance,” “The Over-Soul,” “Circles,” and “Experience” take up these questions not to clarify or provide answers, but to obfuscate such answers by taking what appears as a simple question of how subjects relate to objects, and conflating what constitutes subjects and objects, as if to make orienting oneself toward an original relation feel like an impossible task.

For example, in Nature Emerson argues that “Nature and the Soul” compose the universe to which we should enjoy an original relation. On the surface, because our common assumption that souls belong to persons, one might assume that the soul would constitute the subject in Emerson’s relation while Nature would constitute the object. Yet Emerson quickly distinguishes persons from souls as he says that NATURE is “the NOT ME, that is both nature and art, all other men and my own body” (8). Here, Emerson takes traditional associations and muddies them by disembodying souls from subjects or persons: that is, the soul exists outside of a person’s body and outside of what we typically identify as subjects—the physical body and individual agency. His attempts to clarify only continue to confuse. In Nature he says that when immersed in physical nature “all mean egotism vanishes” and that a person “becomes the transparent eye-ball” where he is nothing but sees all as “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through him” so that he becomes “part or particle of God” (8). Similarly, in “The Over-
Soul” he insists that persons “live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole” (386). These passages make evident that while the Soul, along with Nature, constitutes the universe, it is distinct from the person that exists or is contained within the physical body that comprises the same Nature of which the universe consists. These passages also demonstrate the type of paradoxes that can be found in Emerson’s essays as one tries to determine not only what an original relation to the universe is or looks like, but how persons can orient themselves toward it. These paradoxes, I argue, produce a fluidity between subjects and objects; this fluidity, more particularly, causes us to wonder how we can be both separate from and constituent of the universe in which we are trying to relate.

The second part of this chapter takes the questions produced by my readings of Emerson’s essays and attempts to clarify Emerson’s often opaque terms in order to understand the dilemma of how one can achieve an original relation as a problem of consciousness. In order to do this, I borrow what Sharon Cameron has famously termed the “impersonal” when describing Nature’s call for and an original relation to the universe. Cameron describes the impersonal as “the antidote for the egotistical, the subjective, the solipsistic” because “it refutes the idea that the mind is one’s own ‘property,’ that one’s relation to being is that of ownership on one hand, and separate identity on the other” (4). It is important to note, however, that while Cameron uses the impersonal synonymously with Emerson’s term “The Over-Soul,” I use it more broadly to apply to all references for a catholic entity that exists outside of a particular subject for the purposes of my argument (for example, I use the impersonal to describe Emerson’s characterization of the universe, Nature, God, the Over-Soul, the Universal Being, etc.). The idea of the “impersonal” is useful because it provides clear demarcations between the subject and object where Emerson’s own definitions do not. Using the term “impersonal” allows
me to position subjects as people—what I will refer to as particular and personal identities—as distinct from what constitutes objects, or the impersonal. More importantly, once clear demarcations are established between the subject who is trying to orient itself toward the object or the universe, it is easier to determine how this call for relation is actually a problem of consciousness which produces the logic of double consciousness.

Reconfiguring the original Emersonian dilemma found in *Nature* as one between how a particular person can enjoy an original relation to the universe when he or she both contains and is contained by the impersonal, allows me, in the third part of the chapter, to read Emerson’s later essays such as “Nominalist and Realist,” “Illusions,” and “Fate” to determine that achieving the original relation is much more complicated than Emerson initially suggests. Instead, these essays propose that how we know and understand ourselves within the physical world prevents the acquisition of the original relation and thus all of the benefits Emerson finds in such a relation. Emerson suggests in these essays that knowing oneself simultaneously as a particular person and as a particle of the impersonal comes with demanding and difficult sacrifices for individuals who attempt such knowledge. For example, in “Fate” Emerson tells us that “when a man is the victim of his fate [. . .] or is ground to powder by the vice of his race;--he is to rally on his relation to the Universe, which his ruin benefits” (389). He instructs the reader to “learn this lesson, namely, that by the cunning co-presence of two elements, which is throughout nature, what lames or paralyzes you draws in with it the divinity” (389). Here we are fated to the particularity of personhood even as we strive to dissolve into the impersonal. As we realize this fate, we become simultaneously aware of ourselves as both particular and particle of the larger universal. This consciousness of ourselves as “part and particle” grinds us to powder—destroys us—all for the promise of “universal benefit.” This moment of simultaneous recognition and
dissolution of the self is what I am arguing underlies Emerson’s idea or theory of double consciousness. Moreover, it is this moment that I argue presents consequences with the potential to devastate or even decimate particular individuals entirely as we must sacrifice knowing ourselves as particular and distinct in order to dissolve back into a universe that cares little for us.

For Emersonian double consciousness to occur, and thus for an individual to attain an original relation to the universe, an individual must be aware of himself as both a particular and distinct individual as well as part of the make-up of the impersonal. The problem, however, is that for an individual to know, recognize, and understand himself as a constituent part of the impersonal necessitates that he sacrifice himself as a particular person in order to dissolve back into the impersonal, to know the original relation. Yet, it is consciousness—the ability to think, make meaning, and to know—that in part helps to distinguish persons from the impersonal. So to achieve an original relation, one must develop a kind of consciousness that abandons consciousness and with it particularity. To imagine giving oneself up for the “universal benefit,” is to imagine the particular person ceasing to exist.

Because an Emersonian theory of double consciousness relies on simultaneous or concurrent knowledge of the self as two things—particular and impersonal—full or complete knowledge of the self is never truly possible for any sustainable period of time. People and their actions are mere representations or performances of the impersonal, but because they claim a proprietary possession over themselves and their actions in an effort to distinguish and define themselves as particulars, they do not recognize the “soul of the whole” that is inherent within them without experiencing some consequence to their particularity. Yet, in giving way to one version of the self for another, a person gives up or sacrifices the alternate version of self-knowledge and in so doing eliminates that version. This sacrifice to know the self in one capacity
prevents double consciousness and allows the particular person to return to living life knowing itself in one particular way rather than through the fractured and split manner that occurred at the moment of double consciousness. This sacrifice is a defense mechanism against a total dissolution back into the impersonal which necessitates a person wholly relinquish his or her particularity and thus their personhood altogether.

Despite the impossibility of achieving true double consciousness so long as an individual wishes to continue to live as a particular person, an Emersonian theory of double consciousness positions the self and self-knowledge in a constant state of flux and transition. Though Emerson recognizes the impossibility of reconciliation between different ways of knowing the self, he makes up for this impossibility by advocating a life of succession or continual motion. Emerson’s emphasis on a successive life allows a person to get closer to an original relation and a continual state of double consciousness without an immediate need to sacrifice his entire personhood or experience within the world. However, living a successive life also means that a person must continually reposition himself within the various social, political, and even temporal systems that govern daily life so that he is constantly remaking and re-knowing himself. It is this constant remaking and re-knowing of the individual self in order to successively live that I argue reflects the psychological tension that the material condition of double consciousness can produce for someone like Du Bois in his discussions of American history.

To this end, the remainder of this dissertation will examine how other American authors use an Emersonian logic of double consciousness to test what happens when this logic transforms into a condition experienced by individuals actively participating in life and the systems that govern it. When understood as a condition, double consciousness presents violent, devastating, and sometimes even fatal consequences for the individual suffering from it as well
as to others and the various systems in which the individual exists. The remaining chapters demonstrate both the limitations of human consciousness to possess and inhabit a state of double consciousness as well as how the consequences of this psychological tension manifest in different scenarios in which individuals may find themselves.

I begin Chapter Two, “‘Between the Form of Life and Life’: Conditions of Double Consciousness in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson,” by exploring what critic E. Thomas Finan calls Emily Dickinson’s “poetry of consciousness.” The chapter examines what happens when Dickinson’s speakers find themselves experiencing moments of double consciousness. I open by arguing that Dickinson’s poems “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” and “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind” depict the psychological tension or fracture that an individual experiences as he or she becomes aware they are conscious of themselves in two ways: as a particular person and a person who is part of a larger and impersonal force. Though full or complete knowledge of the impersonal is almost always impossible in Dickinson’s poems, as it is for Emerson, these two poems depict the moment of double consciousness as a transitional state once persons determine that they are, to borrow from Emerson’s “The Over-Soul,” “so much more” than just the selves they occupy in the physical world. More importantly, these poems characterize this transitional state as violent and painful. For instance, Dickinson’s speaker feels a “Cleaving” in her “Mind/As if” the Brain had split” and this fractured state of being feels like “a Funeral” in the “Brain” where “Mourners” are marching “to and fro” until her “mind “goes “numb.” Dickinson’s speaker here seems to transcend the particular self in order to observe how much pain multiple forms of self-knowledge can cause and how such a fracture in consciousness can resemble a death. These poems, I also argue, demonstrate the limitations of human consciousness whenever it attempts to reconcile or assimilate multiple forms of self-knowledge. Dickinson’s
speakers labor to take the pieces of the split consciousness and “match” them “Seam by Seam -
/But could not make them fit.”

Because these two poems are representative of ways in which Dickinson’s poetry
demonstrates the painful and violent nature of double consciousness as a condition suffered by
subjects, I go on to argue that her poetry tries to outline the limitations of individual
consciousness that are ultimately responsible for this condition. The poems “The Brain – is wider
than the Sky” and “I thought that nature was enough,” for example, employ metaphors of
absorption and containment, to describe crucial indeterminacy that effaces the distinctions
between subject and object on which our understanding of consciousness depends. In these
poems, persons trying to orient themselves via an “original relation” know themselves as
particular individuals striving to reach the impersonal; consequently they confront an uncertainty
about the reliability of distinctions between the self and the world. This indeterminacy, I argue,
complicates the process of knowing so that one becomes incapable of differentiating between
knowledge of the self as a self and knowledge of that same self as necessary to the construction
of something larger beyond a particular identity. Dickinson re-imagines this indeterminacy in
poems like “Between the Form of Life and Life” and “This Consciousness that is aware” as a
moment of double consciousness in which persons, unable to delineate the particular self from
the impersonal, are caught or trapped in this painful condition.

Stuck in this indeterminate place, poems such as “Before I got my eye put out” and
“Renunciation – is a piercing Virtue” demonstrate how, because of the limitations of
consciousness, we must ultimately choose between one version of self-knowledge over the other
if we hope to end the suffering that double consciousness imposes because of the impossibility of
reconciling or merging the two. While these poems necessitate a choosing of one form of
knowledge over another to end the suffering of double consciousness, they also highlight how the choosing in and of itself reproduces the pain of the actual experience. In other words, whenever we suspend the condition of double consciousness with a determinate choice between types of self-knowledge, we deny and effectively terminate the alternate mode of knowing. For Dickinson, this termination, or dispossession of one version of the self, turns out to be just as violent and painful as the condition itself, often resulting in a figurative death. Finally, I argue that Dickinson’s “poetry of consciousness,” because a person chooses one form of self-knowledge over the other in order to end the state of double consciousness, posits double consciousness as a temporal condition that occurs multiple times over the course of a lifetime. In Dickinson’s poetry then, double consciousness is a relational experience that differs throughout a person’s life based on the current role or position that he or she occupies. Double consciousness thus emerges as a condition that enables individuals to test this relationality to other systems of organization outside of the self that govern and organize the temporal life in which it must participate.

While Dickinson’s poetry imagines the internal effects of the experience of double consciousness on a person, I argue in Chapter Three, “Economies of Devastation in Henry James’s The Bostonians and The Wings of the Dove” that Henry James explores the devastating consequences of double consciousness on persons as they participate in the interpersonal relationships that are inherent byproducts of living in modern societies. In order to do this, my chapter articulates how double consciousness emerges in James’s The Bostonians and The Wings of the Dove. More particularly, the first part of the chapter investigates how the protagonists of each novel—Verena Tarrant and Milly Theale respectively—experience psychological tension as they come into contact and form relationships with other people. Verena and Milly enter into
states of double consciousness because their relationships with the other characters force them to see themselves through the eyes of others. As each woman must acknowledge the version of herself generated by a relationship with someone else, she must also try to incorporate what the others see with her own notions of selfhood. And because, as established by Emerson and demonstrated by Dickinson, it is so difficult to know multiple versions of the self simultaneously, Milly and Verena suffer the painful consequences of double consciousness: Verena sacrifices her agency as she chooses one version over another and thus the ability to define herself while Milly fails to choose and thus erases her voice from the novel’s narrative until she ultimately dies.

So while Dickinson’s poetry externalizes the internal struggle that a person suffers in a moment of double consciousness, James’s further illustrates one of the forces—social relationships—that can cause persons to enter into this fractured sense of self. The second part of this chapter, however, argues that not only does one particular individual suffer double consciousness as a result of his or her interactions with others, but that those same interactions result in a state of double consciousness for all parties engaged in the relationship. I argue that Verena and Milly, because they lack the strength of personality and particularity of the other characters in each novel, act as sites on which the impersonal more clearly manifests to be experienced by the other characters. As characters like Olive and Basil in The Bostonians and like Kate and Densher in Wings come into contact with the impersonal via Verena and Milly, these characters occupy a state of double consciousness and generate what I call economies of devastation. These economies of devastation begin as economies of relation and work to highlight not only how states of double consciousness effect individual subjects, but also how such revelations impact the organizational systems in which these individual subjects live. In
other words, James’s economy of devastation demonstrates the ways in which something like a relationship between two particular subjects, which is one type of system that works to organize daily life, not only produces a condition of double consciousness for the participants, but also how the relation itself has the potential to be annihilated in the process. Neither the person nor the relation are immune from the consequences of this condition.

Finally, Chapter Four, “Discovering ‘separateness’: The Painful Process of Self-Definition in *All the King’s Men*” takes the internalization of double consciousness that I argue is present in Dickinson’s poetry and the externalization of this condition that I argue is present in the fiction of Henry James and combines them. This combination attempts to determine how an individual might try to manage the painful and potentially fatal consequences of this condition as he or she experiences it again and again over the course of a lifetime. Through a reading of Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* and his essay, “Knowledge and the Image of Man,” this chapter explores the roles time and relation have on a person’s ability to reconcile or merge alternate versions of self-knowledge.

Though *All the King’s Men* first appears to be the story of Willie Stark told by a third person narrator, Jack Burden, as the story unravels Jack reveals that the story actually belongs to him. When read as a first person narrative, Jack emerges as two different characters: that of the narrator who has already experienced the events in the story and that of the character who appears in relation to the story of Willie Stark. Using the past-tense narrative as well as his relationship to Willie to tell his story, allows Jack to examine the events of his past, and thus different versions of himself, in order to piece together how those events and versions of himself have worked to produce the current version of himself as narrator. Although Jack experiences a condition of double consciousness throughout this story, I argue that his narrative reveals how he
chooses again and again one version of himself over another and in this choosing generates an ethos for living that creates a defense mechanism for him to avoid feeling and internalizing the painful effects this condition produces. This ethos takes several forms—such as “The Great Sleep,” “Life is Motion towards Knowledge,” and “The Great Twitch”—throughout the narrative, but no matter its iteration these philosophies allow Jack to protect himself from acknowledging how his particularity plays a role in the impersonal by denying the fact that his actions have an impact on others.

However, the distance that Jack gains through the use of the narrative, I argue, enables him to examine more objectively, not unlike Dickinson’s speaker when she seems to be outside a particular self, those moments in his life in which his ethos shifted. It is in these moments of transition that Jack enters into a state of double consciousness and thus causes the shift in his ethos. The elapsed time that the narrative structure of *All the King’s Men* provides, allows Jack to examine how these moments altered him; in other words, they allow him to see not only how he chose one version of knowledge over another, but also why he chose that version. He then, through re-telling of his story, determines how these choices influenced his relationships, his career, and his actions (or inaction as the case may be). Each choice initiates a new moment of double consciousness and another choosing of one self over another until the end of the novel where Jack reveals how he knows himself in the moment of the re-telling. Yet, the narrative only occurs because of a lapse in time from these actual moments and because Jack only comes to understand these moments by distancing himself from himself and from his relationships, Warren reinforces that a person cannot simultaneously know himself in more than one way at a time without some sort of consequence. Even as Jack re-tells his story and sees himself anew, the current way he sees himself is being remade through the telling. The experience of telling his
story in and of itself causes Jack to re-know himself and thus sacrifice these older versions of self. I argue that both time and relation not only make the condition of double consciousness possible multiple times, but they are also what allow an individual to attempt to reconcile alternate versions of the self.

Yet, the time and relation that Jack utilizes in order to narrativize his experiences with double consciousness also further highlight the paradox of this condition. What I mean here is that as both a character and a narrator, Jack enjoys a particular privilege within his historical moment as a white male narrator, a privilege which Warren himself enjoys as a white male author, that make the technology of narrative more easily available to him that would not be available to those black Americans for who Du Bois is writing (or even to the female characters of James’s novels). In other words, though Emerson and Dickinson posit double consciousness as a condition that afflicts all persons, Warren’s novel while on one hand offering a possible strategy, through narrative, to reconcile multiple versions of the self, demonstrates that literary technologies that may be used for this reconciliation are largely determined and limited by one’s cultural and historical circumstances. And, as Du Bois illustrates, these circumstances often heighten the experience of double consciousness, making it even more paradoxical and challenging for those who find themselves marginalized and alienated from the dominate culture.

Although Dickinson, James, and Warren all make use of what I am calling an Emersonian idea of double consciousness, each does so in a different way and to a different end. The logic of double consciousness manifests for Dickinson, James, and Warren as a condition with devastating, painful, even fatal consequences for the individual as it struggles to know itself as more than the particular identity it possesses. Often, in the case of all three of these writer’s, double consciousness is caused as the particular self tries to reconcile its self-knowledge with the
knowledge that it is also a constituent part of larger and more powerful force such as the impersonal. In reading the logic of double consciousness as it emerges in the work of Dickinson, James, and Warren, I am hoping that this study produces an intellectual history that explores questions of what it means to know oneself as a self or a subject while also trying to know how that self fits into a larger context, whether that context is religious, racial, political, etc. This intellectual history provides a manner in which to read texts outside period and genre distinctions that often determine how we understand the experience of the subject as these distinctions are usually representative of a particular cultural and/or historical moment. What an Emersonian logic for double consciousness offers us then are more comprehensive and nuanced versions of what the experience of personhood looks like for a subject; as a result we can better situate, understand, and articulate the specific challenges of subjectivity within a particular circumstance such as Du Bois’s iteration of double consciousness as a racial experience.
CHAPTER ONE: THE SUFFERING SUBJECT: TOWARD AN EMERSONIAN THEORY OF DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

In his 1836 work, *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson wonders why each person should not “enjoy an original relation to the universe.”

“Every man’s condition,” he goes on to say, “is a solution in hieroglyphic to the inquiries he would put. He acts it as life before he apprehends it as truth” (7). In other words, the person who seeks this relation, or what Barbara Packer has termed “a state of grace,” already possesses the answers to questions about how he or she might achieve an original relationship to the universe even if those answers remain unintelligible (25). An individual who wants to realize a relationship to the universe must face the challenge of not only locating such answers within him-or herself but also of decoding those answers so as to make this relation possible. Emerson’s writing career, for the most part, attempts to characterize this original relation to the universe while providing methods with which individuals may decipher those internal hieroglyphics.

For instance, an essay like “Self-Reliance” reads as an instruction manual famous for generating popular adages in the rhetoric of individualism: “Trust thyself” and “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” (260, 265). And an essay like “The Over-Soul” characterizes the other participant in this original relation; what *Nature* calls “the

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6 Packer’s *Emerson’s Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* demonstrates the historical and biographical influences on the composition of Emerson’s major essays. There she argues that the early *Nature* “includes condensed versions of every major Emersonian theme” that appears throughout his later work (25). Conversely, Stanley Cavell in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* argues that “*Nature*, granted the wonderful passages in it” do “not yet constitute the Emersonian philosophical voice” and that it is a departure from the voice found in “The American Scholar,” “The Divinity School Address,” and “Self-Reliance” (112). For Cavell, *Nature* takes the “issue of skepticism as solvable or controllable” while the later essays reveal “unsolvability to be the heart of his thinking” (112). For my purposes, Packer’s and Cavell’s readings are not so diametrically opposed as they seem. Though Emerson’s voice certainly does alter in his later work, *Nature* does seem to contain many of the themes that appear in the later essays. Most of these “themes” or central arguments address what Emerson initially viewed as a solvable condition in *Nature*—the original relation to the universe in my reading rather than the skepticism of Cavell’s—as an unsolvable, or more precisely an inaccessible condition to the person seeking it.
great apparition” here becomes “The Supreme Critic,” “Unity,” “the Eternal ONE,” “God,” and finally “The Over-soul” (*Nature* 7, “The Over-Soul” 385-386). Yet, even the most novice reader of Emerson often notes the tensions, challenges, and paradoxes that his writing tends to produce. These names for the Over-soul are understood as synonymous despite the disparateness with which they refer to an abstract idea. Such moments reveal the opacities in Emerson’s writing that haunt even his most ardent attempts to clarify just what an “original relation” might look like from the vantage of a particular person.

In its simplest form, the relationship promised by Emerson in *Nature* and sought after in his later essays could be described as one between a subject and an object. The subject seems to be the “we” that Emerson opens with: the individual seeking the original relation to the universe. Determining the object, however, proves more difficult. Is the object the thing Emerson names here as “the universe” or the “great apparition” and later “the Over-soul”? Or is the object “the original relation” to that universe for which one is searching? *Nature* never succinctly clarifies the object leaving critics like Packer to note that trying to interpret “Emerson’s attempt to unriddle the cosmos” in *Nature* “has a way of swallowing up critics who pretend to the glory of having guessed its meaning” (23, 25).

*Nature*’s ambiguity when it comes to clearly defining the subject-object relationship Emerson believes is inherent only intensifies throughout Emerson’s later work. More specifically, because problems identifying and naming the object of “original relation” persist, the lucidity of what constitutes both object and subject becomes questionable as one moves from *Nature* to the later writing. Emerson remains consistent in his insistence that the actualization of this original relation to the universe is possible for all individuals (though most especially for a visionary figure he calls “the Poet”); and later when that possibility is tempered by age and
experience, the essays still maintain the hope that a person can find the ever-elusive “original relation,” whatever that relationship may be. The difficulty in Emerson’s late essays comes not from his shifts in voice or tone, but from the fluidity of the subject-object relation those essays describe. Without clear demarcations, the subject bleeds into the object and vice versa, making it difficult to discern who or what is seeking whom or what. Forming a relation, original or otherwise, necessitates distinct definitions of the parties involved. Because Emerson’s subjects and objects flow into one another, definition and demarcation that would make an “original relation” legible to an individual are withheld because of the fluidity for which this same relationship calls.

The purpose of this chapter is three-fold. In the first part, I demonstrate the ways in which the subject-object relationship introduced in *Nature* becomes confused and even paradoxical as Emerson’s ideas develop. Such a demonstration will then yield a set of terms for better articulating, in part two, the problems produced when subjects and objects are not fixed but rather fluid so that one cannot determine what constitutes the other. Finally, using these terms alongside of the essays “Nominalist and Realist,” “Illusions,” and “Fate,” I argue in the third part of the chapter that Emerson’s idea of an original relation to the universe can be translated as a condition of consciousness—what he terms and I refer to as double consciousness—that necessitates suffering, and sometimes even the complete decimation of the self, for the individual who strives to experience it.

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7 There has been a tendency in Emerson scholarship to differentiate between an “early” Emerson and a “late” and more “mature” Emerson. Though Emerson’s voice does shift between something like *Essays: First Series* (1841) and *The Conduct of Life* (1860), I tend to agree with Michael Lopez that “there exists, from his first book to his last, a fundamental, unchanging Emersonian psychology/philosophy” (247-48). For a thorough discussion on the critical tendency to locate different Emersonian voices in his early and later work as well as why such a differentiation is problematic, see Lopez’s “*The Conduct of Life*: Emerson’s Anatomy of Power.”
2.1 Dissolving Subjects and Flowing Objects

Emerson most clearly articulates the untenability of attaining an original relation to the universe in “Experience.” Bemoaning the failure of a “mood” such as grief to orient an individual into “reality,” Emerson, in an uncharacteristically pessimistic moment, admits that “souls never touch their objects” (472). 8 Even grief, for which Emerson describes as a mood that courts “suffering” and that would ideally, because of its intensity and profound effect on the individual experiencing it, move a person towards the original relation to the universe, is impervious to that relation and does not “carry” that person “one step into real nature” (473). Instead, grieving for Emerson is just as shallow as any other mood or perception; grief simply “plays about the surfaces” and does not help to penetrate Nature who “does not like to be observed” (473). Though specific to Emerson’s grief over losing his son, Waldo, the problem this passage addresses is one of distance and more specifically the inability to traverse the distance between what constitutes the subject and what constitutes the object in order to “find reality” of an original relation.

Emerson goes on, still more pessimistically to say that “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch the hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition” (473). In other words, when persons attempt to move beyond the surface and penetrate the depth of the object, the object evades understanding. Moreover, this unhandsome condition requires that we enter into a particular state of consciousness that necessitates a penetration of the self beyond surface moods in order to attempt to move closer towards the object even as the object moves further from the person. Stanley

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8 “Experience” reflects upon the nature of grief—what Emerson refers to as a mere mood in the essay—following the death of Emerson’s son Waldo. For more on the significance of Emerson’s particular grief, see Sharon Cameron’s “Representing Grief: Emerson’s ‘Experience’” in Representations 15 (1986): 15-41.
Cavell, however, argues that “What is unhandsome is, I think, not that objects for us, to which we seek attachment, are, as it were, in themselves evanescent and lubricious; the unhandsome is rather what happens when we seek to deny the standoffishness of objects by clutching at them, which is to say, when we conceive thinking [. . .] as grasping something, say synthesizing” (117). Cavell seems to be saying here that the unhandsome situation in which we find ourselves is not due to the elusive nature of the object, but rather to the fact that the person becomes conscious of the object’s evasion and then tries even harder to make a move towards it. He goes on to say that “Clutching’s opposite, which would be the most handsome part of our condition, is I suppose the specifically human form of attractiveness—attraction being another tremendous Emersonian term or master-tone, naming the rightful call we have upon one another, and that I and the world make upon one another” (117). Nature’s call for and promise of an original relation to the universe demonstrates this attraction, or handsome condition, as a person “acts it as life” before developing a consciousness about the truth of such an attraction or relation. The ideal condition, for both Emerson and Cavell is one in which subject and object move towards one another naturally—each acts or inhabits the “original relation”— and without the subject consciously trying to ascertain how much further he or she has to go to get the original relation. The consciousness—the thinking that makes our condition unhandsome, if we are to accept Cavell’s reading of this passage—however, makes us: our ability to think, it seems, is one of the things that differentiates us from the world, and subjects from objects. Without the ability to think or to

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9 Cavell’s reading of “Experience” attempts to position Emerson within a larger philosophical tradition that includes Nietzsche, Kant, Wittgenstein, among others. “Experience” for Cavell is less about grief and its contradictions to experience as determined by critics like Cameron and Packer and more about the essay as “a work, or claim, of founding” a relation to philosophy (119). See “Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson’s ‘Experience’” from Transcendental Etudes.
know, the subject loses what distinguishes it from the object, which makes orienting oneself towards an original relation to the universe impossible.

What emerges in “Experience” is both a problem of distance and a problem of orientation; and the two are not mutually exclusive of one another, but rather—to borrow a phrase from Emerson—“part and particle” of a larger problem that has to do with consciousness and the way the human perceives or knows the original relationship. More particularly, the difficulties faced by subjects and objects trying to acquaint themselves with one another are largely due to the lack of a fixed foundation on which one can stand in relation to an object. And for Emerson, while the absence of a static perspective presents obstacles for the individual, it is also necessary for the possibility of an original relation.

In *Nature*, immediately following the call for an original relation to the universe and the promise that such a relation is possible if we would look within ourselves, Emerson attempts to characterize the subject and the object he wishes to unite. He says when considered philosophically “the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul” (8). We seek an original relation, in other words, to a totality composed of Nature and the Soul. Yet what exactly constitutes the Soul and Nature remains indistinct. Emerson clarifies:

Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. I shall use the word in both senses;--in its common and in its philosophical import. In inquiries so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. *Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. *Art* is applied to the mixture of his will with the same
things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together
are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an
impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the
result. (8)

Here NATURE appears to encompass all the physical stuff that makes up the world like space,
air, etc. as well as bodies and the wills those bodies house. For Emerson, defining Nature in this
way causes no confusion because our desires and our effects on the physical world are
“insignificant” when considered in the light of the larger impression everything makes on us.

Though Emerson also calls this larger impression “the world on the human mind,” the reference
to the world seems to imply that the impression is actually left by what is not defined as a natural
object, which would be what Emerson elsewhere calls the Soul. This passage then confuses more
than it clarifies. If Nature is all the stuff of the world, including persons, what then constitutes the
Soul that apparently leaves such an impression upon us? The Soul seems disembodied from
physical persons as well as Nature, but it also seems that if Nature is all the stuff that makes up
the world, wouldn’t the Soul also make up Nature? Because Nature appears here as all
encompassing, the original relation one seeks would seem like a natural state of being for the
subject. Yet, Emerson’s call for such a relation problematizes this assumption and as a result
implies a separateness between subjects and objects or at least between how subjects and objects
know themselves. Paradoxically, this same separateness also prevents the distinctions required of
subjects and objects in order to orient themselves toward one another. What constitutes the Soul,
which impresses upon the need to achieve the totality of an original relation, still evades
understanding and definition.
Emerson’s answer to some of these questions appears a few pages later when he says that immersed in the natural world “all mean egotism vanishes. I become the transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (10). As it relates to the problem of orientation, Emerson equates subjects and objects because individuals dissolve into the “Universal Being” and as they become “part or particle” relate equally to the object. It is worth mentioning here that I am using Emerson’s terms of “Universal Being,” “God,” “Over-soul,” “Nature,” etc. as they appear in *Nature* and throughout his writing as synonymous with “the universe” largely because I wish to argue that the opacity of the subject-object relationship translates to a condition of consciousness for particular persons to suffer. When subjects dissolve into objects, the necessity to seek an original relation to that object becomes obsolete because when subjects and objects are not only equally related, but also part and particle of one another, relation, let alone original relation, is impossible to establish. Subjects cannot locate what distinguishes them from the object in order to establish a position from which to begin orienting themselves towards the object.

What *Nature* provides then is not an identification of the subject and the object, or more plainly of the person and the universe, but rather an idea of what the original relation may look like once achieved: subjects and objects that fuse and flow together to unite beyond the confines of material personhood or the limitations imposed by definitions and names. This image recurs in “Self-Reliance,” “The Over-Soul,” and “Circles” with a series of epistemological abstractions that extend this fluidity and illuminates the difficulties of orienting the subject towards its object. Although Emerson advises in “Self-Reliance” to “Trust thyself” and “to believe” our “own

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10 For interpretations of the specific meaning of these terms and their relationship to Emerson’s transcendentalism see Lawrence Buell’s *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*. Also of note are George Kateb’s questions about Emerson’s religiousness in *Emerson and Self-Reliance*. 
thought,” he also asks “Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded?” (260, 268). “Intuition,” or the “essence of genius, of virtue, and of life” gives us the answer to those questions and appears in the form of “Spontaneity or Instinct” (269). In other words, if we trust ourselves by listening to our instinct or acting spontaneously from that instinct, we will discover our “common origin” and that the soul “is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them from the same source whence their life and being also proceed” (269). The “aboriginal Self” then, because when acting according to “Intuition” we are not “diverse,” is both the self and the universe, or the subject and the object.

This logic appears again in the “The Over-Soul.” There Emerson says:

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is seeing and the thing seen, the seer and spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. (386)

Where Nature fails to clarify its terms, these passages, I think, succeed. They make evident that while the Soul, along with NATURE, constitutes the universe, it is also distinct from it. An original relation to the universe offers the person an escape from physical personhood, which limits and confines us in order to merge into the universe that—according to the logic of these essays—already resides within the person as the Soul. On one hand, distinguishing the Soul reconciles the difficulty in determining the subject because it is inherent within us: it resides then
in the physical body of a person. On the other hand, these passages confuse what constitutes the person if the Soul inherently exists within the person, but the person must still try to orient himself towards an original relation. According to Emerson’s logic in *Nature* then, the person would already possess the totality of an original relation as he is composed of both the Soul and Nature. To put it more simply, these passages prompt one to wonder how one can have an original relation to the universe if he or she simultaneously contains and is contained by that universe? Persons are both the container and the contained just as they are both subject and object.

Emerson continues in “The Over-Soul” that “the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function [. . .] is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being [. . .] an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed” (387). It seems that Emerson nullifies *Nature’s* call for an original relation to the universe here because man—understood as the corporeal body and the personality—cannot possess the soul though the soul possesses man. Such a claim renders the problem of orientation inconsequential. But Emerson also argues that “We do not yet possess ourselves, and we know at the same time we are much more” because “of this pure nature”—the universe’s possession of us—“every man is at some time sensible. [. . .] we know that it pervades us and contains us” (391, 387). To possess ourselves seems to imply that we enter into our original relation to the universe first by recognizing the Soul inherent within us and then allowing it to possess and pervade through us so that our persons dissolve back into the universe. The resulting paradox is thus that in order to possess ourselves we must first escape ourselves—corporeally and personally—in order for the very thing that constitutes (and initially proscribed the limitations we must escape) to possess us.
Intrinsic to this paradox is a problem of limits and limitlessness. The idea of the person serving as the container for that which it contains prohibits the subject’s orientation towards the object precisely because of the limitlessness that is inherent within this orientation. When objects compose subjects, and when objects flow into and out of persons, we cannot possibly find a foundation on which to stand in order to orient ourselves toward the object to which we form a relation. Though the universe gives the person limitations, its internal existence within the person renders those limitations plastic, even immaterial, resulting in a type of limitlessness that cancels out distinguishing features of both subject and object.

The essay “Circles” addresses the necessity of such limitlessness. “There are no fixtures in nature,” we are told, “The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees” (403). On one hand, this statement reaffirms the limitless possibility/potential of the individual for which one version of Emerson has become famous. If nothing is permanent, then the self-reliant individual has the potential, because he or she is not contained to one version of him- or herself, to achieve what Emerson calls for in essays such as “The American Scholar” or “The Poet.” On the other hand, such a statement also poses a challenge for the individual trying to orient him- or herself to the universe to determine his or her original relation. And the person seeking this relationship is, ideally, the self-reliant individual so that we arrive back at our original paradox. Because “Circles” extends the logic of “Self-Reliance” and “The Over-Soul,” the moment in which a person starts to “possess themselves,” or gains some sort of knowledge/understanding of him- or herself to begin determining his or her relation to the universe, the universe shifts as a new circle is created. This then forces the individual to find some sort of new knowledge about the self, and to start the process of orienting him- or herself towards the universe all over again. Thus, a person cannot “apprehend” knowledge of him- or
herself or of the universe as “truth” because both self-knowledge and the relationship are always 
in flux (Nature 7). Moreover, because the self and the universe partially compose one another, 
they too are fluid and always moving in and out of one another. True possession or knowledge of 
the self in its original relation to the universe seems impossible. 

“Circles” avoids the disappointment found early in “Experience” by redirecting our 
attention from the limits imposed by limitlessness to the necessity of engaging in the process of 
living, that is to say an active life of progression and forward movement. “Circles” assures us 
that our lives are an “apprenticeship to the truth” as “there is no end in nature” because “every 
end is a beginning” but also that every person must be “an endless seeker, with no Past” at our 
backs (403, 412). Emerson argues that “which builds is better than that which is built” (404). By 
establishing not only a lack of permanence but also the necessity of our own fluidity through his 
emphasis on process towards- rather than on the product of the original relation, Emerson avoids 
addressing the practicality of attaining such a relationship. Advocating a process towards 
orientation instead of orientation itself underscores the fact that the subject cannot possibly orient 
itself towards the object since both are fluid and therefore unstable. It also ignores the fact that 
without limits or distinguishing features, the subject and object are undifferentiated, which 
further prevents orientation. For Emerson, fluidity is not a problem if we are always moving 
forward, past our current circles, in order to continuously develop ourselves even if that 
development never gets us to our end goal. Thus, participating in the process, trying to orient 
one’s self towards the universe, allows us to “act” the relationship out, even if we cannot quite 
figure out how to “apprehend it as truth.” Knowing and understanding this relationship is 
secondary to living the relation. Yet the limitlessness of the relationship between universe and
person, or object and subject, keeps us living “amid surfaces” and moving forward, living a life in “succession” (“Experience” 478, “The Over-Soul” 386). 11

When Emerson says in “Experience” that “Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand” and that “Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety [. . .] We need change of objects,” he refers to the lack of permanence established in “Circles” (476). The limits imposed by personality and physicality give us a false sense of “the real” or “permanence” because they act as containers that in turn provide a certain degree of stability. This stability, though temporary, gives the person a platform or a place to anchor in which to orient him- or herself. The confines of the container allow the person to possess, or to have a transitory knowledge of himself, but this knowledge does not extend beyond the confines of the physical and material world. More importantly this knowledge of self is partial as Emerson says in “Experience”: “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus” (473). Moods, because they are dictated by personality and particular experience, like the corporeal body, limit our ability for full self-possession. We can only see or know what our mood allows which prevents complete knowledge or a relation to the universe. The mood, like the body, provides a false sense of anchorage for an orientation to the universe. Paradoxically though, they also, because we “pass through them,” provide the “change of objects” Emerson says we need as every object may appear different depending on our mood. 12

11 In “Paths of Coherence through Emerson’s Philosophy: The Case of ‘Nominalist and Realist’,” Russell B. Goodman notes that “‘Succession’ means that we find ourselves in a temporal world, where nothing lasts. ‘Surface’ means that we live far from the center of things, that we slide from one thing to another without grasping or absorbing them” (54).
12 For a more complete interpretation of Emersonian moods, see Cavell’s Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes where he discusses an “epistemology of moods.” Drawing on Cavell’s work, Branka Arsić offers a reading of Emersonian moods as they pertain to the essay “Intellect” in “Brain Walks: Emerson on Thinking” from The Other Emerson.
These essays leave the reader with an overwhelming sense of confusion because subjects are made from and out of objects which they understand only via relation, because the qualities that make us both persons and constituent parts of the universe limit the possibility for an original relation, and because Emerson himself glosses over this impossibility by emphasizing a process towards this relation rather than the relation itself. One wonders not how to attain the original relation, but why bother orienting one’s self toward the universe in the first place? Why would one want to dissolve back into the universe? And why would the universe require such a dissolution of what it initially attributed to the individual?

Resting easy within the containment of the physical body and the personality—playing amid the surfaces—is far simpler than trying to move beyond those confines towards something or someone that is always just beyond our grasp. Critics like Joel Porte argue that “it was not so much a solution” for which Emerson was searching, “but rather a clear awareness of the difficulty” of living a successive life that works towards the futile goal of achieving an original relation to the universe (43). By living life successively, a person will no doubt encounter and experience the difficulty of living; for Porte, Emerson’s interest lies not in solving the challenges of everyday life, but to recognize and accept those challenges as working towards a larger purpose. This notion indicates that one must acquire a process over product mindset when going about the business of life. Russell B. Goodman contends that Emerson’s emphasis on process rather than product is a “dedication to the ‘newness’ of the present moment,” is “essential for our moral development,” as it provides a “transition to new and better virtues,” even if it only gives us glimpses of an original relation rather than a “steady vision of things” (41-2). Ideally engaging in the process of orientation, allowing for disorientation rather than stability, is better than the product of achieving orientation because the person grows, develops—morally for
Goodman and closer to transcendence for Porte—and gets closer to a life beyond the limits of
personhood. Every step in the process of living an active life moves the person toward original
relation by allowing the object to flow more fully through the person and expanding his or her
limits.

Glimpses of original relation, while they provide hope and motivation to keep engaging
in the process articulated in “Circles,” are unsatisfying to the person promised the relationship in
_Nature_ and “Self-Reliance.” By the time Emerson writes “Experience,” even he appears to find
mere glimpses of an original relation wearisome. The lack of permanence and life’s constant flux
that result in limitlessness as well as the individual’s particular limitations—failure to get at the
“the real” or unite the physical person in order to reach the combination of the Soul and
Nature—cause him to begin the essay by asking “Where do we find ourselves?” (471). He
answers: “In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none” (471).
We find ourselves in the middle of a successive life. Emerson likens this experience to being on
a never-ending staircase: we can ascend and keep moving up toward something which is
unknowable to us because it is always out of sight. As long as we are climbing, or trying to
orient ourselves towards the original relation we seek, we are living. Although this process is
exhausting, knowing the extremes of the series in which we live, much like the dissolution for
which we are striving, implies an end, and a death of the self. For once one reaches the end of the
staircase, there is nothing left for which to search: subjects escape their corporeal and personal
limitations and flow wholly into the object.

2.2 _The Impersonal and Manifestations of the “Not Me”_

Though extinguishing the self in order to achieve an original relation to the universe is
troubling enough, Emerson’s obliquity poses two primary challenges for the individual who
attempts to locate such a relation. The first of these challenges has to do with the limits imposed by personhood and how one can expand the parameters of those limitations in order to move forward, as on the ascending staircase that opens “Experience.” The early essays, even an essay like “Self-Reliance” that seems to celebrate the individual, find fault with an individual’s inability to simultaneously embody and enact the totality of Nature and the Soul. While paradoxical because Emerson also claims that both stem from the same original source—the universe—Emerson’s promotion of an original relation to the universe seems to favor what Sharon Cameron has famously termed the “impersonal” rather than the particularity of the individual. In her reading of Emerson’s “Nominalist and Realist,” Cameron observes that “the essay equivocates between belief in individuals and disbelief in them [. . .] seeing this equivocation as a matter of shifting moods. But in the end Emerson’s point of view is unambiguous, in favor of acknowledging what [. . .] he names the ‘catholic sense,’ the ‘larger generalizations’ in effect the impersonal, called by him ‘the Over-Soul’” (4). Emerson’s preference for the catholic is “unambiguous” precisely because of the limitations that the particular or the personal imposes on a person and because for a person to wholly escape these limitations means to cancel out entirely the particular that defines the person.

It is important to note here the differences between Cameron’s use of a term like “the Over-Soul” and my own. Cameron uses the “impersonal” synonymously with “the Over-Soul” while I am equating most Emersonian references to a catholic entity that exists outside of a particular subject standing in relation to it. For example, because of Emerson’s often opaque definitions, I use Nature, soul, universe, “the Over-Soul,” and even God as synonyms for the definition.

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13 I am primarily drawing on Cameron’s explanation of this term from “The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson’s Impersonal” originally published in Critical Inquiry, 25.1 (1998): 1-31 and reprinted in The Other Emerson. All citations from this article are from the reprinted version that appears in The Other Emerson.
centrifugal force underlying his call for “an original relation to the universe.” Though similar in concept, my use of the impersonal, by encompassing all of Emerson’s terms for a larger governing force outside of a subject, attempts to remove the religious connotations that critics sometimes ascribe to these terms. Despite these differences, I would like to borrow Cameron’s term “impersonal” to describe the thing to which Emerson hopes we will form an original relation. The term is useful because it establishes clear demarcations between what constitutes the subjects and objects in question, whereas Emerson’s own terminology depends upon a lack of demarcation. This differentiation is vital to understanding the inherent problems of an original relation to the universe for the seeker of such a relation as well as the consequences that accompany this relationship.

Impersonality is, for Cameron, “the antidote for the egotistical, the subjective, the solipsistic.” She values the concept, “specifically because it refutes the idea that the mind is one’s ‘property,’ that one’s relation to being is that of ownership on the one hand, and separate identity on the other. From the perspective of truth Emerson advocates [. . .] subjectivity and egotism are delusions about personal identity” (4). The identity the subject claims to possess—constructed by emotions, experience, personality, desires, individual actions, or the things that make a person particular from other persons—does not belong, or at least solely belong, to that subject. Cameron contends that “the private will is over-powered by a force”—the impersonal—“that inhabits all” and renders ownership nonsensical so that it is “a mistake to call a talent, an idea, an achievement, or even a heart (and therefore a body) one’s own, as it is a mistake to entertain the more abstract idea that persons have discrete identities” (4). When Emerson says in “The Over-Soul” that “we do not yet possess ourselves,” he means that we cannot possess ourselves first because individual self-possession is not possible, and second that the notion that
one can be in possession of him- or herself is a construct generated to help persons to participate in the world (391).

Using the passage from “The Over-Soul” that says “the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all organs” Cameron observes that Emerson’s impersonal “makes itself manifest through particular persons, who act as its conduit” (“The Over-Soul” 387, Cameron 9). She says it is not “an entity, nor is it a property” though it may be called a “manifestation, even always a particular,” though not always the same, “manifestation” (9). The impersonal then is not “embodied” by the physical and particular person, but rather “becomes embodied” through “organs,” “functions,” and “faculties” so that it “inhabits, vivifies, or traverses the mind, the will, the heart, but it is not the mind, the will, or the heart” because each of those limits the power of the impersonal just as they limit the power of the particular person (10). Instead, the impersonal manifests itself “through recognizable particularities—through actions, emotions, properties, on through what is actual and even at times visible” in order to make “being palpable” (10). Our physical selves and all that comprises the “Not Me” in Nature then become the components in a mechanism through which the impersonal can manifest itself in order to demonstrate its power. In Cameron’s context, the impersonal manifests itself through particular persons which in turn makes it recognizable and explains Emerson’s claim in “The Over-Soul” that though we do not possess ourselves, we do know that we “are much more” (391). This process of manifestation likewise makes being a particular person possible even if that person mistakes the characteristics of being as his or her own. And because the impersonal requires a manifestation, and a particular manifestation, it then becomes possible to have multiple persons, who all have unique identities, wills, desires, etc. which distinguish them from one another and from the impersonal.
Cameron’s conceptions of the “the Over-soul” provide more concrete borders for what constitutes the subject and the object in the original relationship to the universe without discounting the fluidity between the two that is fundamental to Emerson’s explication of this relation. The notion of the impersonal, rather than the ambiguity found in Emerson’s terms like unity, Nature, Soul, the Eternal One, the Over-soul, and God, more clearly articulates the ways in which this larger force can create, occupy, and be occupied by the physical person who hopes to dissolve back into it. More importantly, this conceptualization helps to better define the person’s inability to achieve such a dissolution because though the impersonal “is associated with the individual” that individual can have “no proprietary relation to it” (10). The greatest limitation of particular persons, for both Emerson and Cameron, is the mind’s tendency to “falsely identify” the powers of the impersonal “that inhabit it” (10). She argues,

The mistake lies in associating the Over-Soul with the self and particularly with the voluntary self. It is associated with the person, but not as his property and not through his will [. . .] These activities misrepresent the person not because they are palpable [. . .] but rather because they are limited. In pointing to something other than the experiential world of the fragmentary […]. Emerson is not mystically gesturing to an alien nature that he domesticates, converting the not-me into something with recognizable contours. The Over-Soul always remains other, while all the time being all-accessible. In fact it is precisely the point that we cannot relinquish our difference from it. [. . .] It is a matter of not-willing, of seeing what we are when the will stops executing its claims. [. . .] In seeing one’s true alliance is not with will or desire, not with anything piecemeal, but rather with the totality, the personal becomes the impersonal. [. . .] Thus in acceding to
the impersonal, one is beyond emotions, beyond the idea that identity is fixed.

(10-11)

In other words, the greatest mistake made by the person who embodies a manifestation of the impersonal as personal or particular—Emerson’s “Not Me” and the corporeal and mental limitations inherent within it—is to attribute and then to claim possession of these features as its own, independent creation. The mistake is for the subject to claim to possess or have control over its identity, which makes it possible for one to identify as a subject in the first place. Instead, though always “other” than the impersonal, the particular person is part of that larger and total whole. It is not that the impersonal evades the particular for Cameron, or for Emerson for that matter, but rather that the particular person prevents his or her own access to original relation by maintaining a proprietary claim on the self and its identity. For both Cameron and Emerson, acquiring access to the impersonal means to de-possess ourselves of our own subjectivity, which means to relinquish the knowledge of ourselves as selves and to sacrifice the will that governs that self. To recognize and know the impersonal seems to imply that we must not only relinquish the idea that our identities are our own, but also that identity belongs in a system of life that requires a fixed notion of ourselves and our lives.

So while the impersonal may be all-accessible precisely because it is “other” than the person and because it exists outside of and beyond the systemization that the person deems a requirement to live in the world, the particular person cannot acquire access because it is contained in what Cameron as well as other critics like Cavell and George Kateb refer to as the “social” system of life (Cameron 11). Within this system, to be a person means to have possession and control over one’s particularity or fixed identity and to exercise that particularity through desire, will, and motivation in order to participate actively within that system. In order
for a person to participate in the social world that comprises life, the person must have a particular identity thus allowing them to find a place within that system. To escape the system in order to come into the possession of the original relation (thus dissolving into the impersonal) means to relinquish one’s particularity and personality. That relinquishment comes with consequences: it also means that the person must give up its position within the social and stop participating in that system, which in turn means to stop “being” within the system of life. To knowingly give up the possession of one’s identity then means to cease to know oneself as a self. This logic causes one to wonder what happens to persons in the world when they stop being and acting as particular selves?

2.3 Suffering Subjects and Double Consciousness

Because the subject’s greatest limitation in accessing the impersonal or arriving at the original relation that Emerson calls for in *Nature* is the very thing that allows us to desire and strive toward that relationship in the first place, what emerges is not a problem of access or attainment, but rather one of consciousness. The problem of how to attain an original relationship shifts into a problem of consciousness particularly in later essays such as “Nominalist and Realist,” “Fate,” and “Illusions.” More specifically, what emerges as a problem of consciousness in these essays is a problem with what I argue is the subject’s ability to know itself in two ways simultaneously: first as a particular person with a distinct identity who must participate in the social system of life in order to exist, and second as an entity that belongs to and of a larger and impersonal whole. In my readings of these essays, I call this a problem of *double consciousness* and demonstrate that it is a problem that for Emerson, and the other American authors who follow him, has no resolution but instead only painful and often fatal consequences for its subject.
Cameron, for instance, argues that the impersonal can be understood in three ways. First, “it is something that appears through bodies (as visible in the eyes) as a critique of the personal.” Second, it manifests through “moods and mental states—the very moods that we might suppose to define our individual persons, but when scrutinized in Emerson’s representations rather contradict the idea of the personal (though not necessarily the idea of the individual, since one could be individuated by mental states that were not properly one’s own).” And third, “the impersonal is associated not with the body and not with the affective life of the mind but rather with a law [...] to which the ‘self’ adheres, disregarding as it were the conditions of body and mind” (14-15). Examining the second understanding in particular, Cameron notes “that in an essay like ‘Nominalist and Realist’ the impersonal calls into question the very self as a stable or predictable entity, for the moods that define our perceptions, beliefs, and thoughts are in effect only contingent on circumstance” (14). Because the impersonal uses mental states and moods to embody itself through the person, the person is governed through the moods and mental states of the impersonal. The physical body and the consciousness assigned to that body react, or rather live as a particular person within the system of life, according to the governance of the impersonal which controls it even if this iteration of the self thinks or believes it governs its own actions.

To understand as well as to accept the existence of the impersonal in this manner disrupts traditional conceptions of the subject in addition to how the subject becomes aware of itself. The distinction between the subject and the object in the original relation towards which we are all striving then becomes a distinction between the impersonal and the particular persons it governs, which can be reconfigured as a problem of consciousness. As Cameron points out, Emerson’s “Nominalist and Realist” calls into question the stability or fixed nature of particular identity
because all persons are subject to the law of the impersonal. Challenging the human or personal idea that an individual controls his own life through moods, emotions, and desires reveals that the stakes for Emerson’s original relation to the universe have more to do with how we know and understand that universe as particulars than how we actually form the relation. The real problem in achieving a relationship to the impersonal is an epistemological problem about how we come to know and define ourselves. Knowledge, and selfknowledge more importantly, represent the “solution in hieroglyphic to those inquires we put” in order to “enjoy an original relation” to the universe and to escape our past and current “condition” of life (Nature 7).

Emerson opens “Nominalist and Realist” with “I cannot often enough say, that a man is only a relative and representative nature. Each is a hint of the truth, but far enough from being that truth, which yet he quite newly and inevitably suggests to us” (575). He goes on to say that while “man momentarily stands for thought” he “will not bear examination” and that “we have such exorbitant eyes, that on seeing the smallest arc, we complete the curve” by filling in the blanks—using what our consciousness gives us based on particular and personal experience and knowledge (575). Yet, “when the curtain is lifted from the diagram which it seemed to veil, we are vexed to find that no more was drawn than just the fragment of the arc which we first beheld” (575). On one hand, this is reminiscent of the Emersonian dilemma found in “Experience”: a particular person cannot get at or to the thing it desires even when the person thinks he or she has arrived at it. Despite our best attempts, our efforts—because they are based in a subjective and thus false reality—to see or to know an object, the world, and even other persons are often fictions created by the consciousness contained within the physical person. When a person moves successfully forward in order to advance on the arc of life, or to get closer to the object,
he is disappointed to find that what the consciousness projected into the unseen space is nonexistent and that he is not any closer to that object than he was upon first seeing the fragment.

Ostensibly, the real problem, however, is that an individual seems to naturally—that is to say without foresight or without real effort—fill in the blanks or make determinations based upon what they know. The person sees an object and creates its truth based on previous experience which has yielded a subjective form of knowing the world and contains the object as well as knowledge derived from personal feelings, desires, etc. This knowledge though is only representative: it represents the individual person on one hand, and on the other hand, a part of the truth it is trying to create and thus know. Yet, in keeping with the logic of the impersonal, the individual is doomed to fail because consciousness is unable to do anything more than know the fraction or particle of the truth for which the particular body and mind are mere representative surfaces.

Emerson goes on to argue that “Human life and its persons are poor empirical pretensions” and that “We are amphibious creatures, weaponed for two elements, having two sets of faculties, the particular and the catholic [. . .] Thus we are very sensible of an atmospheric influence in men and in bodies of men, not accounted for in an arithmetical addition of all their measurable properties” (577). This description attempts to rectify the problem that follows whenever a particular person attributes too much power to his own knowledge and thus becomes disappointed when that knowledge fails to meet his expectations or help him to arrive at any sort of truth. The particular individual, for Emerson, is conscious of his person (body, mind, etc.) while at the same time sensing (and depending on which Emerson essay one is reading, only able to sense at specific and fleeting moments rather than all at once) the power of the impersonal contained or residing within him.
Although a particular person may at moments have an awareness of his dual nature—an individual and a constituent part of something larger like the impersonal—he can only act and know according to the personal even as the personal is controlled and governed by the impersonal. Emerson still believes that despite this debilitating limitation, persons can still “burst into universal power” that “life will be simpler when we live at the centre, and flout the surfaces” (580). To live at the centre is to accept and simultaneously know and act as both an individualized person and a mere facet of the impersonal. This dual knowledge, however, presents the impossible challenge of relieving the self of the burden of self-hood: that is to say the individual must acknowledge that its particularity is not its own but a byproduct of something much larger. To do this proves difficult for any individual because, according to Emerson’s own logic, the person must disavow the notion that he has any control or possession of his own consciousness. For a person to do this is to rid himself of the very thing that he knows himself to be and that provides him with a position and function in the world.

In “Nominalist and Realist,” Emerson goes on to say that he wishes to speak “with all respect of persons” but that “they melt so fast into each other, that they are like grass and trees, and it needs an effort to treat them as individuals” and that as a result “he must pinch” himself to “keep awake” (580). Not only do particulars tend to bore Emerson in this essay, he also cannot keep up with their particularity because they all eventually, and here quite rapidly, dissolve back into the universe for which they are already apart. “Nature will not be Buddhist,” he argues, “she resents generalizing, and insults the philosopher in every moment with a million fresh particulars” and that persons may be “one thing,” but that “nature is one thing and the other thing, in the same moment” (581). Nature will “not remain orbed in” any one particular person’s thought, but “rushes into persons; and when each person inflamed to a fury of personality, would
conquer all things to his poor crotchets, she raises up against him another person, and by many persons incarnates again a sort of whole” (581). In other words, the impersonal will destroy or devastate the person that ascribes too much power to his own particularity—his corporeal body, his personality, his consciousness—by inhabiting or residing within another particular or “Not Me.” Yet, if the impersonal here is one thing and the other thing and the impersonal (again in this essay) generates the personal, why would the particular not be allowed to know itself as a piece of that impersonal and why would the impersonal punish the individual who took ownership and control of his or her person as both are part and particle of each other anyway? This essay brings us back to the original paradoxes and tensions of the early essays.

And again, Emerson offers no real insight except to say “it is not the intention of nature that we should live by general views” and that if we were not “the victims of these details” of life and “if we saw the real from hour to hour,” we “should have been burned and frozen long ago” (581). He continues,

If we were not kept among surfaces, everything would be large and universal. [. . .] The universality being hindered in its primary form, comes in the secondary form of all sides: the points come in succession to the meridian, and by the speed of rotation, a new whole is formed. Nature keeps herself whole, and her representation complete in the experience of each mind. [. . .] Whatever does not concern us, is concealed from us. As soon as a person is no longer related to our present well-being, he is concealed, or dies, as we say. Really, all things and persons are related to us, but according to our nature, they act on us not at once, but in succession. We are made aware of their presence one at a time. (584)
This passage, perhaps, most clearly elucidates why the distinction between the particular and the impersonal is actually not one of access, but one of consciousness. Because the particular individual is not wholly separate from the impersonal, and because the partiality or particularity of the person is also necessary to and for the power and existence of the impersonal, the totality of the impersonal cannot be fully known by its constituent parts—the personal cannot comprehend the “real” or the “truth,” it cannot do more than be a mere representation because of the already confounding relation between the two. Yet, persons tend to think of this representation as complete. Our consciousness, then, because of the power of the impersonal, becomes limited to what it can know and experience in the physical world rather than what may be possible outside of that world and its own physical person. The impersonal must be composed of many parts who only know their partiality rather than their contribution to the whole. According to this logic, the individual believes he knows and possesses himself as a type of defense mechanism against the impersonal so that he may function and participate in the system of life that the impersonal requires of its particular parts.

Emerson confirms this in “Illusions” when he says that “space and time” are simple forms of thought and the “material world is hypothetical and withal our pretension of property and even of self-hood” fades because “even our thoughts are not finalities” (947). In this essay, penetrating “the law of our shifting moods” is inconsequential because the moods we feel and the personality we claim “differ as all or nothing” and are merely an “eggshell which coops us in” (947). Emerson goes on to say that “the illusion of time” allows the that the “world exist[s] from thought” but that “thought is daunted in the presence of the world” because “what seems the succession of thought is only the distribution of wholes into causal series” (946). The consciousness “sees that every atom carries the whole of Nature; that the mind opens to
omnipotence; that, in the endless striving and ascents, the metamorphosis is entire, so that the soul doth not know itself in its own act” (946). Thought, time, and personality are all constructs that require forward motion—successive living—despite the fact that this forward motion ultimately keeps the particular person from whole or full knowledge of the impersonal as well as the self. One’s person or “self-hood” is continuously, to use Emerson’s terminology, fading as the eggshell grows old and begins to crack. The limitations of the person shift and transition with the succession of life and as a result are confined by new ways of knowing. What we believe and what we think of as final or complete is not, but rather in a transitional state that keeps the impersonal in motion; and though this transition moves us forward, it does not allow for complete knowledge of the self or of the impersonal because time is an illusion and anything not necessary to us suffers concealment.

Consequently, the impersonal protects the person by prohibiting one’s ability to possess knowledge of the “centre of things.” Instead, the individual flouts about surfaces of personality in order to serve its purpose in the composition of the impersonal. While fleeting moments may bring a sense of something more as in “Experience,” to fully know and understand the whole would destroy the person. If all the parts of the whole are non-existent, so too is the whole. The impersonal, like one’s original relation to the universe, must be revealed gradually and in small moments. But this too, as the passage above demonstrates, has troubling consequences for the person. These consequences appear in the form of concealment—concealment of other persons and objects that are not necessary to the individual in his or her current state of being. The fact that these other particularities are concealed does not mean they no longer exist or are no longer necessary to the impersonal or even to particular persons, but they are no longer temporally necessary to particular personalities that make up the impersonal. Moreover, because life is lived
successively—as in “Experience” when we try to move upward on the never-ending staircase—when the other personalities are concealed for the benefit of a particular person to participate in the various systems of life, concealment may feel like or imply a type of death to the personal. This concealment can feel like death for the loss of the personal that moves in and out of a particular individual’s life, but more importantly the particular individual affected by this movement of other persons and objects must adapt to the changes. This adaptation requires a shift in perspective and in how one knows and understands the world, relationships, etc. As one shifts one’s thinking to reflect his current state of existence, this shift in thought requires a corresponding shift in consciousness. To know oneself differently is to know oneself in a new way and thus requires the letting go of previous knowledge of the self and its way of living in the world to reposition oneself in his existing state. Concealment renders concurrent states of knowledge of the self—as it previously and currently exists—impossible. Likewise, to live life successively means that a repositioning, perhaps even repurposing of the self must occur: that is to experience the impersonal in its “secondary form” and to feel its power from a new and different side in an effort to ultimately reach the center or the “primary state” of being. The consequences also produce a figurative death for the person—to move forward and to accept concealment of other persons and objects not necessary to the present and thus to know the self differently is to devastate previous versions of that self that are no longer necessary or relevant. It could even be argued that the impersonal possesses, destroys, and then repossesses the particular person and imbues him or her with new motivations, feelings, and knowledge.

The ideas inherent in this passage from “Nominalist and Realist” suggest that though we enjoy a limited capacity to know the impersonal and that those limitations are not prohibitive but rather vital to both particular persons and to the impersonal exposes a fundamental problem of
consciousness. The essay argues that “If we cannot make voluntary and conscious steps in the admirable science of universals, let us see the parts wisely, and infer the genius of nature from the best particulars with a becoming charity” (585). Emerson concludes that “the end and the means, the gamester and the game, --life is made up of the intermixture and reaction of these to amicable powers, whose marriage appears beforehand monstrous, as each denies and tends to abolish the other. We must reconcile the contradictions as we can, but their discord and concord introduce wild absurdities in our thinking and speech” (585). While Emerson may describe these two experiences of consciousness as “amicable,” he also recognizes the inconsistencies and contradictions caused by an impersonal that gives consciousness only to limit that consciousness’s ability to wholly and concurrently know itself as subject as well as every other thing within that subject’s world. So while an individual is “justified in his individuality” because of these limitations, he is so because he is working out in a “disguise” the “universal problem” assigned to him by the universe. (586).

Since the impersonal rushes into persons on all sides successively rather than all at once, the “Not Me” and all that it contains—consciousness, corporeality, etc.—is erratic and evolving rather than stable and fixed. In “Illusions” Emerson says, “In this kingdom of illusions we grope eagerly for stays and foundations. There is none”; instead, “we transcend the circumstance continually” and that particular lives are “identical” and differ only in our “manipulations [. . .] or in our thoughts” (949). Emerson makes this point again in “Fate” when he says, “In different hours, a man represents each of several of his ancestors, as if there were seven or eight of us rolled up in each man’s skin [. . .] and they constitute the variety of notes for that new piece of music which his life is” (773). The features said to compromise a person are not identical and unique to the self nor are they fixed to a particular self—all persons, because they are possessed
and inhabited by the impersonal, are the same and only differ in how they enact the consciousness that the impersonal provides. Identity then has the ability to alter several times in the course of a lifetime as a person attempts to move successively towards the impersonal until the person dissolves completely into the original relation. I think, however, that “Nominalist and Realist” and “Illusions” suggest that individuals are subjected to moments of overlap in which they are aware not only that “they are so much more” as Emerson says in “The Over-Soul,” but that they perceive and recognize themselves as the impersonal enacts concealment and succession.

These moments of overlap are what I am calling double consciousness, and I am using the term to refer specifically to a person’s ability to know themselves simultaneously in two ways. As the idea of double consciousness emerges in Emerson’s later essays, it is important to note that for him it seems to be an ideological problem that prevents a person’s access to an original relation. However, I argue that by articulating the problems of an individual person trying to know himself in two ways in one world, despite the fluidity of that world, what Emerson conceptualizes is actually a condition that individuals suffer as they participate in life while attempting to achieve an original relation to the universe or a full and comprehensive knowledge of the self.

Emerson’s writing often tends to posit dual modes of knowing; his ideas about both the individual and the impersonal often appear as binary oppositions that simultaneously depend upon and antagonize one another. He does, however, specifically employ the term double-consciousness twice in his writing. In his 1842 lecture “The Transcendentalist,” he attempts to define the differences between what he calls “Materialists and Idealists.” He says that “Materialists” believe in “experience” and think “from the senses” while “Idealists” rely on
“consciousness” and “perceive that the senses are not final” but rather give us “representations of things” despite being unable to really know what the things themselves are (193). Though these features differentiate the two, Emerson concludes that “every materialist will be an idealist; but an idealist can never go backward to be a materialist” (193). The idealist can never go backwards for two reasons. First, we must live a life of succession as previously discussed; second, once the materialist becomes an idealist he has escaped the confines of the “Not Me,” which includes the consciousness that allowed him to attribute meaning to his sensory experience. Emerson says of the idealist that “His thought,--that is the Universe. His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself, centre alike of him and of them, and necessitating him to regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to the aforesaid Unknown Centre of him” (195). This passage suggests that the idealist cannot go backwards to the thinking of a materialist because he has already sacrificed his consciousness of the personal in order to find what is here called the “Unknown Centre.” By sacrificing individual consciousness, the materialist dissipates and no longer exists for the idealist.

Emerson goes on to advocate “patience” for the materialist, because though this individual knows the world through what he senses, he also implies that the materialist senses something beyond sensory experience is possible. This sense results in what he calls double consciousness. At the end of the essay, he says, “These two stages of thought diverge in every moment and stand in wild contrast”—the thinking of the materialist and that of the idealist—and the “worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other, never meet and measure each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and
paradise; and, with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves” (205-06).

Emerson’s optimism, typical of much of his early writing, appears in “The Transcendentalist” despite his acknowledgement that recognizing or knowing oneself in two ways is irreconcilable. One cannot know oneself as both a materialist and an idealist simultaneously, in other words, though one will occupy each position at different points in life. This essay and these particular passages are noteworthy not only because they include Emerson’s first uses of the term double consciousness, but also because “The Transcendentalist” starts to define the problem of relation between subject and object and explore questions about our orientation towards the universe in terms of consciousness. Emerson compartmentalizes individual consciousness into two distinct ways of knowing and existing in the world. The individual can and must know the world through experience as a materialist, but that experience is limited and “subjective” so that each person will know the world differently.

Though the terms “Idealist” and “Materialist” take other forms, the emergence of knowing the self in two ways can be seen throughout Emerson’s writing. However, Emerson again uses the term double consciousness in the 1860 essay “Fate.” In contemplating “How shall I live?” Emerson writes, “One key, one solution to the mysteries of the human condition, one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge, exists, the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness. A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and public nature” (769, 792). As in “The Transcendentalist” an individual’s capacity to know the world is dualistic, if not pluralistic, so that a person must alternate between what here appears as the public and the private self. We cannot simultaneously be both our public and private selves,
which is to say we cannot know ourselves as public and private entities at the same time—and must alternate between the two accordingly.

These two iterations of double consciousness simplify the problems of consciousness that I have been working to articulate; however, they also help to establish the variety of binary oppositions that Emerson uses throughout his writing as a trope for human consciousness and in its ability to reconcile multiple versions of self-knowledge. This trope, at its core, is a mimetic representation of the difficulties of trying to attain an original relation to the universe if one is composed of and by that universe. The limitations imposed on human consciousness prevent a true state of double consciousness whereby an individual knows himself in two ways at once (regardless of what form that knowledge may take: public self vs. private self; past self vs. present self; Idealist vs. Materialist; Nominalist vs. Realist; etc.). For one to achieve double consciousness, he or she would reach the center of the whole and see him- or herself as part and particle of the impersonal. The individual would see the impersonal as both creator and creation and as such would dissolve into the totality or wholeness of that knowledge: the person would cease to exist as his particularity would transcend the confinement of existence within the physical body of the person and the physical world. Put more simply, to attain a state of double-consciousness, requires a sacrifice of particularity and personality and thus a cessation of life in the corporeal world. To know the impersonal in its wholeness means to no longer require the “disguise” of particularity.

Emerson expresses the dilemma of double consciousness most eloquently in “Fate.” Early in the essay, he notes that the individual comes “upon immoveable limitations” which are the restraints imposed on the personal (769). He says, “the population of the world is a conditional population, not the best, but the best that could live now” and that “Man is the arch
machine, of which all these shifts drawn from himself are toy models. He helps himself on each emergency by copying or duplicating his own structure, just so far as the need is” (775-76).

Nature, or the impersonal, on the other hand “does not cosset of pamper us” and does not “mind drowning a man or a woman” (773). The impersonal is the “immoveable limitation” which keeps the individual as a representation and conditional to his times. However, for Emerson “a man’s power is hooped in by necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc” (778). Fate, or nature, in this essay is the circumstance of life that a person cannot escape and cannot reconcile despite his attempts to see and to know the arc as in “Nominalist and Realist.”

Yet, Emerson says that the limitations of the person “refine as the soul purifies” which implies that as the person lives and participates as a particularity in the system of life, the limitations though still present, become less “brute and barbarous” and bring us closer to a union with the impersonal (778). The individual person, despite being composed from and of the impersonal, thus serves to “antagonize Fate” with power as he chooses to live life in succession. To live as oneself, to live the disguise of personality at the will of the impersonal, is also to weaken the constraints of that same particularity. Emerson goes on to argue that “nobody was ever cunning enough to find the two ends” of the “knot of nature” (787). When the “knots” that bind the person begin to loosen, the person gains the possibility of orienting him- or herself towards the original relation. Emerson contends that “If Fate follows and limits power, power attends and antagonizes Fate” by “a dragging together of the poles of the Universe” (779).

Converted into a problem of consciousness, as an individual lives and sheds versions of himself that are no longer necessary, the distance between himself as a particle that composes the impersonal grows smaller—he gets closer to knowing himself as a constituent part of the whole
that also differentiated him from it in the first place. Power—to live—is the path towards double consciousness even if double consciousness cannot be wholly accessed as long as one still only identifies himself as particular person.

Rather, man must “confront fate with fate” so that “our atoms,” or personalities, “are as savage in resistance” (780). By acting out or possessing our particularity, even though that particularity is not created by us, is “The revelation of Thought” that can take “man out of servitude into freedom” so that “We rightly say of ourselves, we were born, and afterward we were born again, and many times” (781). Thinking, knowing, and being in a world that is not concealed from us draws us closer to a complete or full knowledge “so important, that the new forgets the old” in order for the “inward eye” to open “to the Unity in things” so that “It is not in us so much as we are in it” (781). “Successive experiences” then allow the individual person the opportunity to shed outdated forms of self-knowledge and to harness new power in order to continue to exist as a particular within the system of the impersonal.

Emerson says that “relation and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always” so that the impersonal is nothing more than a “name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought;--for causes which are unpenetrated” (784). Even when concealed and unknowable to the person, the particular still maintains a connection and relation to the impersonal. The problem here, however, in terms of consciousness and self-consciousness is that despite our advancement in transcending the polarity and disparity between the particular and the impersonal, particular persons, no matter how refined or fractured their limitations are or how much power they harness through new modes of knowledge necessary for specific temporal moments in their life, cannot unite these polarities and still maintain the dichotomy necessitated for this connection or relation. Emerson argues,
Fate involves the melioration. No statement of the Universe can have any soundness, which does not admit its ascending effort. The direction of the whole, and of the parts, is toward benefit, and in proportion to health. Behind every individual closes organization [. . .] Liberation of the will from the sheaths and clogs of organization which he has outgrown, is the end and aim of this world. (786)

To be free of the confinement of selfhood, as previously stated, is the end goal of all particular persons. Liberation from all thoughts and thus consciousness and the power Emerson advocates in “Fate” becomes the reason to live life in succession. The challenge, however, as Emerson notes in earlier essays but specifically emphasizes in “Fate” is the idea that this liberation can happen concurrently with the experience of personhood. Although Emerson notes that there is no point where a person cannot find a thread or connection between fate sliding into freedom and freedom sliding into fate because “Nature is intricate, overlapped, interweaved, and endless,” he also notes in “Fate” as well as in his other work that the eye cannot fully open wide enough to recognize and thus know this connection (787). The personal in its false possession of will and knowledge functions in a type of “long sleep” over the course of a lifetime and does not awake until what characterizes the individuated person disappears completely (787). There is no co-existence or co-knowledge (despite the fact that the particular person acts as a container for the impersonal) of the particular and the impersonal. There are only moments of transition that initiate the process of double consciousness, even though full double consciousness cannot be fully realized.

Emerson states that “Every solid in the universe is ready to become fluid on the approach of the mind, and the power to flux it is the measure of the mind. If the wall remain adamant, it accuses the want of thought” (790). Ironically enough, consciousness and knowledge, part of
what distinguishes particular persons from the impersonal and therefore keeps the person from wholly actualizing knowledge of the impersonal, is the one tool an individual has to eventually realize the connection between himself and this centrifugal force. When one does not allow himself fluidity in his thought and action, when he does not allow his person to adapt to what the universe reveals or conceals at a given moment, when he ascribes too much possession to his person, he prohibits forward motion in order to gain access to the impersonal: he remains static and fixed within the system of life. And this, for Emerson, is tragic in spite of the fact that to move forward means to break the barriers established by the impersonal simply for the impersonal to destroy the person. Emerson concludes “Fate” by affirming the impossibility of a reconciliation or amelioration between the personal and the impersonal, the subject and the object, while an individual is alive and conscious. Yet, he trivializes the destruction of the personal because man is “to rally on his relation to the Universe, which his ruin benefits” and eventually leaving the “daemon who suffers” (personality) is to “take sides with the Deity who secures universal benefit” from his loss (793). Persons should “build altars to the Blessed Unity,” he argues, “which holds nature and souls in perfect solution, and compels every atom to serve an universal end” (793).

Though now put in different terms, “Fate” articulates the nuances of the tensions produced by Emerson’s call for an original relation to the universe in *Nature*. These tensions are largely relegated to a person’s ability to know the self as concurrent subject and object. To possess this knowledge would be to achieve a state of double consciousness, which according to Emerson’s own logic is an impossibility so long as the subject retains possession of the self as a subject that differs from other persons as well as the universe. In simpler terms, dual consciousness, though a state each particular person tries to achieve throughout life, comes with
the expectation that the individual person must sacrifice consciousness and the particular identity that he or she has come to possess in order to participate in life. Double consciousness thus mandates the destruction of the person; and for Emerson this is all for the benefit of the larger, impersonal whole.

Two problems arise from this line of thinking. First, because identity is not stable and fixed, but remains in a constant state of flux that moves with the impersonal’s concealment of other persons as well as objects, those who aspire to double consciousness must sacrifice how they know and identify themselves several times over. On one hand, this sacrifice of the self benefits not only the impersonal, but also the person as he or she gets closer to the state of double consciousness and achieves an original relation to the universe. On the other hand, to reconstruct knowledge of one’s self over and over again means to dismiss and destroy versions of one’s identity. The ideological benefits of this process may seem to outweigh any consequences, but for an actual person experiencing and participating in the various systems that organize and govern a practical life, this process necessitates continual, vertiginous shifts in identity. This fluidity makes functioning in a tangible life impractical. It would require that all of the organized systems in a practical world (government, relationships, etc.) recognize and make allowances for the fluidity of personhood so that the individual could continually reposition himself within those systems without devastating consequences either to the individual or the system. Emerson thus requires a type of double consciousness from both the person and the system—both need to adjust and recognize change as it occurs. In the real world, where life consists of multitudes of particular personalities and often strict governance to maintain order and function, this is impractical. Either the individual and/or the system in which it participates will experience disruption through this shift. The disruption will then have consequences that directly or
indirectly impact the particular person or the other personalities that also participate in that system. This sort of successive movement and constant re-knowing of one’s self, though a performance of the impersonal’s power and will, never escapes real-world implications. These implications are destructive, and sometimes even fatal, to the particular individual who must undergo a transformation of the self. As such, living life in succession devastates the individual—even as living a successive life also works to protect us from this devastation—and thus becomes a condition suffered by individual persons rather than just an ideological goal.

Second, not only does the state of being that constantly works toward reinvention of the self pose practical consequences in life, the actual state of double consciousness once achieved literally requires the loss of consciousness, the physical body, and all of the other distinguishing features of the particular. In other words, a person must cease to live in order to have complete or full knowledge of the way the impersonal works throughout life: that is, to have an original relation or to know the self as both subject and object is to stop being a particular person, is to die. The person must fully sacrifice the self in order to dissolve back into the universe. And though the impersonal generates new particulars according to Emerson, relinquishing one’s personhood seems a counterintuitive goal for consciousness and, for many, an intolerable account of what it means to live.

Understanding the tensions produced in Emerson’s writing as a problem of consciousness and more particularly in terms of a type of double consciousness not only emphasizes the consequences such a state of knowing renders to individual personhood, it also helps to understand the ways in which other American authors interrogate the logic of relationality between a particular person and something like the impersonal. More particularly, in the moments of transition, where an individual finds himself as close to double consciousness as he
can possibly get, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and Robert Penn Warren nuance what a constant redefinition of self and identity means for the individual as well as the devastating effects such a state of being can have on both individual lives and the worlds that they inhabit.

Emerson’s call for an original relation to the universe was no doubt familiar to Emily Dickinson and his influence on her thinking has been examined extensively by scholars. Although Dickinson never explicitly refers to this call or to Emerson himself in her poems, her poetry experiments indirectly with the problems Emerson faces in distinguishing between a subject and an object in order to achieve what he calls “original relation.” Dickinson posits this relationship as one between the human and the natural—or what Emerson would call Nature, the Over-Soul, the universe, etc., and what I have termed earlier the impersonal. Determining the relationship between Emerson’s subject and object allows Dickinson to make transparent what Emerson leaves opaque. Dickinson often stages contacts between human subjects and natural objects, in other words, that privilege consciousness even at the expense of Emersonian impersonality.

However, in order to position double consciousness as a condition of human experience, Dickinson establishes a metaphor of absorption and containment that demonstrates the limitations of human consciousness in a temporal and finite world. This metaphor effectively creates a space of unknowability or indeterminacy that looks surprisingly similar to Emerson’s conceptualization of double consciousness; in fact, Dickinson, through this indeterminacy,

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depicts double consciousness as a condition with deleterious consequences for the individual who suffers from it. Dickinson’ “poetry of consciousness,” to borrow E. Thomas Finan’s term, posits double consciousness not only as a condition that requires suffering through the sacrifice of self, but also as an unrelenting sensation experienced throughout one’s life. Because Dickinson’s poetry takes the idea of double consciousness and transforms it into a lived experience, she is able to experiment with the condition as a way for persons to test their relation to the world that exists outside of and beyond physical personhood and particular identity. But these tests involve a distinct violence to the person performing them and often emphasize the restrictive nature of consciousness.

3.1 Feeling Consciousness

Poems such as “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind” (FR 867) and “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (FR 340) take the Emersonian idea of double consciousness and imagine what it might look and feel like for a person actually experiencing it.¹⁵ More particularly, these two poems demonstrate the pain subjects undergo as they enter into this condition. “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind” reads:

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind -
As if my Brain had split -
I tried to match it - Seam by Seam -
But could not make them fit –

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before -
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound -
Like Balls - opon a Floor –

Because we tend to associate the brain and the mind as symbolic of consciousness and our ability to think, Dickinson’s speaker demonstrates what the psychological tension characteristic of double consciousness feels like as the individual starts to enter into this transitional state. Helen Vendler notes that the splitting of the “Brain” occurs because it is forced “to contain more than it can bear” (357). The experience of double consciousness necessitates a splitting, not of the physical brain, but of the mind as it requires a repositioning or expansion of the bounds of consciousness. In this moment of expansion, Dickinson’s speaker becomes severed, or cleaved, from the self. E. Miller Budick argues that this cleaving process achieves “true” meaning of selfhood. He states that once this true or complete meaning—knowledge of the self—has been reached that “the supposedly analogical halves of the brain can no longer be made to ‘fit’ together [. . .] The knowledge that is contained between the halves is not, the narrator discovers, a synthesis or a compromise between two separate parts” (234). I would counter that “true meaning” cannot be wholly reached so long as the individual is alive, but rather only felt or experienced in fleeting moments; yet these moments fracture or split the consciousness. When the speaker attempts to seam together the fractured portions of her psyche, she repossess her consciousness and returns to a temporal life.

Once Budick’s moment of “true meaning” vanishes, the individual is left to try to heal or repair the fracture such a moment produced. The speaker here cannot “match” the fragments that result from the “Cleaving,” that the fragmented consciousness cannot expand to incorporate “true meaning” of the self because the self exists in a physical and temporal world: so long as the mind is contained by a physical and active brain—essentially the body of the person—piecing together the consciousness “Seam by Seam” is impossible. To reach the whole version of self Budick finds in this poem would mean that the fractured psyche would match and it would be seamless.
The inability to match the fragments, and the remaining seams, like bruises or scars, indicate the remnants of a fracture or a dispossession. Once a new version of knowledge is made apparent to an individual consciousness, the individual in possession of that consciousness cannot return or re-possess wholly the old version of the self as only fragments remain.

The second stanza makes this clear as the speaker notes that she tries to bind “The thought behind” with “the thought before.” In other words, the individual with a fractured mind tries to piece together previous versions of the self made available to consciousness with current versions but also future versions. Sharon Cameron notes the importance of temporality in the poem when she reads the last stanza: “The rupture of temporality depicted as if beginning, middle, and end of ‘Sequence’ were a circumstantial rather than integral order, an arrangement that cannot be gleaned out of context, suggests so much distrust of the temporal scheme [. . .] that we translate its own past into a present or continuous action” (164). This, I think, further emphasizes the restrictive and confining nature of human consciousness. Because the individual experiencing the transitory state of double consciousness cannot grasp the condition to assimilate the particular with the impersonal completely, and because this condition necessitates a fracturing of the consciousness that was previously available to the individual, it seems only natural that once returned to the temporal world in which we live the now fractured consciousness of the person would distrust its temporal and physical confines. To put this problem another way: how can one trust conventional self-knowledge after glimpsing the possibility of something larger and greater like infinitude or the impersonal, or after becoming aware that the same self cannot contain that greater force, but still must experience the pain of trying to attain it? The return to temporality and the confines of one’s own particularity, despite
the new expanse of the consciousness, only exacerbates the confusing and painful ramifications not only of experiencing double consciousness but also of simply being a person.

The attempts to join past versions of the self with current and potential versions of self are not only impossible but also produce anxiety as the simile of “Sequence ravelled out of Sound-/Like Balls - opon a Floor - ” suggests. The person’s inability to order versions of identity, or what he has perceived as his identity,—past, present, and future—in a sequential order prevents the desired totality of knowledge or complete assimilation with the impersonal. This inability makes the possibility of full assimilation questionable and requires the particular individual to take it on faith that such a relation (or immersion into the infinitude as it appears in Dickinson’s poems) is ultimately achievable even if that relation requires the sacrifice of self. In other words, once a self regains possession of its consciousness, that consciousness now able to contain new and alternate ways of knowing in order to keep participating through the process of living cannot perceive, imagine, or experience how past, present, and future versions of the self will exist within the expanse of the impersonal. There is a cognitive dissonance between what the individual desires and what it knows as itself. Cameron confirms this when she says, “the unraveling of ‘Sequence’ is a disaster as inaudible (‘out of Sound’) as ‘Balls –’ of yarn, which cannot be heard and therefore cannot be reconstructed” (164). Instead, consciousness, unable to recreate past perceptions of self-awareness and identity, is forced to re-define and thus come to terms with new forms of self-awareness within the temporal confines of physical life.

Dickinson laments this sacrifice of self and the return to the temporal after an experience of double consciousness in “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain.” The speaker of this poem says,

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through
And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

The “Funeral” in the speaker’s “Brain” signals the moment that the consciousness becomes aware of something other than the individual identity it possesses. The funeral then symbolizes the experience of double consciousness as this transitory condition necessitates the sacrifice of one version of self-knowledge over another: when the confines of human consciousness are pushed beyond their existing limitations, the existing consciousness must figuratively die in order to make space for new forms of self-knowledge and for the person to continue participating in the temporal and physical world. This expansion and re-definition of self is the mourners “treading” about until “Sense” breaks through—the particular person is relieved from the transitional state of double consciousness and returns to sensory experience and particular identity. However, because the speaker has experienced this “Funeral” in the first place, she returns to sensory experience and self-awareness differently than before the experience of double consciousness occurred. Cameron calls this return to the sensory world “a parallel confusion between unconsciousness and death” as the “persistent downward motion of the poem”
resembles a burial” of “something in the mind” whereby the self tries to bury or reject what it saw while engaged with the condition of double consciousness (97).

The remainder of the poem explores what happens during an experience of double consciousness as the speaker hears the “Service” that sounds “like a Drum” beating until the individual’s “mind” goes “numb.” Drum beats are a system of measurement that can be used to keep time while the consciousness is disengaged from the speaker’s current self-knowledge. In the speaker’s numbness—her separation from the consciousness that she possessed prior to the “Funeral”—she can hear the funeral process and sense the gap between the two ways of knowing herself; it is within this space that full self-awareness occurs and the confines of the consciousness expand so that the speaker becomes conscious of the fact that she is “some strange Race” separate from, “wrecked” and “solitary” from the mourners and a self that can exist in the temporal sphere. When she occupies the space created by the condition of double consciousness, the speaker cannot be contained by her physical body and thus cannot exist in the temporal world; thus, she cannot exist as the self she was or in the alternate form she perceives, while in this condition. These lines demonstrate the limitations of consciousness to perceive and know the self as anything distinct from the person it embodies in the physical world.

Vendler notes that this process, which I am calling a momentary experience of double consciousness, allows Dickinson’s speaker “to name the location of her suffering.” The speaker begins “at ‘Brain’ (line 1) and mutated into ‘mind’ (line 8), then ‘Soul’ (line 10), then ‘Being’ (line 14), enumerating first a corporeal lodging, then an intellectual one, then a spiritual one, and finally a totality including all the others” (143). The suffering Vendler describes is the awareness that the individual must return to the temporal world and the physical self because the consciousness cannot grasp the totality of selfhood—a full assimilation of the particular identity
with the whole of the impersonal. Finan argues that “In Dickinson’s poems, our consignment to consciousness also means our fatedness to the possibility of disruption—to reworking and reorientation of this consciousness” (41). When the “Plank in Reason” breaks for Dickinson’s speaker, she descends back in the “World” to which she previously belonged; and though she “finished knowing” the consciousness has not stopped knowing altogether which would imply literal death, but that she has “finished knowing” both the totality of selfhood she desires, and also her previous sense of selfhood in order to reorient and re-know herself after this experience. A particular individual experiences a disruption of self-knowledge through the condition of double consciousness and this disruption results in a figurative death as the confines of the individual’s consciousness expand so that the self can come to know itself in a new, different, and more relational way to its current position in life. Identity is reconfigured from the experience of the “Funeral” in the “Brain” and from recognizing that there is space and time that exist outside of conscious experience, but that cannot be traversed by the person. The speaker ultimately mourns that she must return to selfhood and that her “Being” cannot be “but an Ear” for which to hear “all the Heavens” unless she wants to fully sacrifice her particularity.

Not only do “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind” and “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” transform the Emersonian idea of double consciousness into an actual felt experience, but they also successfully depict the violent and painful ramifications of having knowledge of the self as more than a particular identity. Moreover, they better demonstrate the temporary nature of this condition as a person must choose one sort of knowledge over the other in order to prevent a total dissolution of the particular and physical self. Budick argues that an individual “can know directly, immediately, either stasis or motion, not both” so that a person can remain in the space of double consciousness and cease to exist or to return to the confines of particularity and
consciousness in order to continue living (234). “Yet, since neither time nor eternity has absolute meaning for us and both are defined only in relation to each other,” he continues, “it is possible” and even necessary that “the two realms” remain separate and are only perceived as relational states of being (234). Because double consciousness is temporary, these poems imply the continual nature of double consciousness: a person will experience this painful state of being again and again as he or she progresses through life until the physical body deteriorates, consciousness is extinguished, and, what Emerson calls, the Soul wholly contains what was the particular. While they demonstrate the temporary and painful ramifications of the felt experience of double consciousness, they also raise questions about the ways in which consciousness is limited and consequently produces this condition.

3.2 “The one the other will contain”: The Problem of Containment and Absorption

Dickinson questions the limitations of individual consciousness through an extended metaphor of absorption and containment. In poems like “The Brain - is wider than the Sky” (FR 598) and “I thought that nature was enough” (FR 1269) she employs this metaphor to translate the problematic subject-object relationship that we find in Emerson into an experience of individual consciousness as a person struggles to ascertain knowledge or meaning of the self and the world he or she inhabits; and, it is in this struggle that we can better identify how and why both time and physicality limit consciousness. The problem of what determines the subject and the object manifests as a problem between what constitutes the human, which in Dickinson we can read as a version of Emerson’s subject, and the natural, or Emerson’s object, in “The Brain - is wider than the Sky.” For Dickinson’s speaker,

The Brain - is wider than the Sky -
For - put them side by side -
The one the other will contain
With ease - and You - beside –
The Brain is deeper than the sea -
For - hold them - Blue to Blue -
The one the other will absorb -
As Sponges - Buckets - do -

The Brain is just the weight of God -
For - Heft them - Pound for Pound -
And they will differ - if they do -
As Syllable from Sound –

Dickinson distinguishes the subject from the object by using an analogy that governs the relation between human perception—“The Brain”—and the natural world that it apprehends—“the Sky” and “the sea.” When placing human perception or consciousness alongside features of the natural, “the one the other” would “contain/With ease” because it is only through consciousness that subjects can make meaning and generate systems of measurements like the sky’s width or the sea’s depth. In the first two stanzas then, the person contains elements of the natural which exist outside of the self and its particularity. Individual consciousness contains and absorbs that which is separate from it in order to make sense of and meaning from it so that a person can thus differentiate and then possess its selfhood. Rather than understanding the differences between the subject and the object as “part and particle” of something larger as Emerson does when calling for an original relation, the first two stanzas in this poem imagine what a relation between the two might actually look like for a conscious person.

The third stanza, however, challenges how this relationship works as it equates the particular person’s perception to the “weight of God.” I am reading “God” in this poem in the same way I read it in Emerson’s writing—as a centrifugal force that governs the world—rather than as a specific religious entity and as such will refer to it as the impersonal. Because “God” symbolizes the impersonal in my reading, it generates and contains features of the natural world. In this stanza, when consciousness is placed alongside of the impersonal, the systems of
measurement in the earlier two stanzas break down as the weight of the two differs—“if they do at all”—“As Syllable from Sound.” Vendler notes that the “first two stanzas here are unremarkable in their Romantic claim that the Brain is capable of containing or absorbing knowledge, in its fullness, not only vast natural phenomena (Sky, sea) but also of the human being perceiving those phenomena [. . .] But the first two stanzas clearly exist for the sake of the third” because Dickinson abandons “metaphors of containment and absorption” to turn to the “significant power of each of her two entities: the Brain and God” (17). Vendler implies, that because these two entities show very little, if any at all, difference in weight, that the power the consciousness held by containing the natural in the first two stanzas diminishes; the particular individual’s power to apprehend the impersonal then is similar to the power the impersonal holds over particular persons. If the power of either differs, as Vendler notes, it is only through something like language because “God, through Nature, utters Sounds, but human language alone is voiced in Syllables” (18). In other words, human consciousness as it perceives and experiences the impersonal attempts to make meaning of it by articulating it through language. However, like a particular person is “part and particle” of the impersonal, the articulation that the person ascribes to the impersonal is merely syllables derived from sounds provided by the impersonal.

Dickinson here, consistent with the Emersonian logic of double consciousness, demonstrates the inextricable relation between particular persons and the larger, impersonal whole. While the first two stanzas illustrate the ways in which human consciousness tends to privilege itself through the circumscription of things outside of the self, the third stanza, because the consciousness cannot differentiate itself from the impersonal when hefted “Pound for Pound,” produces a sense of indeterminacy whereby the consciousness cannot perceive or make
meaning of the personal as separate from the impersonal. The poem establishes indeterminacy as
the power of the consciousness declines and the systems it used earlier to measure and thus
contain “the Sky” and “the sea” dissolve. Indeterminacy thus reduces the exceptionalism
produced in the first two stanzas when the consciousness was absorbing, containing, and thus
trying to make sense of and know the impersonal as distinct from the self. More importantly
though, this sense of indeterminacy better elucidates the limitations of human consciousness as it
tries to enact its power by containing the impersonal or “God,” but finds this power ineffective as
the two are equal in weight.

“I thought that nature was enough” further investigates the limitations of human
consciousness as it tries to absorb and contain something which it comprises and is comprised
by. In the first stanza, the poem opens with a transition from innocence to knowledge only made
available through a human interaction with the impersonal:

    I thought that nature was enough
    Till Human nature came
    But that the other did absorb
    - As Parallax a Flame –

This poem replicates the differentiation between the human and the natural as well as the
privileging of the human consciousness that we found in the first two stanza’s of the “The Brain
- is wider than the Sky.” The speaker believes that the natural is “enough” until consciousness, or
“Human nature” enters the equation. When the speaker becomes aware of consciousness, she
becomes aware of herself as a self and recognizes difference between herself and the natural.
Once in possession of the consciousness and the individual becomes aware of the self, he or she
taints the innocence of the natural through organization and categorization in order to know and
thus articulate the difference between all of “nature” and “Human nature.” In other words,
particular persons who are in possession of their consciousness—persons claiming an identity
and living in the temporal world—“absorb” nature “As Parallax a Flame” in order to make meaning of it. The use of “Parallax” as a simile for this absorption further produces another instance of indeterminacy that works to illustrate the confines of consciousness once possessed so that a person cannot go back to knowing that “nature was enough.”

This simile produces indeterminacy in three ways. First, the simile implies that a person may know the natural world in a variety of ways, as if through a parallax. To “absorb” something as a “Parallax does a flame,” is to see or know the thing differently dependent upon one’s position or perspective. A person may look at the same feature of the natural at different points in his or her life and see the very same object, and thus make meaning of that object, based solely on the particular moment in which they are seeing and trying to make sense of it. The features of the natural will never look the same to the individual trying to absorb it because of the temporal and linear fashion of life. According to Emersonian logic, the very process of living necessitates this variation (and variation, for Emerson, is necessary for the individual).

Second, the simile implies that the world does not look and cannot look universally the same to multiple persons. Because individual minds possess consciousness, no two persons can see or experience nature or the world in the same way. Just as consciousness allows a person to know the self as a self and thus distinguish that self from the world, consciousness also allows the person to distinguish itself from other persons. As such, consciousness makes selves distinct from one another so that when perception absorbs any thing outside of the self, that thing will be experienced, viewed, and known differently to the particular consciousness doing the absorbing. This prevents a common or collective experience or type of knowledge. The inability for multiple persons to wholly experience and know a thing in the exact same manner effectively works to create a degree of isolation among people.
Finally, the isolation between persons that the idea of absorption through a parallax creates also highlights the third way in which the simile produces a sense of indeterminacy. The speaker says “But that the other did absorb.” Though the reader may assume that “Human nature” absorbs “nature” because “nature was enough” until the consciousness entered, that assumption just replicates the human tendency to privilege the consciousness over something like the natural as in “The Brain - is wider than the Sky.” The poem itself does not specify whether nature absorbs “Human nature” or vice versa. And since no two consciousness know or experience the same thing at the same time, there can be no point of reference in order to determine what exactly does the absorbing. Because the reader is left unclear as to what or who absorbs what or who, and because the consciousness absorbs experiences differently from other consciousness’s and depends upon an individual’s place in life, the consciousness appears in this first stanza as limited and lacks the fulfillment that nature provided when it “was enough.”

The second stanza further demonstrates the limitations of consciousness and more clearly illustrates how indeterminacy produces a condition of double consciousness for a particular individual.

Of Human nature just aware
There added the Divine
Brief struggle for capacity
The power to contain
Is always as the contents
But give a Giant room
And you will lodge a Giant
And not a smaller man

On the surface, this stanza confirms the initial assumption that human consciousness has the ability to contain as the “Divine” is “added” to the consciousness that in the first stanza made the self aware. It is worth noting here that as in “The Brain - is wider than the Sky,” I am reading the “Divine” here as akin to an impersonal force that governs the world and thus acts generates and
contains the features of the natural world that appear in the poem’s initial stanza. Thus, these first
two lines complicate the earlier indeterminacy—brain or god, “Syllable” or “Sound”—by
refiguring it not as a challenge of knowing the difference between the consciousness and the
natural, but as a challenge of knowing the difference between the particular individual in
possession of the consciousness and the impersonal that contains things outside of that
consciousness.

Read in this light, the first two lines complicate the surface reading that human
consciousness has the ability to contain something as vast as the impersonal. The “Brief struggle
for capacity” indicates that a particular consciousness struggles to absorb and contain the
impersonal. This struggle for capacity recalls the diminished power of the consciousness to
contain and make meaning of things outside the self as it comes into contact with the impersonal
in “The Brain - is wider than the Sky.” In “I thought that nature was enough,” once the particular
and the impersonal are combined, they struggle to contain and absorb one another and
differentiation between the two becomes difficult further establishing an indeterminate relation
between entities said to absorb or contain one another. The next lines confirm the indeterminacy
that is produced when a particular consciousness comes into contact with the impersonal as “The
power to contain/Is always as the contents.” Since the contents, or participants, of this struggle
are both the particular and the impersonal, the power of the two to absorb and contain the other is
equaled once they come into contact with one another.

This indeterminacy reinforces the idea that one’s particular consciousness and the
impersonal are linked and cannot be separated from one another. It also reinforces the limited
capacity of the consciousness to contain and absorb the impersonal in all of its magnitude: if the
consciousness did not have limitations then there would not be a struggle of any sort. This
struggle, however, gives “a Giant room” to be lodged rather than “a smaller man.” Although the particular consciousness seems to be limited in its singular capacity to contain and thus know the impersonal as distinct from the self, once the individual consciousness and the impersonal are involved in this struggle they create a space large enough to house a “Giant.” I read the “But” in this stanza as an indication that despite the limitations imposed by consciousness and the struggle that ensues, the struggle itself has positive implications for an individual because it brings the consciousness into contact with the same magnitude of the impersonal that limits it. I mean here that though the individual consciousness is limited in its ability to know the self as distinct in this moment, it expands and becomes larger—it becomes as immense and as powerful as the impersonal. This contact makes the particular consciousness and the power it yields seem small in comparison.

“The Brain - is wider than the Sky” and “I thought that nature was enough” employ metaphors of absorption and containment to link what constitutes a particular person and what comprises that person’s attachment to what exceeds the confines of consciousness through an unstable and inscrutable logic. More importantly, these two poems, demonstrate both the limitations of a particular consciousness but also how a particular consciousness expands those same parameters as it comes into contact with the impersonal and makes an attempt to absorb and contain it. To return to Dickinson’s analogy of sponges absorbing water, for example, the water becomes part of the sponge’s constitution causing an increase in the sponge’s weight and shape (at least until the sponge is wrung out). During this struggle, a particular consciousness expands and experiences what it would be like to assimilate into the impersonal.
3.3 “Extatic Need”: The Experience of Double Consciousness

Through the absorption/containment metaphors in “The Brain - is wider than the Sky” and “I thought that nature was enough” Dickinson outlines the parameters of an individual consciousness as it possesses a person but also as it tries to possess things outside of the person as it experiences them. This determines that subjectivity is a relational experience and better elucidates why an experience of double consciousness may occur multiple times throughout one’s life as indicated by “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain.” Dickinson’s poetry of consciousness, however, goes one step further in illustrating what the experience of double consciousness may feel like for a particular individual by interrogating what occurs during the “Brief struggle for capacity” when a particular consciousness comes into contact with the impersonal and the confines of that consciousness must expand to house a “Giant.”

Dickinson’s “Between the Form of Life and Life” (FR 1123) describes this experience in terms accessible to the consciousness that is being expanded. The poem reads:

Between the Form of Life and Life  
The difference is as big  
As Liquor at the Lip between  
And liquor in the Jug  
That latter - excellent to keep -  
But for extatic need  
The corkless is superior -  
I know for I have tried

The “Form of Life and Life” can be read as two, albeit similar, versions of the problem of subjective experience. In one sense, to be “Between the Form of Life and Life” suggests that Dickinson’s speaker is simultaneously theorizing what it means to be a living subject and what it means to be an actual person subjected to the emotional, intellectual, and physical implications of living in the material world. In another sense, the notion that the speaker is “Between the Form of Life and Life” suggests that the speaker idealizes a version of life beyond subjective
experience, which will allow her access to the impersonal while also not requiring that she sacrifice her subjectivity, and being tasked with the ordinary and mundane act of living as a person who must possess while also contained by individual identity and consciousness. Again, each of these readings are nuanced versions of the same problem about what it means to live in the world as a person and as such it is important to note that Dickinson’s speaker is “Between” two forms.

I argue that because the speaker is “Between” two forms of “Life,” she is dispossessed from her individual identity and not fully absorbed by the impersonal; instead, she is caught between or suspended from each of these two forms of knowing life (not unlike the speaker in “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain”). This suspension from inhabiting either “Form of Life,” allows the speaker to contemplate the differences and requirements of each form. In this space, she notes that the difference between the two are “as big/As Liquor at the Lip between/And liquor in the Jug.” This simile emphasizes the differences between the two forms of living. Subjectivity and consciousness limit the person’s ability to live fully—to know the self as an individual and simultaneously know itself as part of the impersonal—much like a jug must contain and confine quantities of liquor. Likewise, access to something outside of subjectivity enables the person to live freely without restrictions or containment and thus expand beyond the requirements of personhood to experience the impersonal just as liquor passes between the lips once uncorked and released from its container.

In this suspended state between either a contained form of life and a free flowing form (between individual experience and communion with the impersonal), the speaker evaluates these two forms of living. Dickinson’s speaker determines that “The latter”—the form of life analogous to “liquor in the Jug”—is “excellent to keep” despite the fact that “the corkless” form
is “superior.” The speaker, in “Between” both forms, has “tried” to live as a person who uncontained by consciousness in order to experience the “uncorked” containment and absorption of the impersonal. However, when her consciousness is not confined, though she may get to experience the impersonal, it is only the restrictions imposed by her consciousness that allow her individual subjectivity in the world. Without the confines of consciousness, the speaker must give in to the form of life that she idealizes, but without the luxury of retaining possession of her identity. There is an “extatic need” to exist in this idealized way of life where persons get to connect to the impersonal without any sort of sacrifice of individuality and because it is the ideal state of living—not unlike Emersonian transcendence—it is the “superior” option. Yet, in order for the speaker to reach this idealized “Form of Life,” where she is absorbed by the impersonal, she must first return from the experience of “Between” and live within the confines of consciousness. In other words, Dickinson’s speaker finds the form of life involving containment “exce llent to keep” because it is the only way to attain a “Form of Life” where access to the impersonal becomes possible. She must live life as an individual person and proceed through the task of living a linear and progressive life.

The “Brief struggle for capacity” where the particular person is “Between the Form of Life and Life” not only characterizes what results from indeterminacy, but in the process positions double consciousness as an ideal state for the individual experiencing and feeling it. Though to be between forms of knowing is ideal because it is the only place where a person can entertain multiple versions of self-knowledge, the poem “This Consciousness that is aware” (FR 817) illuminates the negative ramifications of occupying this space. The first two stanzas read:

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone
Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men –

Here Dickinson’s speaker notes that her particular consciousness “is aware/Of Neighbors”—particular persons—as well as “the Sun”—that in its magnitude can be read as a symbol of the impersonal—but that this awareness also leads her to become “aware of Death” that can result from occupying the space of the “Brief struggle for capacity” for too long. Joy Ladin argues that “The first line puts consciousness [. . .] center stage. However, the second line, grammatically a direct extension of the first line, shifts our focus to the eternal objects of consciousness: ‘Neighbors and the Sun’ so that ‘death heightens consciousness’” (34-35). Though I disagree with her reading of “Neighbors and the Sun,” I do agree with the idea that “death heightens consciousness” for particular individuals.16 In other words, if the person occupies the space between forms of life for longer than necessary to simply expand the confines of consciousness, the person in possession of that consciousness will inevitably be absorbed by the impersonal as its magnitude is greater than that of consciousness alone. The self in other words will dissolve back into impersonality, the state before consciousness where “nature was enough.” The knowledge that comes from what initially appears as an ideal state of being comes with an awareness of the power of the impersonal to destroy particularity.

Perhaps more importantly, the awareness that the impersonal can effectively kill individual persons, because it relies on relation and temporality as indicated by the “Parallax” in “I thought that nature was enough,” causes the person in possession of the consciousness existing

16 For more on Ladin’s argument about the ways in which Dickinson’s poetry allows people to name and thus come to terms with the act of dying, see her essay “‘This Consciousness that is Aware’: The Consolation of Emily Dickinson’s Phenomenology” in Wider than the Sky: Essays and Meditations on the Healing Power of Emily Dickinson (2007).
between the forms of life to see the solitary nature of this condition: the self is “alone” and
“traversing the interval/Experience between.” While various persons in possession of their
consciousness come into contact with the impersonal, they do not do so at the same time and
because consciousness makes the self aware of the self as distinct from other selves, they also
cannot share the experience of what this contact looks or feels like. It is an experience unique to
each particular person. This isolation becomes the “most profound experiment/Appointed unto
Men” because the person inhabited by the consciousness that is aware cannot be absorbed by the
impersonal if it wants to maintain any sort of particularity and go on living in the temporal world
nor can it commune wholly with other persons because those persons cannot share or know this
same experience. Moreover, because this experience expands the bounds of individual
consciousness, the person occupying this space starts to feel awareness as a burdensome, solitary
task with negative ramifications no matter how the struggle for capacity ends. The consciousness
is isolated from other persons as well as itself. Double consciousness may be an ideal state
because the consciousness can occupy a space where all forms of knowledge co-exist, but
coming into this experience also makes one aware of the isolation and possible destruction of his
or her identity that a full awareness of the impersonal necessitates.

The second two stanzas of this poem demonstrate that the consequences of awareness
cause the speaker to find particularity sufficient in order to maintain her individual identity and
to go on living. They read:

How adequate unto itself
It’s properties shall be
Itself unto itself and None
Shall make discovery –

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be -
Attended by a single Hound
It’s own identity

The speaker finds the self’s “properties”—the identity it comes to possess through consciousness—“adequate unto itself.” Though possession of the consciousness and thus coming to reoccupy personhood requires a sacrifice of knowing the self as a self and “part and particle” of the impersonal, it allows the person to retain fully his or her individual identity and return to the process of living where it can interact with other persons in a physical and material way. This possession of consciousness is “adequate” for the person because it allows him or her particularity; though this possession is “adequate,” it is far from satisfying as the state of double consciousness was because as a particular consciousness the person still remains distinct not only from the impersonal but also from the consciousness’s of other persons, since “None” can make “discovery” of one another’s properties beyond the selves that contain the consciousness. This becomes an “Adventure” in and of itself, because though physical persons may interact and connect as individuals, each remains isolated from their “Soul,” which comprises the impersonal. Instead, persons are attended by the “single Hound” of their own identities. Finan argues that this hound suggests “a kind of perpetual confinement for the soul in chase” where a particular consciousness cannot assimilate individual identity with the soul it chases through the act of living (39). In other words, particularity and personhood, though they are meaningful in a physical world, damn us to solitude as they prevent communion with the soul.

All of these poems interrogate and attempt to ascribe to subjects a felt experience that points towards Emerson’s idealized state of double consciousness. They work to define the painful consequences of existing in a prolonged state of consciousness as well as the pain

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17 For other compelling interpretations of the role of the “Hound” in this poem, see Charles R. Anderson’s “The Conscious Self in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry,” *American Literature* 31.3 (1959): 290-308 as well as the previously cited work from Budick, Cameron, and Finan.
associated with recognizing how an individual consciousness becomes aware of its own limitations. To exist fully in this state and thus to retain a holistic sense of self as an individual person means suffering a paradoxical relation between the personal and the impersonal. In the process, Dickinson also traces the patterns according to which double consciousness insists so that “the search” for a full identity, one that merges particular personhood with the soul “is forever unfinished” so that whole “self-definition is always as yet impossible” (Grabher 224). Persons must thus experience double consciousness again and again, or “traverse” its “interval,” as they maintain their particularity and try to define themselves as whole: they must experience the isolation of being hounded by their particularity as well as the continual “Cleaving” of the self.

3.4 “Covered Vision”: The Paradox of Choice

Inder Kher claims that the “suffering involved in the process of self-finding” is vital and that the only solace an individual can take in such suffering is the recognition that “we must continue to add to the holdings of the self” through living as particular and distinct selves (267). In other words, each time a person experiences double consciousness and the limitations of his or her particular consciousness expands, he or she adds to their particular identities in order to exist in the world—the physical self grows, ages, etc. all in relation to whatever place he or she occupies on the spectrum of life. For Kher, adding to the holdings of the self through this process should be entertaining for the person rather than merely a source of pain (263). Yet, entertaining one’s self with the process of continual remaking and redefining of the self in order to only find a true relation to the impersonal only after particular identity has been destroyed can be as

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unsatisfying for Dickinson as it can be for readers of Emerson’s emphasis on process over product in “Circles” and “Experience.” Of course Dickinson’s disdain for the confines of consciousness and the necessity of retaining particularity in order to live can be found in a number of her poems. In poems like “Before I got my eye put out” (FR 336) and “Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue -” (FR 782), however, she demonstrates with unusual poignancy that the condition of double consciousness repeatedly suffered by individuals is not only painful in and of itself, but also requires we make an impossible choice again and again. These poems reflect what Kher calls a “total commitment and constant striving on the part of one who seeks to merge with his or her being” beyond the corporeal body that houses consciousness and that the repetitive “realization of self or identity” over the course of a lifetime “constitutes man’s ultimate struggle to be himself,” which is a “quest” involving “infinite suffering” (231). The constant choosing of one’s particularity rather than total immersion into the impersonal causes a type of suffering in which the conscious self must remain finite while embodying the infinite. For Kher, this amounts to a discipline necessary if one eventually wants to achieve the “arduous task of grasping the experience of existence as a whole” (233). For Dickinson, it often means blinding oneself in order to see.

In “Before I got my eye put out,” Dickinson demonstrates the choice an individual makes to return to particularity after the experience of double consciousness. In the first stanza the speaker replicates the absorption and containment metaphor found in “The Brain - is wider than the Sky” and “I thought that nature was enough”:

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Before I got my eye put out -
I liked as well to see
As other creatures, that have eyes -
And know no other way –
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The speaker here likes to see the world as every other living thing: that is to say she liked well enough to see only as much as her individual consciousness allows and desires no other way of seeing or knowing the world. By the second stanza, however, this knowledge is no longer enough for her:

But were it told to me, Today,
That I might have the Sky
For mine, I tell you that my Heart
Would split, for size of me –

Suddenly, when an alternate form of seeing and knowing the world presents itself, the speaker’s “Heart” would “split” because the physical body—kept alive by the heart—can only contain consciousness in its particularity. The speaker, because she is confined to a physical body and an individual identity made available through consciousness, cannot experience beyond those confines lest she should suffer a split or a fracturing of her selfhood.

As the poem continues into the remaining stanzas, the speaker becomes aware that an alternate manner of perceiving and experiencing the world exists. She says:

The Meadows - mine -
The Mountains - mine -
All Forests - Stintless stars -
As much of noon, as I could take -
Between my finite eyes –

The Motions of the Dipping Birds -
The Morning’s Amber Road -
For mine - to look at when I liked,
The news would strike me dead –

So safer - guess - with just my soul
Opon the window pane
Where other creatures put their eyes -
Incautious - of the Sun –

This news, however, that there is a different way of existing in the world—as one with all of these natural elements because to have knowledge of them would be to assimilate into their
constitution, thus making them hers—“would strike” the speaker “dead.” More importantly, the speaker can only take the news of this different way of knowing—which ultimately is to know life outside the confines of personhood and to merge with the impersonal—“Between” her “finite eyes.” This indicates that consciousness still limits her ability to make sense of and attain full knowledge of this alternate way of seeing because she exists in the temporal world and as such must abide by the restrictions of such an existence: she cannot fully possess this way of knowing while retaining her particularity though the possibility of doing so seems to excite her and recalls the “extatic need” from “Between the Forms of Life and Life.” In the third stanza, the use of the analogy “As much of noon, as I could take” suggests that access to the possibility of a knowledge of the impersonal occurs only during the middle period of one’s life, once the confines of an individual consciousness have been expanded several times over through lived experience. I would argue, however, that the noon period represents an alternate place between the beginning and the end of physical life where one experiences the condition of double consciousness.

Read in this context, the last stanza represents the choice between the limitations of consciousness and existence in the temporal world with that of deathly assimilation into this newfound manner of knowing the world—a knowledge that negates particularized selfhood. The last stanza has the speaker deciding that it is “safer” she guesses, “with just my soul” because her finite perspective, despite its temporal and physical limitations, preserves identity and awareness of the self as a person. She can only “Opon the window pane” watch “Where other creatures put their eyes -” unaware and “Incautious - of the Sun” because they haven’t yet encountered the space of “noon” and glimpsed the possibility of the world as theirs or themselves as constituent parts of that world. The speaker’s choice, after the moment of double consciousness, is to
preserve her sense of self despite the restrictions of that self and in spite of her apparent desire to know the world as hers as well as to have the world know—or absorb—her.

To choose one’s particularity rather than existing in spaces between forms of life and submit to absorption by the impersonal is even more pronounced in “Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue -”:

Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue -
The letting go
A Presence - for an Expectation -
Not now -
The putting out of Eyes -
Just Sunrise -
Lest Day -
Day’s Great Progenitor -
Outvie
Renunciation - is the Choosing
Against itself -
Itself to justify
Unto itself -
When larger function -
Make that appear -
Smaller - that Covered Vision - Here -

Vendler calls this a “double poem,” where the phrase “Renunciation - is” begins one poem and then repeats in the tenth line to signal the beginning of a second (330). The recursive structure works to at first to define, though a common enough term, the abstract act of renunciation. By line five, the act of renunciation requires the “putting out of Eyes” or the blinding of the self because to do so is a “Virtue.” Once one puts out her eyes—her way of seeing and knowing the world—she becomes able to let go of worldly knowledge and expectations for the expectation of something greater than just a “Day” or a “Sunrise,” which are only constructions of a consciousness. The return to “Renunciation - is” in line 10 moves from an attempt to define the act of renunciation to an attempt to describe the experience of renunciation for particular persons: in other words, the second half of the poem works to explain how blinding the self of
what it knows and can grasp in the world for an expectation feels like. Vendler calls the second half “a very painful narration of Renunciation” for one particular “soul” (330). This experience is described as a “Choosing/against” the self that knows itself as an individual subject in the material world for the “Expectation” of a “larger function” beyond the physical self and the temporal world. This “Expectation” becomes a justification for the violent act of the “putting out” of one’s “eyes.”

Cameron argues that the “voice” of this poem is one “aware of the situation’s complexity” as it “is the tone of someone trying to convince herself of something she finds both difficult and imperative to believe—that renunciation is a virtue; that it is piercing she knows” (40). Vendler adds that the speaker in the first three lines generalizes the experience of renunciation and gradually gets more specific to an individualized experience of renunciation in line 10 (330). It seems that the speaker’s awareness of the complexity of the situation in which she finds herself is what allows her to generalize the “piercing” and virtuous qualities of renunciation. Although abstract, this initial renunciation is both piercing and virtuous because it requires particular persons to let go of a presence in order to be replaced by an expectation.

Vendler’s interpretation that this is a generalized view of renunciation seems particularly apt as she also notes that the speaker says “the letting go” rather than “to let go.” She says, “The letting go’ creates an overarching untensed Idea that can be chosen over and over again” and that the first instance of renunciation is “the foregoing of a Presence (which one passionately values) for an Expectation (not yet fulfilled)” (331). Because the act of renouncing is a continuous action, the opening lines may signify the position individuals find themselves in as the consciousness and its presence in the temporal world—the thing that the person doing the renouncing “passionately values”—in order to accept the possibility that something else is
possible and even desirable. And though this renouncing will surely look differently for each individual faced with this choice of letting go, it is still piercing because it requires the dispossession of the self that it values for only the possibility of something like knowledge of the impersonal. Similarly, the continuous action of “the letting go” implies that particular persons will renounce more than once over the course of a lifetime as knowledge of the self is relational and requires constant re-definition.

What though makes this renunciation virtuous? The lines that follow indicate that once one renounces the limitations of consciousness by “The putting out of Eyes” all he or she sacrifices is his or her own ability to see the world or “Just Sunrise.” As a reward for this piercing and even deleterious renunciation, “Day’s Great Progenitor – ”—the impersonal—will eventually “Outvie” or overtake the particular person. In other words, a person must continue to renounce itself, even if the result is the remaking of that same self to exist within new confines and limitations, eventually the renunciation of self will give way and dissolve into the impersonality that provides particularity and temporality in the first place. Likewise, Cameron notes that while the speaker remarks that this renunciation may be virtuous and even necessary for the maintenance of an identity in the physical world, that she “exhibits a clear preference for this world” (41).

As a result, “Renunciation – is the Choosing/Against itself –” whereby, despite one’s individual desire to maintain existing versions of one’s sense of self, the self that wants to move forward through the temporal life to achieve an assimilation into the impersonal must choose against that self. In this sense, to renounce the self could also be virtuous because it requires that a person acknowledge his own limitations of consciousness in order to expand those boundaries to make room for new versions of selfhood, even as the past self becomes anxious or
uncomfortable in this moment of double consciousness. This then becomes a justification to the individual: dispossess the self of self-knowledge in order to redefine that self so that it can return to the temporal world and ultimately arrive at a “larger function” that makes all previous forms of knowledge or “Covered Vision” appear small in comparison to the self’s ultimate dissolution into the impersonal. Each time a person makes the choice to renounce, even though it truly requires a figurative death of the self, her consciousness expands and makes previous ways of knowing and experiencing seem smaller and more limited than the new way of knowing until eventually the consciousness has expanded to the point that it exceeds all corporeal and temporal restrictions. In other words, as Cameron points out, renunciation as a “matter of one’s best interest is a convoluted idea involving, as the lines [ten to thirteen] literally do, several iterations of the concept of self: the sense in which renunciation is an act that violates the self; the sense in which it is an act that legitimates the self; and the sense in which the self stands as ambivalent arbiter between the two” (41).

Cameron goes on to argue that Dickinson’s speaker “clearly indicates with the eyes she now has”—which I interpret to mean eyes that, while still limited by temporality and consciousness, are and have been remade through several instances of renunciation—that “a presence looks better than an expectation” (41). While this may be true for Dickinson’s speaker, and it certainly aligns with the logic of “Before I got my eye put out,” the speaker inevitably finds herself in an impossible situation where in order to preserve her sense of self she must also denounce and choose against herself. Moreover, this positing the self against the self in order to choose an expectation requires a violent—the putting out of one’s eyes—sacrifice of selfhood despite its eventual deliverance to virtue through assimilation into the impersonal. This choice is a direct consequence of the fleeting moments of double consciousness that persons find
themselves faced with over the course of a temporal life. While Cameron argues that Dickinson’s speaker demonstrates a preference for a “presence” rather than an “expectation” not because it is the better choice, but because it is what she has the capability to know now, Kher argues that this choice is necessary because “the human mind is the container” for “man’s identity” and “if the mind is dissolved or disintegrated” the being “cannot be located” by or locate the impersonal once the temporal life ends (258). This is an important distinction because the choosing for Cameron reflects the self’s desire to make a different choice while for Kher the choosing reflects a desire to avoid the deleterious consequences that come with choosing the impersonal. I think, however, that both readings point to the painful and violent condition of double consciousness, though fleeting, must be experienced by individuals even as the consequences of this experience necessitate the painful, sometimes violent, sacrifice of particularity each time the person comes into contact with it. Even in the context of Cameron’s choosing, for the self to make a choice it does not necessarily want comes with the sacrifice of the other choice which it does.

Though double consciousness emerges as an ideal state of being in Emersonian thought, it presents as a continual and painful condition which individuals must suffer in order to paradoxically sacrifice self-knowledge in order to maintain an awareness of that self in the temporal and physical world. Such a condition causes critics like Finan to view “Dickinson’s poetry of consciousness” as “experiments in subjectivity” that facilitate “how consciousness can limit us and how it can facilitate its own disruption” (24). Dickinson’s poetry thus “turns to dispossession; self-reference, which” ultimately “allows consciousness to unify” and become “a tool for interrogating our cognitive assumptions and for surrendering old certainties” to ultimately yield a tool for exploring the human consciousness’s relation not only to the self but to all other things that exist beyond the self (25). Double consciousness thus looks here like a
condition that allows individuals to test this relationality to other systems of organization beyond the particular self that govern and organize the temporal life in which it must participate.
While Emily Dickinson takes the Emersonian idea of double consciousness and positions it as an actual condition that—although temporary due to one’s finitude—must be suffered by persons multiple times over the course of a lifetime, Henry James in *The Bostonians* and *The Wings of the Dove* explores the consequences of this condition by examining how it affects and is affected by the systems of organization that govern the temporal and corporeal world. More specifically, in these novels James investigates how an individual’s social intercourse—that is, a person’s interactions with other embodiments of personality and a person’s participation in the events of the physical world—influence one’s ability not only to attain access to a relationship with the impersonal but also to sustain that relationship within the confines of a system of relation (to others and to the world). Where Emerson and Dickinson see a condition unique to each particular person, James looks outward to examine how an interaction between singular individuals and the impersonal contexts that govern their lives impact other particular individuals, resulting in what I will call an “economy of devastation.” James configures this economy of human relationships by taking the concept of double consciousness and applying it beyond a particular subject to demonstrate how, when the subject comes into contact with the impersonal even temporarily, the confines of consciousness expand not only to devastate our particular notions of self-hood, but to threaten the coherence of our intersubjective attachments as well. Ostensibly, social relationships indirectly force particular persons into a state of dual consciousness at some point during the span of the relation. When a person is forced into the condition of double consciousness, his or her particular identity is suspended and eventually transformed in order to participate in a successive life. More importantly though, especially in
these novels, the experience of double consciousness initiated by one’s social relationships also transforms and eventually destroys those same relationships in the process.

James offers the main characters of *The Bostonians* and *The Wings of the Dove*, Verena Tarrant and Milly Theale respectively, as sites that are easily accessible to the impersonal because they lack a stable and fixed personality. Though to varying degrees, Verena and Milly are characters who demonstrate little self-awareness or particularity and thus the confines of their consciousness are not limited by the same constraints as the other characters in each novel. Verena and Milly function as the centers of their respective novels in which the other characters form a “circumference.” In other words, Verena and Milly serve as central points around which the other characters negotiate their conflicts, but the narrator grants the reader very little access to either’s particular consciousness. In fact, their centrality to their respective novels, despite their lack of narrative representation, depends upon the fact that they depict little-to-no consciousness or self-awareness. Though critics like Susan Wolstenholme and Martha Banta argue that Verena and Milly must appear as empty vessels in order for characters like Olive, Basil, Kate, and Merton to develop their own personalities and consciousness, their lack of personality and particularity are what allow them to function as points of entry for the impersonal in order to initiate states of double consciousness for themselves as well as the other characters in the novel. It should be noted, however, that I am not arguing that Verena and Milly are sites of impersonality for each is still limited by her corporeality as well as the confines of

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19 James specifically mentions this “circumference” in the Preface to the New York Edition of *Wings* when he refers to Merton Densher and Kate Croy as “successive centres” (8). Though he never explicitly states that Basil and Olive form a circumference around Verena, the narrative structure of *The Bostonians* where Verena’s conscious is rarely reflected in favor of Basil’s or Olive’s resembles the structure that James describes in his Preface to *Wings*. Like Milly, Verena is “superficially so absent” from much of the novel and instead of having a distinct essence of her own, serves as the site for which the action of the novel unravels and the plot depends (8). All citations from *The Wings of the Dove*, including those from the Preface are from: Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, Norton Critical edition, 2nd ed., eds. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003).
whatever consciousness she might possess, though each might be unaware of that consciousness. However, because each lacks a fixed identity, within their social spheres, they offer James the opportunity to more successfully illustrate what a state of double consciousness may look like than either Emerson or Dickinson as well as allow him to examine the external conflicts produced by this condition.

Although Verena and Milly experience little narrative representation of their consciousness compared to the other characters in each novel, their positions at each novel’s center actually generate multiple modes of self-knowledge that are not easily integrated or mediated into complete selves. In the most provocative representations of self-knowledge, Verena’s and Milly’s struggle with the condition of double consciousness also replicates the devastating consequences of this condition for those with whom they are intimately involved. Verena and Milly thus enable to James to represent the limitations imposed by human consciousness as Dickinson does, but also depict how those limitations are partially influenced by other conscious beings outside of the self as well as by the impersonal to which all persons and things are “part and particle.” The innocence that Verena and Milly first present with—their utter lack of self-consciousness—transforms over the course of the novels as they experience and participate in relationships with people who have a more stable and fixed sense of self. What results are external influences—Basil, Olive, Kate, and Merton primarily—that work to shape the consciousness of Verena and Milly as they start to see or know themselves as reflected by the other characters. As these particular persons start to influence and redefine the bounds of

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20 Knowledge and self-knowledge is often described as something to “see” or has having a “light” in the work of Henry James. Sharon Cameron’s *Thinking in Henry James* provides a compelling argument for the external nature of knowledge or consciousness as something that is seeable as does George Butte in “Henry James and Deep Intersubjectivity,” *The Henry James Review*, 30(2), 129-43, and Peter Rawlings in “The Painful Production of Verena Tarrant: John Locke and The Bostonians” from his chapter in *Becoming Visible: Women’s Presence in Late Nineteenth-Century America*. 
Verena’s and Milly’s consciousness with deleterious consequences, Verena and Milly subsequently force these external influences into states of double consciousness whereby the original relationships they formed are devastated but so too is the particularity that other characters embody, thus creating an economy of devastation where all particular individuals suffer in some capacity.

4.1 Sites of Double Consciousness: Verena’s and Milly’s (Self)-Possession

Verena

While Olive Chancellor’s and Basil Ransom’s desire for control over Verena drives The Bostonians, Verena’s consciousness is absent from much of the novel. Philip Page calls this “the first peculiarity of the narration” and that this lack of narrative access keeps the reader as well as the narrator “distanced from her and therefore excluded from direct exposure” to her thoughts about her role in “the central action of the novel” (375-6). It is likely that the absence of Verena’s thoughts from the narrator has caused critics to regard her as little more than the “empty vessel” awaiting possession by the novel’s stronger personalities. Wolstenholme adds that Verena is “empty” because she has “no anchoring point,” which “James underscores [. . .] by making her virtually rootless rather than a representative of any of the societies in the novel, Boston, New York, rural New England, and the South” (590). Irving Howe notes that Verena “has little but her promise, and her promise consists of little but her malleability.” He

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21 Page’s argument about the narration of The Bostonians stems from earlier arguments, primarily made by Irving Howe and Lionel Trilling, that the novel reflects the social chaos of post-war society in America. Page extends the notion that the novel reflects a disjointed society void of the “social cohesion” typically provided by art, family, tradition, and community” which yields characters who feature “disoriented personalities” and a narrator that doubts “his ability” to describe the irregularity of the fictional world of the novel (374-6). Interestingly, the narrative distance noted by Page is what Howe considers a remarkable feat of the novel in that the pictorial descriptions rather than interior musings of the characters allow James to satirize Boston as he is “much less concerned than in his other novels with getting to the ‘essence’ of his characters and situations” so that he might focus on placing a “higher value on the outer grain and texture of experience” (xv). Another interesting interpretation of the narrative difference between The Bostonians and James’s later novels can be found in Janet A. Gabler’s article “The Narrator’s Script: James’s Complex Narration in ‘The Bostonians’” (The Journal of Narrative Technique 14.2 (Spring, 1984): 94-109.
adds that “If James meant Verena as the one ‘positive’ moral force, the one figure toward whom our response should be more sympathetic than ironic, he failed; for she is unable—she simply is not interesting enough—to assume so crucial a role” (xxi). Banta refers to Verena as “pretty,” “sweet” and as “rather vapid and rather a bore” (180). Lynn Wardley even goes so far as to describe Verena as “adaptable, accommodating, assimilative, and absorptive” and containing “the voice of a ventriloqual body” that is “potentially indistinguishable from the alien, the crowd” (645, 647). Inherent in these interpretations of Verena as empty, malleable, and subservient is the notion that Verena lacks personality or essence and is without consciousness or self-awareness. In effect, these interpretations render Verena without any real particularity or differentiation from the crowds of people she addresses.

Verena’s introduction into the novel is marked by an air of impersonality. After the narrator’s brief description of her as “very pretty, though she had red hair,” the people gathered in Miss Birdseye’s drawing room encourage her to speak about the current state of women in place of the great Mrs. Farrinder (60). Verena pleads with Mrs. Farrinder to go first in order to give her “an atmosphere” (77). The narrator notes that Verena makes this request as if it were “a lesson rehearsed in advance” though she had a “strange spontaneity in her manner, an air of artless enthusiasm, of personal purity” (77). Verena’s need for an “atmosphere” indicates that in order for her to express herself she needs external influence or inspiration. The narrator’s reflection that Verena’s manner is simultaneously contrived and innocent suggests that Verena is at least minimally aware of her own lack of particularity. As her mother, Mrs. Tarrant, talks to

22 In *Truth in American Fiction*, Janet Gabler-Hover counters traditional interpretations of Verena by arguing that she has an essence of “benevolent love,” which is demonstrated over the course of the novel by Verena’s “good faith and innocence,” her “intuitively benevolent emotion,” and an “optimistic interpretation of experience” (170).
Mrs. Farrinder about her daughter’s great capacity for speaking in support of their collective cause, Verena insists that “‘It isn’t me, mother’” (79). Finally, when Mrs. Farrinder demands that Verena speak, her father, the mesmerist-healer, Selah Tarrant, acquiesces to her demands and provides the “atmosphere” by laying his hands on Verena without embarrassment because “any success that he and his daughter might have had was so thoroughly impersonal” (79). The narrator notes that “he and Mrs. Tarrant and the girl herself were all equally aware it was not she. It was some power outside—it seemed to flow through her [. . .] She let it come out just as it would—she didn’t pretend to have any control” (80).

The reader’s initial encounter with Verena is significant not only because it marks her entrance into the novel, but also because it demonstrates her belief that she must have an external influence to possess her in order for her to become aware of herself and the task at hand. Verena is characterized by her ability to deliver speeches, and primarily speeches concerned with the issue of women; yet that ability is entirely dependent on an external force over which she has no control. Whether or not that force is her father’s hands or Mrs. Farrinder’s atmosphere is irrelevant—Verena cannot speak without someone else influencing her. Without someone else’s influence, Verena has little to distinguish her from any other person. Because public speaking defines Verena, she is rendered without a distinct identity when judged or characterized outside of this role and instead perceived by readers like Howe, Wolstenholme, and Banta as simple, empty, and uninteresting. Without her vocal abilities and without Olive or Basil fighting to possess her, Verena, based on her lack of representation by the narrator, is void of any personality or distinguishing features of her own. She thus functions, as Basil will later point out to her, as a puppet in need of a master. Moreover, Verena’s insistence upon an external influence to create an “atmosphere” and essentially embody her is reminiscent of Sharon Cameron’s
description of the impersonal as previously outlined in my discussion about Emerson; and it is this desire in conjunction with Verena’s lack of self-awareness that allows her to function as a point of access for the impersonal and thus allows her to experience a state of double consciousness.

Peter Rawlings argues that “Verena Tarrant spends most of her time in *The Bostonians* in forms of confinement not of her own making and in realms of visibility organized on her behalf” (230). To confine Verena means that her consciousness is contained—she cannot have knowledge of her self, even of her own inabilities, lest she should self-reflect and come to know herself in a way that is different from how her parents, Basil, and Olive know or see her. Verena’s early recognition that it is *not* her that delivers her speeches is not a signal of Verena’s consciousness or self-awareness, but rather a self-knowledge built from her family’s knowledge of her. In other words, they tell her that she is not responsible for the messages she gives voice to and she internalizes their knowledge as self-knowledge. If being a person depends upon one’s knowledge of herself as distinguishable from other persons, then in this scenario Verena is indeed void of personality. Consequently, Verena manifests the impersonal even as she provides a personality to the masses through the delivery of her speeches. She has no direct experience with subjugation or oppression, but rather becomes, in Wolstenholme’s terms, a “medium” who speaks on behalf of a community of women and thus provides a particular face or image to a collective cause and an impersonal mass. Because she is a blank slate, so to speak, she is likely to give voice to any cause that concerns not a particular person, but of persons more generally. She is the ideal speaker for such causes because she can represent any cause so long as the cause is in the “atmosphere.” Her sole existence, according to this logic, relies upon a certain degree of impersonality required for the performance of her role as representative of a movement.
Verena’s ability to become the personality of the women’s movement is what draws Olive to her. Paradoxically, this ability depends upon Verena’s lack of self-awareness, but that scarcity of awareness also distinguishes her from everyone else, most especially—Olive, Mrs. Farrinder, and Miss Birdseye—the champions of this particular cause. Olive, for example, though she claims to Mrs. Farrinder that she has “no self-possession, no eloquence” and despite her secret hope that she “might be a martyr and die for something,” possesses herself well enough to know that her “taste” and appreciation for the material pleasures of life prevent her by “suffering” in the same ways other, more common women do (63, 43). Though Olive tries “to kill that nerve” and to “persuade herself that taste is only frivolity in the disguise of knowledge,” she simply does not share a common consciousness about life with the women she so desperately wants to liberate because of her personal preferences, desires, etc., (57). Olive cannot speak for them because she doesn’t quite understand them. On the other hand, as a site of entry for the impersonal, Verena is void of the confines of consciousness that Olive exhibits and is therefore able to construct a common consciousness with whomever she is representing through her speech. Verena’s lack of fixed identity ironically separates her from the masses she represents and thus particularizes her.

The inherent paradox in Verena’s characterization indicates that the issue of her consciousness is more complex than the assertion that she doesn’t have one at all and thus available for Olive or Ransom to possess. After the scene at Miss Birdseye’s, the narrator remarks that “Verena took life [. . .] very simply; she was not conscious of so many differences of social complexion” and that she “had no vivid sense that she was not as good as any one else” (97). And when learning more about Verena, Olive notes that “she was only supremely innocent” and that “she didn’t understand, didn’t interpret” (127). She also reflects that Verena is “too
rancourless, too detached from conventional standards, too free from private self-reference” (183). These passages indicate that the problem of Verena’s consciousness in *The Bostonians* is not that she is completely void of consciousness—as a corporeal entity in the world, she cannot be—but that there is little evidence that she exhibits any sort of self-reflection. As a result, this prohibits her consciousness from developing on her own terms through knowledge acquired by her experience. Without self-reflection, Verena must construct knowledge of herself based on what the people in her life know her as in order to perform as a particular person with a distinct personality in the other characters’ lives. She is sweet, innocent, and talented then because the narrator, Olive, Basil, and her parents tell her she is so; she meets their expectations by performing the ways in which they know/see her and in the process comes to recognize herself only as they do. When Mrs. Farrinder or Mrs. Burrage meet her with suspicion, she is unsusceptible because the larger consensus is that she does in fact have something to say and because so many people believe in her gift, Verena naturally assumes she is gifted. But because her assumption is rooted in knowledge derived from outside of her own consciousness, it appears to the narrator and to others as “naturally theatrical.” The self Verena presents to the world is not wholly her own, but rather a composite of others’ assertions about that self: Verena is at once spontaneous and innocent, but also performative and, in the terms of Rawlings, “framed” by the ways in which others view her (232).

Since she lacks the self-consciousness that determines individuals as particular and separate from one another, Verena’s relationships with Olive and Basil are primarily responsible for the ways in which she becomes conscious of herself. As Verena’s and Olive’s relationship develops, Olive opens “Verena’s eyes to extraordinary pictures, made the girl believe that she

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24 Rawlings argues that Verena’s consciousness must be framed because “all seeing is partial” so that however “freely seen” a person wants to be, they must be framed by the sight of someone else (232).
had a heavenly mission” and sparks in her “quite a new measure of the interest of life” (125).

Verena responds by taking “all that was given her and was grateful, and missed nothing that was withheld” (125). Olive sees Verena as “an exquisite creature,” that despite her crude upbringing, was a girl “who had some natural light, some divine spark of taste,” and who was “fresh from the hand of Omnipotence” and “far from common” (133). Olive even assures Verena that while she “must be saved,” her saving will “come from the growth of” her own perception and “seeing” of things herself “sincerely and with conviction,” so that she will certainly come to know life “in the light in which I see them” (152). Olive promises Verena a certain amount of freedom by promising that her conscious will develop on its own without her influence, though she is sure Verena will come to recognize Olive’s knowledge as truth. Seeing herself through Olive, Verena is quick to assimilate into this version of herself—it is a prettier version than the one the Tarrant’s had already given her—and believes that the truth she “wanted to know” was clearly in Olive’s keeping (163). So when Olive asks Verena “to give up” or to “renounce” the idea of marriage in favor of their cause, Verena happily does so at least partially because Olive’s “tone worked a spell, and she found something to which at least a portion of her nature turned with eagerness in her companion’s wider knowledge” (153). She can renounce marriage with ease because knowledge of herself in a committed heterosexual and romantic relationship that exists solely for personal reasons has been withheld from her experience. As Verena begins her studies with Olive (and thus her relative isolation in Olive’s Beacon Street home), the narrator remarks that the “fine web of authority, of dependence” that Olive had “woven about her, was now as dense as a suit of golden mail” and that Verena was now “thoroughly interested in their great undertaking” (178). We are told Verena’s “former attitude had been girlish submission, grateful, curious sympathy” and though she “had given herself” because of “Olive’s stronger will,” that
over the course of their interaction she was “no longer passive, purely appreciative” but now “passionate” as she believed “ardently” in their cause (178).

Despite this assertion from the narrator, it isn’t entirely fair to say that Verena has developed a stake in their joint cause wholly on her own accord as Olive originally promises. Olive reflects early in her training of Verena that there were “so many things that she hadn’t yet learned to dislike” in spite of Olive’s efforts to teach her (137). The fact that Olive teaches Verena to like or dislike anything at all indicates that Olive is constructing a version of Verena that relies upon her own knowledge, experience, and perceptions. Verena’s likes and dislikes are of little consequence to Olive, though she is always telling Verena that she is at liberty to do as she pleases. And yet Olive isolates and immerses Verena, “her listening and responsive friend,” by presenting her worldview “again and again” so that “there was no light in which they did not seem to palpitate from the truth” until Verena is “immensely wrought upon” and “a subtle fire passed into her” (191). By the time they leave for Europe, Olive has inculcated Verena with her truths about feminism until Verena “quite agreed with her companion that after so many ages of wrong [. . .] men must take their turn, men must pay!” (191). Janet Gabler-Hover argues that in scenes such as these Olive “compels Verena to renounce her essence” of benevolence so that she may exploit her in public as a champion for feminism (176-77). Wolstenholme, on the other hand, notes that Verena acts as a medium for Olive in that Olive, through their intercourse, is “quite literally absorbing Verena” and subsequently “inhabiting her ‘form’” (583). Regardless of her motivations or intentions, in terms of Verena’s consciousness, Olive possesses Verena by indoctrinating Verena with the version of herself that Olive has concocted: a Verena that—at least intellectually—mimics Olive but maintains all of Verena’s original charm, innocence, and vocal talent. Olive essentially subsumes Verena with her own consciousness to the point that
Verena dismisses any sense of particularity that she may have had and, as Rawlings argues, is confined to the point that she cannot recognize her own consciousness from that of Olive’s.

Though it seems for much of the novel that Olive is successful at transforming Verena, Verena is partially aware of her own transformation. When Basil Ransom visits Verena at her parents’ house in Monadoc Place, Verena tells Basil that Olive “makes” her speeches because she tells her “what to say—the real things, the strong things” and that “It’s Miss Chancellor” as much as it is her (230). Verena also tells him that “I advocate equal rights, equal opportunities, equal privileges” and “So does Miss Chancellor” (233) before she finally says to him “Miss Chancellor has absorbed me – there is no doubt about that” (234). Verena’s ability to communicate to Basil that Olive has “absorbed” her indicates that she is not incapable of self-reflection. Limited though her conscious may be, Verena is capable of recognizing the influence Olive has in developing “her” opinions and thoughts.25

In fact, there are several moments early in The Bostonians that portray Verena as at least partially self-aware, which complicate traditional readings of her simplicity. Soon after Verena’s introduction, the narrator recounts a conversation where Verena and Mrs. Tarrant discuss Olive and he says Verena “had her own ways of thinking of it, which were not her mother’s, and if she lent herself to this lady’s extensive considerations it was because that was the best way of keeping her thoughts to herself” (124). Here Verena knows herself enough to decipher that her way of thinking about Olive differs from her mother’s, but by keeping her thoughts to herself she limits her ability to internalize and intellectualize these thoughts and thus her ability to allow her consciousness to alter according to her will. Instead, by keeping her thoughts to herself, Verena

25 It is important to note here, however, that Verena does not distinguish between her thoughts and Olive’s—they both promote equal rights, etc. to the same extent and even Verena’s speeches are not differentiated as her own, but as an amalgamation of her voice put to Olive’s beliefs.
maintains a degree of malleability, and thus allows others to shape and manipulate the ways in which she gains knowledge of herself. Similarly, in the scene mentioned above, Verena reflects that Basil’s visit “was very agreeable” to her though her “pleasure was mixed with other feelings or at least with the consciousness that the whole situation was rather less simple than the elements of her life had been hitherto” (235). Though Verena cannot clearly articulate how the visit with Basil will complicate her life, she is conscious that the visit will affect her. Moreover, as they tour Harvard’s Memorial Hall and she contemplates what keeping the meeting a secret from Olive might mean, Verena demonstrates a desire for the particular and the personal. When she considers not telling Olive, Verena evinces a conscious desire for autonomy—she wants to be and have knowledge outside of their relationship. Because she does not tell Olive until much later about the visit, Verena withholds knowledge from what is quickly becoming a common consciousness between her and Olive. This distinguishes Verena from that collective consciousness; she possesses individual knowledge that is not privy to Olive’s judgment and control. The distance Verena establishes from Olive by keeping her meeting with Basil a secret makes accessing her consciousness on her own terms a real possibility. This distance initiates a state of double consciousness that will plague Verena for the remainder of the novel.

Basil’s visit and Verena’s secret from Olive is significant in two ways. First, because it demonstrates her capability to think, know, and experience on her own terms without an external influence. This becomes the first time Verena makes a conscious decision and acts out of her own free will. Gabler-Hover argues that “[i]n James’s fiction, the sharing between two persons of a secret truth that excludes the rest of the world initiates [. . .] a heightened sense of self. As one perceives the difference between oneself and the rest of the world [. . .] consciousness becomes more defined” (179). Although these moments of self-reflection and awareness are
limited because Verena does not give voice or articulate her own thoughts to the other characters, they still depict her as a person with the ability to think and to know for herself. For instance, she feels a small amount of guilt at keeping her secret from Olive, but keeps it all the same. By having knowledge that differs from Olive’s knowledge, Verena accesses her consciousness on her own terms and begins to distinguish herself beyond the limits of their relationship. This complicates the earlier emptiness of her character for which the other characters vie for possession.

Second, this meeting with Basil initiates his influence over and desire to possess Verena’s consciousness. Like Olive, Basil views Verena as “constantly simple” though “her candour seemed to him preternatural” (248). Again, and James reemphasizes the point when Basil questions Verena on Olive’s role in designing her speeches, Verena is viewed as outside of and different from people more generally and characterized as simple and without thoughts of her own. Her simplicity renders her without personality and available for possession in the minds of both Olive and Basil. The narrator, for example, tells us here that Basil enjoys “her visible hesitation” and “was slightly conscious of a man’s brutality – of being pushed by an impulse to test her good-nature, which seemed to have no limit” (248). Basil is aware of his influence over her and this scene marks the beginning of his struggle to control Verena’s consciousness in order to win her essentially from Olive’s “fine web of authority.”

Verena helps Basil do this unknowingly, because at this point in the novel she is still only partially self-aware, by inviting him to her first New York speaking engagement at the Burrage’s. Upon hearing her speech Basil reflects that it “had about the value of a pretty essay, committed to memory and delivered by a bright girl [. . .] it was vague, thin, rambling, a tissue of generalities that glittered agreeably enough” (269). He also notes the “importance of the speech
was high” because of the fact that the voice was “not the voice of Olive or Adeline” but Verena’s (269). He “rejoices” in the fact that “she was so weak in argument” and that “she counted as a factor only because the public mind was in a muddle” as it “was a proof that her apostleship was all nonsense, the most passing of fashions, veriest of delusions” (269). Basil’s reception of the speech indicates to him that Verena “was meant for something divinely different – for privacy, for him, for love” (269). The fact that Basil wants Verena for a private life confirms Lynn Wardley’s assertion that “Ransom fears what will take place when Verena enters the public domain” (639). His struggle to possess or affect Verena’s consciousness then is one that may or may not derive from real love; instead, as critics like Howe, Gabler-Hover, and Rawlings note, Basil’s desire to possess Verena is rooted in an ideological struggle about controlling how others know and see Verena.26 Ironically, though Basil wants Verena to exist in his private realm beyond the reach of public exposure, the same lack of particularity that renders Verena susceptible to public exploitation makes Verena susceptible to his view that she and her abilities belong in a privatized space.

Basil’s view of Verena as something for private possession eventually sways her from the image of herself with which Olive has presented. After her speech at the Burrage’s, Basil meets Verena and convinces her to walk in Central Park with him. She has a sense, even after that early visit in Cambridge, that “his interest in her was personal, not controversial” and though she has convinced Olive that her interest in their cause “would transcend any attraction” or personal relationship, Verena still hesitates to accompany him (312-313). Verena hesitates because she has no experience or knowledge with personal relationships not involved directly with her’s and Olive’s crusade. Verena only goes with him though when he declares he wants to talk to her of

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26 The exact nature of these competing ideologies run the critical gamut but most often takes the form of dichotomies such as the public realm vs. private spheres, North vs. South, aristocracy vs. democracy, etc.
the differences between them for that “was not personal” in nature (318). The narrator, though this knowledge is not privy to Verena herself, notes that as “the nature of her reflections [...] softly battled with each other,” that going with Ransom also signals “that the struggle of yielding to a will which she felt to be stronger even than Olive’s was not of long duration” (322).

Once in the park, Basil vies for possession of Verena by providing her with an alternate image of herself. He tells her: “You stand apart, you are unique, extraordinary; you constitute a category by yourself [...] you are outside and above all vulgarizing influences” (330). This iteration of Verena as different and separate from other people, as able to transcend the crude influence of personalities, is reminiscent of Olive’s characterization of her. Basil continues:

your connexion with all these rantings and ravings is the most unreal, accidental, illusory thing in the world. You think you care about them, but you don’t at all. They were imposed upon you by circumstances, by unfortunate associations, and you accepted them as you would have accepted any other burden [...] it isn’t you, the least in the world, but an inflated figure [...] whom you have invented and set on its feet, pulling strings, behind it, to make it move and speak, while you try to conceal and efface yourself there.

Ah, Miss Tarrant, if it’s a question of pleasing how much you might please some one else by tipping your preposterous puppet over and standing forth in your freedom. (330)

Confronted with this version, Verena always “deeply attentive” springs to her feet and turns away from him though she felt “as if he felt the whole thing to be an absolute certainty – which partly scared her and partly made her feel angry” (330-1). Basil essentially assaults Olive’s construction of Verena’s consciousness by starting with some of the same distinctive qualities as Olive and with the same certainty or “truth” that Verena had originally found so persuasive. As Basil watches her for a response, Verena who had “been commended of old by Olive for her
serenity ‘while exposed to the gaze of hundreds’” was “now unable to endure the contemplation of an individual” (331). Faced with a new knowledge of who Basil thought she was or could be, Verena is uncomfortable and unfamiliar occupying such a personalized space for someone else as her current self-knowledge is only as a voice of a larger and impersonal collective and not as a singular person meant for private relationships. Basil’s version of who she could be further forces her into a state where she becomes aware of knowing herself in multiple ways at once.

Up until this point in *The Bostonians*, Verena has remained relatively passive as the other characters present their perceptions of her because most of these perceptions largely coalesce. Basil’s is the first image she has of herself outside of the impersonal and public sphere relegated to her by Olive and her parents. Integrating her parents’ knowledge of her with Olive’s, for instance, was relatively simple as those versions of who she was and would be shared many similarities. Rawlings asserts that as a result “Verena is largely unconscious, and therefore without much of a personal identity” until this moment in Central Park with Ransom when she begins “to develop a sense of normative, or conventional privacy, and hence notions of interiority and consciousness” (232, 234). Her interactions with Basil are and continue to require privacy and secrecy from Olive precisely because they involve an alternate construction of her selfhood. Basil, like Olive before him, immerses and indoctrinates Verena with his image of her as he continues his pursuit of her in Marmion until she is convinced that it is the better version.

As a consequence of experiencing double consciousness, Verena’s instinct is to defend and cling to the image of herself that Olive and her parents have provided. The confines of her consciousness and more importantly her self-awareness expand in these moments with Basil and thus assault the notion of herself that she does possess. She finds that Basil’s “description of herself as something different from what she was trying to be, the charge of want of reality,
made her heart beat with pain” (331). In response, she questions Basil about his perception of her “gift”: “I presume, from what you say, that you don’t think I have much ability” (331). The knowledge she has of herself relies so heavily on her ability to represent the masses that this becomes a desperate attempt to keep the identity formed by her speaking intact. Basil replies that he thinks her ability is actually “genius” though it should be used “in a very different line” such as the “realm of family life and the domestic affections” (331). His reply only further confuses matters for Verena as it does not nullify her gift and therefore her identity altogether, but rather places it in another sphere for which she has had no exposure. More specifically, Ransom’s version of her particularizes her away from the masses and requires a singular personality of which she has no possession. She becomes uncomfortable under his gaze and wishes “to lead him off again into the general” with which she is not only familiar, but an expert at navigating through talk. Despite her discomfort, Verena recognizes that “at any rate, it was her real self that was there with him now,” though “she oughtn’t to be” because it contradicts and challenges every part of who she knows herself to be (331).

Rawlings is correct in his assertions that the scene in Central Park is the first time where Verena accesses her consciousness as her own. However, this access is not solely due to the privacy she must maintain about her encounters with and subsequent feelings for Basil. Instead, Verena’s cognizance and self-awareness in this scene, for the first time, challenges her knowledge of herself with a competing image. Basil’s version is even more problematic because it too relies on her gift of speaking, but places that ability in a private and personal realm for which Verena has no experience. This moment yields a sense of double consciousness for

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27 It is worth noting here that though this scene is the first where Verena seems most in touch with her conscious, it is not the first time she has struggled to maintain this identity in the company of Basil. Earlier when they are touring the grounds of Harvard, she randomly, after a long period of silence, remarks to him that her travels in Europe “showed” and “proved” she had “a great use” (242).
Verena because she has access to two competing modes of self-knowledge: one as a point of access for the impersonal so that she may represent and particularize issues of concern for the masses and the other as a particular person not required to give voice to the collective, but to be possessed by one particular person. What confounds the condition of double consciousness for Verena is that neither version of herself is rooted in her own awareness of the self.

Naturally, because she withholds Basil’s image of her as well as her feelings from Olive, Verena distances herself from Olive and from the knowledge Olive has instilled in her. This distance provides space for Basil’s version of her access to inform and influence her consciousness. Because Verena grapples with two competing modes of self-knowledge, she becomes aware of the consequences posed by choosing one over another, which once again demonstrates that she is not merely an “empty vessel” as she has some cognizance of herself beyond that which others provide her. For example, when Ransom first appears at Marmion “a mortal chill” creeps over her as she must now explain Ransom’s presence to Olive (361). The description of Verena as experiencing a “mortal chill” is significant to the notion that she is suffering from double consciousness because, according to the Emersonian ideal, to know oneself in two ways is impossible without some sort of painful consequence. She knows to admit her secrets and deceptions will hurt Olive but also will tarnish her promise to renounce and thus her identity as committed to their cause. She also knows to refuse to see Basil will sacrifice “the real” and liberated part of herself that she experienced with him earlier in Central Park. Choosing either Olive’s version or Basil’s version will come at the cost of renouncing some aspect of a self that she has been made to believe are both her.

The distance that Basil’s perception of Verena creates between her and Olive allows Verena to develop and practice self-reflection more concretely than she was able prior to this
point. Because Basil offers her a new and decidedly different option of knowing herself, Verena comes “at last to believe” and allows herself to transform into his version. His knowledge kindles “a light in which she saw herself afresh” and “she liked herself better than in the old exaggerated glamour of the lecture-lamps” (374). She admits to herself that “the truth had changed sides” and that “Instead of being constituted by nature for entertaining that sentiment in an exceptionally small degree (which had been the implication for her whole crusade, the apparent warrant of her offer of old to Olive to renounce)” was now constituted for that “largest range, the highest intensity” which was the love she felt “in every throb of her being” (374). Basil frames Verena as a particular person meant to have personal relationships based in emotion rather than a being designed simply to give voice to the causes of other particular persons. Verena knows that assuming this version of herself means to be “a partner of his struggle, of his severe, hard, unique stoicism” and that she must suffer in this way as a “condition to her happiness” (376). Rawlings argues that the “truth” or knowledge changes sides for Verena because “she realizes that her selfhood, or the reflection that constructs it at least, is other-directed, and contingent on sentiment” so that “to see herself reflected is to encounter a reflection and to become, in turn reflective.” And as she reflects on her love for Basil, “she discovers a sentiment that qualifies her to enter social and human realms as distinct from those of the puppet theaters and drawing room platforms” that she previously occupied (Rawlings 236).

The idea that Verena sees herself as “other-directed” is important here because it does reflect her most self-aware moment in the novel. I would like to suggest, however, that this self-awareness is not initiated by emotional sentiments, such as love for Ransom or loyalty to Olive. Rather, Verena more concretely demonstrates self-reflection because she has access to a consciousness that is all her own. Though this consciousness is only made accessible to her
through the opposing versions of herself that are provided via Olive and Basil, the sentiment she really finds appealing is not really as that of lecturess speaking on behalf of a collective or a part of a more particularized relationship that Basil offers, but is one where she acknowledges her own will and desires. The secondary image of herself that Basil provides forces Verena to distance herself cognitively from Olive’s. This distance not only allows room for Basil’s knowledge to occupy a space within her conscious, but it forces Verena to acknowledge her own desires in order to choose either Olive’s construction of herself or Basil’s. The narrator notes that as the truth changes sides for Verena she recognizes her own desire “to keep on pleasing others” as well as her immense “desire to please herself” and consequently feels “strained and aching” and wonders how far it “was necessary to go in the path of self-sacrifice” (376). Though Verena will remain torn between Olive and Basil for the remainder of the novel, in this moment she acknowledges and gives voice to a consciousness separate from their influences.

What Verena “loves” then is not necessarily Basil, but the sense of self she gains access to as he initiates the condition of double consciousness for her. Basil’s declaration and subsequent courtship provoke Verena to acknowledge competing versions of herself, but they also require she confront her feelings about each version. As she gives herself over to Basil’s version—and I would argue here that she only accepts this version above Olive’s because it is both new and different as well as allows her the freedom to recognize her own agency—she must penetrate who she is outside of each version. And Verena is a person who likes to please others even at the cost of herself.

Her desire to please others causes her to lose herself to the consciousness of others. At the end of the novel, Verena appears “glad” that Basil has “rescued” her from her public speech at Boston’s Music Hall. The narrator, however, notes “though she was glad” she was also “in
tears” and that “It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed” (432). These final lines indicate that the cost of Verena’s condition of double consciousness is not necessarily knowing herself as either the voice of Olive’s cause or a possession of Basil’s, but as a particular person at all. Basil’s success at influencing Verena’s consciousness occurs because he provides an opposing image of her to that of Olive’s, and this difference necessitates that she distance herself from Olive’s image in order to entertain both versions of herself. Once she does this, she reaffirms her early malleability and because of Basil’s persistence, like Olive’s before him, his version overtakes Olive’s and thus he wins her over. Yet, in that brief moment of space where both versions were competing, Verena becomes aware of herself and her desires outside of each construction of herself.

Verena’s actual condition of double consciousness amounts not to a choice between knowing herself either as Olive does or as Basil does, but to a kind of knowledge comprised of a self understood impersonally through external constructions and a self understood through her own experience, beliefs, and desires. When she taps into her consciousness, she allows herself to become a particular person with a distinctive personality. She thus functions as a site on which James tests the limitations of a consciousness forced to choose between her self-knowledge and the knowledge of self as constructed by others. In Marmion, when she feels something akin to love for Basil, Verena formulates knowledge of herself on her own terms. Her newly acquired self-knowledge that she is a people-pleaser causes her turmoil because she wants to please both Olive and Basil. Yet, their versions and desires for her are so dichotomous that she must ultimately choose because they cannot coexist. The reason Verena cries at the end is not because she feels doomed to a life of domesticity or because she left the world of public-speaking behind,
but because she has failed to please Olive when she pleases Basil; and though she pleases herself by choosing Basil, this pleasure is only temporary. What Verena realizes and cries over at the end of novel is that by choosing either Olive or Basil she chooses against herself and denies her growing particularity and personality.

The problem with the figuration of the condition of double consciousness in *The Bostonians* is that Verena is left with no option but to choose against herself—her self-knowledge until the moment in Marmion is entirely constructed by others, which renders her unaware of herself as a particular person with a fixed personality in the corporeal world. When she does experience true self-awareness it is only after someone else has offered her a different pre-constructed version of herself. Her only access to self-knowledge is granted only after Basil paints her in a new and different light. Her choice to go with Basil at the end of the novel is one that reflects his connection to the access his version grants to her consciousness rather than any real belief or desire to inhabit the form of herself he constructs. Olive’s austerity and indoctrination, as well as the fact that her version of Verena resembles previous notions, denies this access by forcing Verena to commit and renounce. Olive denies Verena the very liberty she promises and thus prohibits any exploration of consciousness outside of her established parameters. Verena’s choice to move from one construction of herself to another, or from one “union” to another remains outside of her own possession of her self: neither allows her to transcend that identity in order to exercise her own consciousness nor to become a particular person with a personality, and a mind, of her own.

James’ characterization of Verena thus demonstrates the limitations of paradigms for consciousness that requires knowing oneself in a variety of ways. James employs the condition of double consciousness to demonstrate the consequences of knowing oneself in different ways
as Verena must ultimately choose against her desire to know herself outside of the constructions of self imposed upon her. In effect, Verena denies herself as a self. By allowing Verena to choose between Basil and Olive at all, James limits the potential of her particularity and thus her personhood as he has done throughout *The Bostonians*. Her choice, and the narrator’s subsequent fear that the union will cause more tears, reflects the limits James imposes on Verena’s consciousness as she cannot ever fully possess herself because she chooses between two preconceived ideas of self. Her self-knowledge then is limited by these pre-existing versions of who she is, versions in which she has no real opportunity to reconcile Olive’s and Basil’s knowledge of her, and no means for integrating how they know her with her own growing sense of self. Rawlings argues “unless there is pain, there can be no consciousness” and this is certainly true for Verena (238). The pain of having to choose between not just Olive and Basil but between their ideas of her self and her growing self-awareness both grants and destroys her consciousness.

Although the idea that double consciousness is a destructive condition that causes suffering predominates in *The Bostonians*, James has difficulty demonstrating the extent of its devastation for an individual because of the ways external constructions of Verena’s consciousness limit her ability to develop true “self-knowledge.” Verena does adequately demonstrate the limitations of human consciousness when affected with multiple modes of knowing the self, but the consequences of these limitations are only implied by the novel’s final lines rather than explicitly portraying the often-catastrophic effects to the self that such a condition imposes. Where James fails with Verena in this sense, he succeeds with Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*. 
James’ reader is indirectly introduced to Milly Theale in Book Third of *Wings* by her Bostonian chaperone, Susan Shepard Stringham. What the reader knows about Milly then is merely what Susie knows about Milly, which “as she believed” was “knowing much more about Milly Theale than Milly herself knows” (76). Susie sees Milly as the “the real thing, the romantic life itself” even though she feels uncertain as to why Milly “was real” (79). Milly’s realness causes Mrs. Stringham “very consciously, from the first, to give something up for her” and so she gives up all—her life as a writer in Boston—in order to accompany Milly abroad (81). Mrs. Stringham, a “woman of the world,” views Milly as a “princess, the only one she had yet to deal with” and this “made all the difference” (86). Milly “was the biggest impression” of Susie’s life and “Mrs. Stringham by this time understood everything, was more than ever confirmed [. . .] in her view that it was life enough simply to feel her companion’s feelings” (81, 83).

For the others, Milly functions as “a light” in “which to be read,” and Susie attempts to read Milly over the course of the novel never really knowing her as fully as she thinks she does (84). Because Susie describes Milly as an impression she can feel, her actual knowledge of Milly’s consciousness is limited and thus “darkened” (76). She feels Milly as “the real thing” without knowing what makes her so much more real than any other person. What Susie does know of Milly is not knowledge of Milly herself—that is Milly’s consciousness—but rather how the rest of the world configures Milly. In other words, Susie knows Milly in the roles she plays for the other characters: Milly is Susie’s princess, Kate’s dove, and Densher’s and Lord Mark’s American girl.

This darkened knowledge of the “real” Milly does not belong exclusively to Susie. In Book Sixth at Mrs. Lowder’s dinner party, in Milly’s absence, Mrs. Lowder and Kate applaud
Densher for having “known” Milly first. When Susie rises to Milly’s defense by telling Densher he knows nothing, “not the least little bit” about Milly, he replies with “I certainly don’t know much [. . .] She’s beautiful, but I don’t say she’s easy to know [. . .] I didn’t forget her. One doesn’t forget an impression” (209-10). Kate then replies to this with: “You’re right about her not being easy to know. One sees her with intensity—sees her more than one sees almost any one; but then one discovers that that isn’t knowing her and that one may know better a person whom one doesn’t ‘see,’ as I say, half so much” (211). Millicent Bell argues that Milly “is problematic and inscrutable, someone who others try, unsuccessfully, to bring to definition,” that James wished to “propose or to test the value of her indefiniteness” as “she is observed and reflected on by all the other characters.” Bell goes on to argue that “their problem with Milly is James’s own [. . .] the problem of defining human individuality in relation to its living acts” (314). Despite frequent encounters with Milly, neither Susie, Kate, nor Merton can know her consciousness completely, because Milly is always conscious of how they “see” her. There are no common terms for which to define Milly except for the roles which the other characters assign her (princess, dove, American girl) which renders her undefinable and unknowable.

Similarly, Milly’s limited consciousness replicates her appearance in the novel: the reader only really has full knowledge of Milly’s consciousness when she is featured alone and these moments are restricted through the novel’s narration. When Milly shares moments with Susie, Kate, Densher, or even Lord Mark the narrator mediates her consciousness by depicting her awareness of how the others see her. This is perhaps best demonstrated by Milly’s initial encounter with Lord Mark during her first dinner party at Lancaster Gate. The narrator notes Milly’s awareness that Lord Mark had traveled to New York and his trips had “helped him to place her, and she was more and more sharply conscious of having [. . .] been popped into the
compartment in which she was to travel for him” (105). The narrator goes on to remark that most girls would resent Lord Mark’s assumptions, but that Milly’s “kind of mind” was “made all for mere seeing and taking” which made her charming as well as such a success with the others (105).

Milly’s limited presence, and particularly the rare moments we see her fully conscious, cause critics like Virginia Fowler to argue that Milly, “unable and unwilling to create an identity of her own,” accepts the roles the other characters “envision for her” such as Kate’s dove and Susie’s princess (60). Isolated cognitively from the other characters and thus a victim to their schemes, Milly, like Verena, does not possess any sort of self-knowledge. What Fowler doesn’t account for are the scenes where Milly appears to not only have a clarity of her own consciousness but also some sort of possession over it, such as in the Bronzino portrait scene or when she goes to Regent’s Park alone after her second visit with Sir Luke. Gary Kuchar’s argument that “Milly’s consciousness is conveyed in conditional and hypothetical terms, effecting a profound sense of distance between herself and the other characters, as well as herself and the reader” seems more apt at describing not only these moments where Milly appears to be in full possession of herself, but also those in which the narrator mediates her consciousness by describing her awareness of how the other characters view her to the reader (179). Kuchar also notes that the distance between Milly’s consciousness and the reader “will begin to narrow as she moves towards greater self-awareness” (179). These moments, in other words, feature less intervention on Milly’s behalf by the narrator or the other characters and more direct access to Milly’s thoughts as they occur to her.

Presented as a series of ebbs and flows, Milly’s consciousness restricts how much the reader (or the other characters) can possibly know Milly while simultaneously leaving the
impression or feeling that we do in fact have complete knowledge of her. But limitations imposed on others’ knowledge of Milly does not necessarily correspond to what Milly knows of herself. Despite her limited presence in the novel, Milly seems to know herself far better than either of the “successive centres” that James suggests make up her “circumference” know themselves, as Kate and Densher spend countless pages considering who they are and contemplating their own actions as their plot is unraveled (this is especially true in the case of Densher).

James features Milly not only as his “fixed centre” but also as a character whose consciousness is often impenetrable to those around her even as she exhibits qualities of a person who knows herself and allows that knowledge to develop with her. I am suggesting that Milly succeeds where Verena fails. Milly’s function in the *The Wings of the Dove* is to serve as site in which a version of Emersonian double consciousness is enacted in order to demonstrate the destructive consequences such a consciousness can have not only for individual persons, but also for those intimately involved with that person. Emersonian double consciousness refuses the reconciliation or integration of dual modes of knowing the self. The lacunae that prevent access to Milly—Kate’s and Densher’s inability to fully “see” her, the reader’s convoluted introduction to her state of mind—demonstrate the irreconcilability at the heart of Emerson’s concept.

In addition to the untenability of double consciousness, another characteristic of this Emersonian ideal is the awareness that two competing modes of self-knowledge exist. In Emerson’s writing, these competing modes often take a variety of forms such as: understanding vs. the soul, the public vs. the private (the version presented in *The Bostonians*), the material vs. the spiritual, and so on. What all of these dichotomies point to is a division between knowledge of the self as a particular person, and knowledge of the self as part of something much larger and
impersonal. In *Wings*, Milly emerges as a figure who experiences the condition of double consciousness because she must confront a similar dichotomy: in order to possess or know herself, Milly must confront her imminent death and the effects that both her life and death have on her as a particular person, but also the effects (or lack thereof) that each will have on the world more generally.

During the first dinner at Lancaster Gate in Book Fourth, we get our first glimpse into Milly’s consciousness. Here, with help from the narrator, we learn that Milly hopes to gain insight about the differences between her and Kate Croy from Lord Mark. When she does not, because he tells her that he has “failed” with Kate and does not “make her out,” Milly is glad because “explanations would in truth have taken her much too far” and that there were “probably, many things, as to which she would learn more and which glimmered there already as part and parcel of that larger ‘real’” in which she found herself upon arriving in London with Susie (109). In two important ways these thoughts reflect Milly’s developing consciousness and more importantly initiate her condition of double consciousness. First, she senses that she is “part and parcel of that larger ‘real,’” which in this particular instance represents her growing awareness of the complexities of London society. This recognition is significant, even if she cannot fully integrate exactly what it means to be a part of the larger real, because for the first time the reader sees Milly as seeing herself as more than just herself. Yet, to know oneself as more than just her particular self, according to the logic of double consciousness, requires a sacrifice of the self as previously known to the person; thus, Milly must come to first know

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28 In *Nature* Emerson writes, “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (10). This passage is significant to the discussion of Milly’s double consciousness because here Emerson notes that his personality or particularity vanishes and when it does, he is able to immerse himself and become part of the larger entity of God or the Universal Being. Likewise, Milly though she cannot access it fully at this point in the novel, recognizes that she may be privy to knowledge which will demonstrate to her how she will help compose “that larger ‘real.’”
herself as a particular person and because at this moment in the novel she has not quite realized or possessed herself (as demonstrated through the narrator’s mediation as well as the other characters reflections on her without any direct access to Milly’s thoughts) she must come to knowledge of the role she plays in the “larger real” more carefully and gradually.

Second, this scene is important because it exacerbates Milly’s double consciousness as she begins to become aware of the distance separating her from the other characters, especially Kate. Milly finds herself wondering in the very next chapter, after a more private encounter with Kate, why “she herself was so ‘other’” from Kate because they lack what James often terms a “common consciousness” and experience—a “failure of common terms” (123). Double consciousness emerges in these first unfiltered views of Milly because she senses her difference and otherness not only from Kate, but from English society more generally. She can’t quite explain her difference or particularity, but realizes that she is and starts to apprehend knowledge of herself as such. The feeling she expresses at Lancaster Gate that a more truthful or fuller explanation of these differences would have taken her too far because she has yet to acknowledge her own mortality, allow her to recognize herself in a manner that differentiates her from Kate (such as Kate’s cruel streak when she talks of Susie). Milly must come to this knowledge gradually because it will require her to sacrifice herself—a sacrifice she cannot make until she possesses or knows herself more fully.

Critics often treat Milly’s confrontation with the Bronzino portrait at Lord Mark’s Matcham estate, for instance, as the first time that she becomes fully aware of what Sheila Teahan calls her “abysmal otherness” (114). According to Teahan, Milly is “looking at the portrait through tears” and

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29 Teahan also argues that the first time the reader sees Milly’s “abysmal otherness” is when Susie sees Milly sitting on the edge of a cliff in Switzerland and wonders if Milly is about to throw herself off and then decides that for Milly “it wouldn’t be for a questions of a flying leap and thereby of a quick escape. It would be a question of taking full in the face the whole assault of life” (89). But because the reader does not have access to Milly’s consciousness
sees the woman in whom Lord Mark and Kate Croy find Milly’s likeness and thinks to herself that “she was dead, dead, dead” before exclaiming aloud that she “shall never be better than this” (139). Kristin Boudreau credits this exclamation to Milly’s realization not of her own mortality but of the realization of the “deadness of existence.” She says that what seems to trouble Milly most is not that she will die one day, but that “even during her own lifetime she will outlive her moments of transcendent thought and feeling” or her own subjectivity (105). Conversely, Kuchar reads Milly as recognizing her own death in the portrait and the moment when “the slowly connecting pieces of Milly’s consciousness begin to merge” because the portrait functions “prosopopoeiaically” for Milly as it “puts a face to something which” has been an absence for her (180). But it matters little what exactly Milly comes to recognize regarding her own mortality when viewing the portrait because whatever it is causes her to acquire some recognition, and thus knowledge, even if that knowledge is not made clear (or clearly accessible) to the reader at this point in Milly’s story.

This newfound knowledge is another sign of her particularity in relation to Kate and the others; Milly’s viewing of the portrait simply makes her more conscious of this difference even as Milly struggles to name the difference. Milly tries to differentiate herself from the woman in the picture by telling Lord Mark that though the woman’s complexion is green, hers is “greener” and that her hands “are larger” (140). When he tells her but “surely” she must “catch” the resemblance, Milly retorts that “one never knows one’s self” (140). Yet, Milly is starting to know herself in this scene not only through whatever the portrait signifies to her—regardless of whether or not they reflect her growing awareness of her own mortality or her growing desire to live despite the “deadness of existence”—but also how the others look at her and she looks back at this point in the novel, it is difficult to know whether or not this is indeed a moment where Milly starts to come to terms with her particularity.
at them with the portrait looming over her. It is here where Milly starts to wonder how Kate must look to Densher and how she compared. And because seeing or looking signifies knowledge in *Wings*, Milly starts to know herself as “other,” something separate from and different than Kate despite their budding relationship.

In this moment, when Milly begins to come to terms with the multiple ways in which her conscious develops, the reader gains more access to her thoughts. Milly is most clearly visible to the reader in the fourth chapter of Book Fifth as she leaves her physician, Sir Luke Strett, and contemplates what she has learned from him—that she must do nothing but “live,” which signifies to her that she is in fact dying. Her entrance to Regent’s Park finds her contemplating her meeting with the doctor and demonstrating more fully a duality of consciousness. When Milly first enters the park she thinks to herself that she is glad she is alone because “No one in the world could have sufficiently entered into her state; no tie would have been close enough to enable a companion to walk beside her without some disparity” (153). She feels that she must only be surrounded by “the human race at large, present all round her, but inspiringly impersonal” (154). Her visit with Sir Luke has “made a mixture of her consciousness—a strange mixture that tasted at one and the same time of what one had lost and what had been given her” (154). On the one hand, this mixture of consciousness demonstrates Milly’s knowledge that she will die, but it also comes with the knowledge that she now has the freedom to live if she so chooses. Superficially, this is one version of double consciousness—Milly “could live” if she “would,” but only if she “gives up” or “darkens” her knowledge of the fact that she is in the process of dying because she cannot simultaneously know herself as actively living and actively
dying according to the logic of Emersonian double consciousness (155). On the other hand, however, Milly’s “mixture of consciousness” is more complex than just her knowing herself as choosing to live even while she dies. Here Milly more completely recognizes her particularity and the particularity of her situation. To be in the company of someone close to her at this moment would mean that Milly would have to acknowledge and name her particularity as she recognizes her own mortality. For Milly that disparity is what she calls “the question of ‘living’” by both “option” and “volition” whereas Kate, Merton, and Susie don’t choose to live, they live because “they could” without thinking about or knowing what living means for them (154-5). Instead of being forced to name her difference or her particularity as an individual person, she prefers the impersonality of the masses in the park.

This preference to be among the masses of London, in the “current” of life resembles the moment at Lancaster Gate in which Milly senses that she is part of some “larger real” that complete knowledge of would “have taken her much too far” without really knowing what it means to be a part of something impersonal or of what role she is to play in the “larger real.” Kuchar says in this scene “Milly realizes a profound ‘consciousness of relations’ through a recognition of her own mortality” (171). Milly can come to terms with a “consciousness of relations” only after she comes to possess herself as an individual, which necessitates that she confront her mortality because it differentiates her from the other characters in *Wings*.

Later in the Regent’s Park scene as she goes “into it further” she finds that “this was the real thing” and that “the real thing was to be quite away from the pompous roads, well within the centre” (155). To be a part of “the real thing,” to be immersed “well within the centre” for Milly

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30 Several critics note the interesting juxtaposition of Milly’s “would live” “could live” thoughts. Among some of the most interesting are Sharon Cameron’s analysis in *Thinking in Henry James* and Sheila Teahan’s in *The Rhetorical Logic of Henry James*. 
is to be “in the same box” and to share with the masses “their great common anxiety”—“the practical question of life” (155). “The main connexion” she shares with the masses is “the current” that moved among them and was “a current determined [. . .] by others” (168). The common anxiety connects Milly to other people and it is impersonal unlike the personality of the relationships she shares with Susie, Densher, or Kate. Her ability to immerse herself in the common anxiety results because she is not forced to name her difference to anyone else. More importantly, “the real thing” is a relief to this common anxiety and it too is impersonal. Life as merely a current that moves based on the determination of the wants and needs of others means that individuals have no real control over their particular life’s outcome; the current relieves the anxiety of being a particular person trying to exist within the confines the corporeal world. Thus, Milly’s death is out of her hands just as it is for the others with whom she finds herself sharing “a box” in Regent’s Park and this realization enables her to live through her own volition for as long as she can.

This scene in the park then is the moment in which Milly is faced with “a mixture of consciousness” or double consciousness as she is forced to know herself not only in a particular and individual way—in that her life is limited—, but also in the impersonal way as she shares a common anxiety with the rest of the park’s inhabitants—that she, like them, will die and as a result will render her life as well as her death of little significance to anyone except those in which she maintains a personal connection. Kuchar argues that in this scene Milly “communes” with the world in front of her while at the same times knows herself “outside it” as she is “now able to distance herself from herself without the disturbing effects” of the earlier “self-objectification” she experiences during the Bronzino scene in order to become “genuinely otherwise” and “whole” (183). Sharon Cameron, on the other hand, argues that Milly’s “self is
liberated from any fixed mental state by the novel’s treating that state as if it could be understood by analogy to frames of mind dissociated first from one’s own person and then, further, from actual persons” (147). The analogies to frames of mind in which Cameron refers is to the thinking of mortality that the other park-goers are doing, which enables Milly to dissociate from her person in order to see her own as well as their thinking as externalized. Read in the context of double consciousness, however, these different interpretations of the Regent’s Park scene are less at odds than they at first appear and work jointly to highlight the scene’s significance to the rest of the novel. Because Milly comes to know herself as both particular person and part of something larger and impersonal in this scene she does in fact become “whole” as Kuchar notes. In other words, in this moment Milly becomes aware that she is conscious of herself in two ways and that these two modes of knowledge often compete with one another especially when she is in the presence of the other characters. Likewise, it is because Milly experiences this wholeness or moment of double consciousness that she is able to be “liberated from any fixed mental state,” and release herself from singular knowledge: that is to know herself solely as particular person or part of something more general and impersonal.

Milly’s wholeness or liberation is not sustainable. Recalling Emerson’s warning that personal and impersonal aspects of a dual consciousness are irreconcilable, it should come as no surprise that after this scene in Wings the reader has very limited access to Milly’s consciousness before the narrator completely removes her from the novel altogether, even as the plot twists rely upon her. Aside from Milly’s brief walk through her Venetian palace, she is rarely present though often discussed by the other characters until she ultimately “turns her face to the wall” and gives up her “volition” to live (334). In the Preface, James determines that “Milly’s situation ceases” after this scene in Regent’s Park to be “‘renderable’ in terms closer than those supplied
by Kate’s intelligence, or, in a richer degree, by Densher’s, or, for one fond hour, by poor Mrs. Stringham’s” (12). As Milly attains double consciousness, by recognizing herself as both particular and impersonal to embody “the real” as Susie designates her early on, Milly has limited contact with the other characters for the rest of the novel. And though Milly functions as the site on which double consciousness is tested, double consciousness as a condition replicates the untenability of the Emersonian idea: the reader as well as the other characters are unable to contain Milly’s consciousness for any substantive period of time. The direct access we had to Milly and her thoughts in Regent’s Park is fleeting. Instead, we are granted access to her indirectly: through either the narrator, Kate, Densher, or Susie. Likewise, the characters themselves very rarely have any direct access to Milly and her state of mind; instead, they themselves maintain mediated relations with her either through one another or through Eugenio, her hired Venetian concierge.

Ostensibly, Milly dies after receiving the knowledge that Kate and Densher are engaged from Lord Mark and she begins to “see” herself as “part and parcel” of their manipulations to both acquire her fortunes and give her the love she so desires before her death. Here again, we see Milly attaining double consciousness as she recognizes her particularity as a part of Kate’s and Densher’s larger and quite impersonal scheme. And just as Milly is, as Sheila Teahan terms it, “effaced” and “erased” from the novel’s narrative as a result of her double consciousness (118), she must also be, as Leo Bersani notes, “renounced insofar as she is a distinct individual” (144). Just as Verena must choose between Olive’s, Basil’s, and her own perception of self for The Bostonians to move forward, Milly’s death is necessary for the plot of Wings to finally unfold and for the narrative to continue, but also for James to demonstrate how destructive a condition of double consciousness can be for a particular person. As such, Milly must die
because one cannot simultaneously know herself as both particular and impersonal without some sacrifice or loss to the self. Thus, Milly’s death effectively demonstrates the contradictory terms of double consciousness: as soon as she becomes wholly conscious of herself, she is inaccessible to every other person including the reader.

Consequently, Milly is a more successful test site for the condition of double consciousness than Verena. Though it is true that Milly experiences moments where she considers how others “see” her, Milly possesses her consciousness, albeit temporarily, through knowledge she gathers based on her own experience. Verena’s knowledge of herself is second-hand and derived from those with whom she is closest. What Verena possesses at the end of *The Bostonians* is not necessarily a consciousness all her own, but rather an awareness that she has a consciousness that has (or had as the case may be) the potential to know first-hand and that awareness is stifled by her acquiescence to Basil’s version of her. Though both women have significant moments of self-awareness in their respective park scenes, Milly, because she has more agency over her conscious and its development, experiences a more specific condition of double consciousness with knowledge of herself as a particular as well as a constituent part of the impersonal. Verena cannot fully enter into this state because her consciousness is possessed by others and not wholly her own. This difference in the possession of each woman’s consciousness correlates to her respective end: Verena does not fully experience the potentially devastating consequences of double consciousness through a literal death as Milly does. Instead, what results from her multi-faceted knowledge of her consciousness is a loss of control or possession of that consciousness following from her acceptance of Basil’s construction of her (or Olive’s if her choice had been different). Verena’s ending is unsettling not necessarily because her union with Basil means that she will be relegated to a domestic space and perhaps oppressed
by his will, but because she loses control of her own ability to develop knowledge of herself
without external influence. Milly, on the other hand, because she possesses her consciousness
internalizes multiple modes self-knowledge, faces the consequences of such a condition via her
literal and figurative removal from the novel.

4.2 Economies of Devastation

But there is also more at stake in the articulation of double consciousness than the
question of Verena’s happiness or Milly’s death. James uses Verena and Milly to demonstrate
the disastrous consequences of double consciousness for the individual who attempts and attains
such a state of mind, but he also demonstrates the destructive possibilities for those involved
with and in relation to such an individual. John Carlos Rowe argues of Wings that “Milly Theale
ultimately brings the characters of the novel to a consciousness of one another, forcing them to
recognize the distance that separates their respective desires,” and this is no less true for the
characters of The Bostonians as Verena grapples with her self-awareness (174). Verena’s
recognition of her consciousness as an entity of its own in addition to something constructed and
possessed by the influence of others as well as Milly’s double consciousness force the central
characters of each novel to become conscious of themselves. The knowledge the other characters
gain from this consciousness leads to what Rowe calls “a shattered, fallen world become
conscious of itself” (174). And it is this knowledge that governs what I will term James’s
economy of devastation. The limitations James imposes on the consciousness of Verena and
Milly directly affect the self-knowledge of characters like Densher and Olive; more importantly,
the effects of the knowledge each gains from their encounters with Milly and Verena annihilates
their previous modes of self-knowledge and renders each alone and without the very
relationships on which the plot of each novel depended.
Because Milly is a more successful iteration for the consequences of double consciousness and because superficially *Wings* is a novel about economic concerns, it is easier to demonstrate the emergence of an economy of devastation. James notes in the Preface that each of his “centres,” as well as his narrator, who critics commonly refer to as the Jamesian reflector, must be “selected and fixed” in an “economy of treatment” so that they form a “related point of view” or a “represented community of vision” (12). With the exception of Milly, whose consciousness is largely inaccessible except for those brief moments in which she experiences a condition resembling Emersonian double consciousness, the characters of *Wings* are “fixed” in a society whose social codes reflect economic anxiety. Kate, though she refuses to admit it to Aunt Maud, has a predilection for the finer, material aspects of life and as a result, though she loves Densher, cannot agree to marry him since he has no money or prospects; Aunt Maud, though she has enough of a fortune to take-in Kate and participate in London society, offers her charity and her niece to Lord Mark in hopes of gaining a title in the family so that she has more social clout. Densher, who is penniless and thinks of money in terms only by which to live, loves Kate enough to participate in her scheme against Milly despite sacrificing his integrity. Lord Mark must depend upon Mrs. Lowder as he is broke and has no prospects despite his title. Even Milly and Susie Stringham participate in this system once they arrive in London as Milly is hungry to experience the true “English” life: she insists Kate take her to visit her sister, Mrs. Condrip, because she pictures her as something out of a Dickens novel. These characters are trapped in a society which understands value in fiscal terms and views people and relationships simply as material means for enhancing their positions relative to the delicate and complicated social strata of English life.
At the simplest level, James’s “economy of treatment” is actually an economy of relations in the novel whereby people serve as capital. These characters constantly “give-up” and “renounce” one character for another in hopes of making the material or social gain of which they are desirous. This system is most lucid when Kate explains it to Milly early in their acquaintance. She tells her that theirs is a system of “working and being worked” where “every one who had anything to give [...] made the sharpest possible bargain for it, got at least its value in return” (117). She refers to these mutually beneficial relationships as “happy understandings” because “the worker in one connexion was the worked in another” and calls it “as broad as it was long—with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled” (117). Kate defends these “happy understandings” by declaring that part of the value of these “connexions” is that one learns his or her worth which he or she would “never have found out for” themselves (118). And when the naïve Milly wonders about her own “paying’ power,” Kate declines discussion with the exception that “Milly would pay a hundred per cent—and even to the end, doubtless, through the nose” and that “was just the beautiful basis on which they found themselves” (118). In other words, “happy understandings” are justifiable because the participants are able to gain valuable knowledge about their own worth that would have otherwise been unknowable. Milly then should be satisfied to know that she will be involved in a “happy understanding” of her own that will not only cost her greatly, but also provide her with self-knowledge about her value to those with whom she forms a relationship. Though different in terms of their representation, the “happy understandings” in Wings resemble the external influences that provide self-knowledge to Verena in The Bostonians.

Yet, none of Kate’s “happy understandings” come to fruition in the novel. By the conclusion of Wings, the relationships each character valued either for gain or for affection are
decimated by this system in which people function as commodities up for trade. Because Kate mentions to Milly that part of the trade in the “worked and being worked” relationship is self-knowledge, there is more at stake than the mere trading in people for financial, material, and social gain. Instead, these “happy understandings” produce an economy of devastation whereby the knowledge each character gains through his or her “connexion” with another character has disastrous effects for the ways in which the character knows herself. The relationship, in other words, forces each character participating in the “happy understanding” to acquire a new mode of self-consciousness. One’s original self-knowledge and the new self-knowledge acquired via this relationship cannot co-exist, cannot reconcile with one another to form the “whole” or “liberated” person that Kuchar and Cameron locate in Milly via the scene in Regent’s Park. Rather, individual relationships annihilate the ways in which the participants know themselves, forcing them to “renounce” or “give-up” such relationships. Whether human connections made simply for avarice or from a combination of avarice and affection, the kind of self-knowledge required changes the participants and devastates the conditions of the original connection.

Milly is the most obvious example of the ways in which the limitations of the consciousness can devastate the individual. But when considering the ways in which double consciousness produces an economy of devastation among the other characters, Densher emerges as the most obvious byproduct of the destructive effects of a doubly conscious mind. James notes in the Preface that the “state of others” as “affected by” Milly was their “case” for they “too should have a ‘case,’ bless them, quite as much as she” and that this is the “correlative half” of the novel’s focus (7). In an economy of devastation, Milly functions as the novel’s true center of consciousness—no matter how absent, elided, or effaced she may be—because her connection to every other character forces them to “see” and know themselves in a new way. Through the self-
knowledge her connection to them provides, Milly acts as a destructive agent that devastates their current knowledge, much like the gradual confrontation of her own mortality that forces her to acknowledge herself as both a particular person with personal ties—her relationships with Susie, Kate, Densher—as well as an impersonal entity that makes up the larger stuff of life (even if that impersonality only demonstrates her as a necessary component to the scheming of her friends in order for their lives to continue as they desire). The difference between what happens to Milly and what happens to the other characters as a result of these competing modes of self-knowledge corresponds to Milly’s ability to entertain both modes of knowing, albeit temporarily, at the same time. She achieves double consciousness, but as James confronts the limitations of the consciousness, she must sacrifice herself. Susie, Kate, and Densher, on the other hand, never transcend a singular knowledge of themselves—instead, through their connections with one another and most especially with Milly, they replace one mode of self-knowledge with another, despite the catastrophic consequences this replacement causes to their relations with one another and their previous way of knowing themselves.

The proof of how Milly affects the “state” of the other characters is most evident in Densher, who appears as quite a different man at the end of the novel than at the beginning. Densher, for most of the novel, describes himself as a man of inaction. He is a man “painfully aware” of his financial shortcomings as well as “the demands” that Kate “and Mrs. Lowder are making on him” (Bersani 135). As a man of feeling rather than action, he is content enough to acquiesce to Kate’s and Mrs. Lowder’s demands because he knows he feels intensely for Kate and that he likes Milly well enough to comply with their plotting.  

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31 It is worth noting here that though Kate’s and Aunt Maud’s plan is the same—for Milly to love Merton and for Merton to shower Milly with enough attention so that she feels loved—their end goal is different. Mrs. Lowder hopes that Merton will return Milly’s affection and fall out of love with Kate, so that her niece will be free to marry Lord Mark (and as a result, Lord Mark will fall out of love with Milly). Kate, on the other hand, only wants Merton
fully understanding what the plot involves. Only when he does have a fuller knowledge of what he is to do with Milly, does he begin to resent his inaction. Once in Venice he reflects that he had “sunk so deep” because it was “all doing what Kate had conceived for him; it was in the least doing—and that had been his notion of his life—anything he himself had conceived” and this “glowed for him” as a “kind of rage [...] an exasperation, a resentment” (283). Moreover, he was starting to notice that he was becoming “conscious” of a “general necessity” that “making the best was the instinct [...] of a man somehow aware that if he let go at one place he should let go everywhere” (283). Merton partly recognizes how far he has “sunk” morally through his interactions with Milly, whose company he does enjoy and who through her own goodness makes him feel his own moral depravity. This insight causes him to reflect upon his own inaction, which has characterized much of his life, in his relationships with both Kate and Milly. For him this produces an awareness that he has conceded his own desires in an effort to make Kate happy and that recognition results in both a resentment and a disgust that gradually starts to convert Densher from a passive spectator directed by others to a man of action.

The first way he demonstrates this shift is through his insistence that Kate “give up” something for him by coming to his rooms and consummating their relationship privately if they cannot do so publicly through marriage. For this, he tells Kate, he will help Kate defraud Milly of her money. His demanding something of Kate illustrates to the reader his growing conflict with his own consciousness and the way in which he has come to know and define himself. His promise, however, to remain complicit in Kate’s plans also demonstrates this conflict rather than any definite change in character. Densher does remain passive, he remains so passive in fact that after Lord Mark has visited Milly for a second time and she then refuses to admit Densher for to act as interested as it takes, even if that means he must marry Milly, for Milly to leave him a substantial amount of her money upon her death so that he and Kate can eliminate the financial hiccup in their relationship.
visitation that he decides “to keep thoroughly still” (331). He does nothing either to contradict the knowledge that Lord Mark has brought Milly of his engagement to Kate, nor to confirm it. Instead he contents himself with the idea that Lord Mark is “a brute of a man” for wanting to hurt Milly, while he is the kinder of the two for not only remaining in Venice, but also for keeping quiet (332). This, not unlike Verena’s attempt to lead Ransom back in “the general” during their encounter in Central Park, becomes Densher’s defense mechanism and resistance to the experience of double consciousness.

Only after Susie Stringham’s visit to bring the news that Milly “has turned her face to the wall” and Sir Luke’s gracious touring of Venice with him, does Densher sense “the larger real” in the current of Venetian life and begins to recognize himself as something other than the inactive man willing to sacrifice his moral integrity to please the woman he loves. The narrator remarks:

The result of it was the oddest consciousness as of a blest calm after a storm. He had been trying for weeks, as we know, to keep superlatively still, and trying it largely in solitude and silence; but he looked back on it now as on the heat of fever. The real, the right stillness was this particular form of society. (353)

The “blest calm” and “right stillness” Densher experiences in his walks with Sir Luke resemble the “current of life” Milly experiences in London as she starts to recognize the impersonality of life. In this current, Densher starts to “take it in perfectly”—that is, his situation—and “could turn cold at the image looking out of it” (353). Turning cold, Densher examines his situation and condition objectively and impersonally. The “heat of the fever” of remaining “superlatively still” has subsided and he begins to understand how his inactivity makes him a player in Kate’s scheme and Milly’s demise. Densher’s comprehension of his inaction as if outside of himself
immerses him in the “current of life” or the impersonal. It liberates him from his passivity and ultimately drives him to action as he returns to London and deals with Kate. Perhaps more important though, the calm Densher feels is a relief from the double consciousness he began to suffer with his arrival in Venice. The narrator says, “The liberation was an experience that held its own” and that “he had so fondly hoped for it” (353). Densher’s liberation alleviates the anxiety he felt about his own passivity. By “feeling the real” or the impersonal in the current of life in the Venetian streets, Densher is “let off” from the consequences of this passivity and comes to see himself as more than just a particular or singularly defined person. This letting off or liberation allows him to trade one form of self-knowledge for another, ending his temporary condition of double consciousness and allows him to reemerge from the experience as a newly defined version of himself so that he may start playing a more active role in his own life.

Ultimately, Densher’s connection with Milly forces this conversion of consciousness from man of inaction to man of action who maintains moral integrity even if it means sacrificing those he loves (and in Densher’s case he not only must sacrifice Kate as he gives up knowing himself as passive, but also Milly whose death was partly caused by this passivity). Bersani argues that from his relationship with and the subsequent redemption he receives from Milly (in the form of an inheritance), Densher “emerges from his conflict having decisively chosen his higher self and renounced the acquisitive self that would possess the symbols of value in the material world.” And though he is “fully conscious now, has been wholly assimilated” to himself” his “spiritual victory does not resolve the moral ambiguities of his social behavior,” which means he must alienate himself from the people who required him to engage in such behavior (Bersani 142-3). He cannot, as in accordance with his new sense of identity, maintain relationships with Kate and Mrs. Lowder because they only know him and found value in him
prior to his relationship with Milly. The new Densher is not someone they understand as evidenced by his final encounters with Kate.

Thus, Milly’s role as the central consciousness of *The Wings of the Dove*, the common point of connection for all of the other characters in the novel, creates an economy of devastation by helping each character come to terms with new ways of knowing the self. The allows the other characters to experience double consciousness temporarily, to expand the confines of their consciousness in order to redefine themselves. But such knowledge also negates the very relations those characters plan on “working” and “being worked by” as they strive to participate in the larger social economy in which they value so highly. Their various plans of “working” one another ostensibly work to cancel out the value they originally saw in one another. For instance, while Kate and Mrs. Lowder form a connection with Milly for her money, the very thing they prize in her is also the same thing that causes their undoing: Milly’s money devastates Kate’s relationship with Densher and destroys Mrs. Lowder’s plans for Lord Mark. And by being forced to choose between Densher and Milly’s money, Kate must define herself in a new way—one she has struggled to avoid over the course of the novel—as someone who cannot live without material wealth. The economy of devastation not only necessitates that each particular person trade existing knowledge of themselves to participate in the relationships they try “working” and “being worked by”, but also that they sacrifice those very relationships to gain what appears as a more valuable way of knowing themselves as new versions of the self keep a person successively participating in the physical world.

Although its concern with economies does not take a fiscal form and its articulation of double consciousness is less clear, *The Bostonians* also produces an economy of devastation that
annihilates individual consciousness through relation. Rawlings argues that “At one level, *The Bostonians* engages with the question of personal identity in relation to consciousness” and this is certainly the case with Verena as she encounters her consciousness and unsuccessfully tries to gain possession over it (232). Her relationships with Olive, Basil, her parents, etc. devastate any potential she has for possession as their forms of self-awareness try to integrate their modes of knowing into her own. What results is what Banta calls “a kind of spiritual murder” that takes place when the consciousness of two particular individuals attempt “to merge at the expense of one” and thus work to “annihilate personality” (103). Verena then, as a person who experiences double consciousness, encounters the consciousness of the other characters and alienation from personality and particularity, and this distance produces her final tears at the end of *The Bostonians*.

While critics like Wolstenholme argue that “given James’s terms in the novel, the individual has no ‘personality’ or unique existence” in the first place, it cannot be ignored that characters like Olive and Basil have distinct personalities that separate them not only from one another and from Verena, but also from the ideologies that they come to represent (583). Despite their particularity though, Basil and Olive also experience the limitations of consciousness through an economy of devastation. By examining external influences such as social interactions on individual consciousness, James stages this economy of devastation to further emphasize the consequences of double consciousness outside of the consciousness of particular individuals. For James, economies of devastation rely on connections or relationships in which knowledge, and

32 *The Bostonians*, as most critics note, is concerned with “the warring claims of the democratic attitude and the aristocratic attitude” (Gabler 96). Inherent in this struggle, as noted by Howe and Trilling, are also concerns about what constitutes “natural relationships,” gendered identity, the political, and the spiritual, as well as the public realm and the private sphere. The dichotomous nature of these challenges and the way in which the novel, and more particularly the narrator, negotiates these challenges can all be described as economic systems in and of themselves and they are no less significant, though beyond the scope of this argument, than the fiscal economy that surfaces in *Wings*. 
more particularly self-knowledge, is traded for new knowledge that decimates any prior notions of the self in the process; and these economies adhere to the Emersonian conception of double consciousness in that dual modes of knowing are irreconcilable to the individual. Moreover, if as Rawlings argues “feeling and consciousness are functions of and contingent on community,” then the very act of possessing self-knowledge determines consciousness as both particular and impersonal much as Milly experiences her conscious in Regents Park (237). Yet because persons cannot integrate multiple modes of self-knowledge, the ways in which the limitations of the human consciousness are present in characters like Olive is through an economy of devastation. Seeing consciousness as a function of and contingent on community means that as particular persons commune with the world and form relationships these relationships will inevitably destroy aspects of the particularity that define each person.

In contrast to Verena, Olive, from the outset, is a distinct personality with particularities that not only differentiate her from the other major figures in *The Bostonians*, but also more generally from people in her age, gender, and class demographics. Olive is first introduced by Mrs. Luna as a “nihilist” and later by Ransom as “a tragic figure” (37, 46). The narrator, however, describes Olive as prone to fits of “tragic shyness,” “morbid,” and filled with “silent rage” at the “usual things of life” (41-42). She is “unmarried by every implication of her being” and lives by a “theory which bade her put off the invidious differences and mingle in the common life” though in “her heart she loathed it” (47, 52). She prefers not to be “a representative of the aristocracy” and instead proudly associates the Chancellor name to “the bourgeoisie—the oldest and the best” (61). And, as noted earlier, though Olive was “constantly exposing herself to offence and laceration” through her career, “her most poignant suffering came from the injury of her taste” (57). In fact, Olive wishes “to work in another field” because
she “had long been preoccupied with the romance of the people” and an “immense desire to know intimately some very poor girl” (62). She even tells Mrs. Farrinder that she wants to not only give herself “up to others,” but also “to know everything that lies beneath and out of sight” in order to “enter into the lives of women who are lonely, who are piteous” because she wants “to be near them – to help them” (63). However, she has trouble speaking to these sorts of women and therefore will not represent her cause publicly. Ultimately, the narrator tells us that “Poor Olive was, in the nature of things, entangled in contradictions” (165).

These descriptions paint Olive as a person struggling to negotiate the person that she knows herself to be with the ideology she wants to represent. What distinguishes her personality is twofold. First, Olive is a person who conforms to societal norms such as taste and decorum. She prefers the finer things her “bourgeois” lifestyle provides and this differentiates her from the common people who she wants to mingle with and represent. Olive has trouble communicating or socializing with those that she desires because of her particularity; she does not share anything in common with those she wishes to know and more importantly she loathes the commonness of their life. Lionel Trilling notes that this is “the essence of Olive Chancellor’s nature” and “that she cannot endure social intercourse; a speech to a crowd is her notion of human communication” (94). Because she cannot endure social intercourse on an individual, one-on-one basis because of her personality, and because this inability counters her desires, she does not judge or relate to people as distinct personalities, but rather as “classes” like the men she despises or the women she wishes to liberate (127).

Second, Olive’s personality, as opposed to Verena’s impersonality, is defined by the contradictory roles she comes to represent in the novel: she is an advocate of equality, liberty, and democracy more generally while maintaining the privileges and social codes her upper-class
lifestyle provides. What makes her distinct from other people then is what critics like Gabler and Wardley term her ambivalence. The contradictory terms of her identity are what distinguish her from others and provide her with an essence of personality. Though critics like Ross LaBrie argue that “Olive’s weakness” is that “she fails to understand the passions which motivate her,” I wish to argue here that Olive possesses enough of an understanding to recognize the struggles her identity poses for her and to her relationships with others (103). This is evidenced not only through her remarks to Mrs. Farrinder that she cannot speak on behalf of the movement, but also in the many instances where the narrator reflects Olive’s awareness of the tensions within her own conscious. For instance, the narrator notes that Olive would be, much happier if the movements she was interested in could have been carried on only by the people she liked, and if revolutions, somehow, didn’t always have to begin with one’s self – with internal convulsions, sacrifices, executions. A common end, unfortunately, however fine as regards a special result, does not make community impersonal. (129)

This passage is noteworthy because it demonstrates Olive’s awareness of her particularity and her longing for something more general and impersonal as well as void of personalities that she dislikes or finds distasteful. Not only is Olive’s own particularity problematic for her, so are the

33 In “The Narrator’s Script: James’s Complex Narration in ‘The Bostonians,” Janet Gabler argues that “Verena’s primary role is to show Olive in the glare of all of her ambivalence,” and thus reflects the narrator’s ambivalence towards her as well (97). Lynn Wardley in “Women’s Voice, Democracy’s Body, and The Bostonians” also argues that Olive is ambivalent toward her own agenda (651).

34 Similarly to LaBrie’s reading of Olive as unaware, Howe makes the following argument about the contradictory nature of Olive’s character: “yearning for martyrdom” she finds no “satisfactory release” because “she cannot bear to acknowledge the private and contaminated sources of this yearning” and associates the contaminated source to be her “lesbianism” as it is “both cause and emblem of her social incapacity” (xxii, xxiii). This reading implies that Olive is not conscious of what causes her paradoxical nature. It is also worth noting here that Olive’s lesbianism as a source for her identity struggles was often used by early critics like Howe and Trilling to read the novel’s ending with Ransom’s victory as a return to what was natural. Peter Shaw in “Refuting Human Nature” notes that it is this idea that lead early scholars of the novel like Howe and Trilling to read the ending of The Bostonians as “the natural” reasserting “itself as mutual attraction reaches across the ideological divide between the lovers and they set off to marry” (27). Conversely, later critics like Judith Fetterly in her chapter on The Bostonians in the Resisting Reader take offense to these early articulations of Olive’s contradictory nature as symptoms of her lesbianism and as opposed to what was considered natural relationships like that of Verena and Ransom.
particular personalities of others. It is worth noting here that the critical tendency to deem Olive ambivalent may represent a fractured consciousness that resembles a condition of double consciousness. However, Olive does not suffer from the full extent of this condition because Olive cannot access knowledge of herself as impersonal and part of something larger despite her desire for impersonality. The impersonal is something she longs to know, but as demonstrated through her remarks to Mrs. Farrinder, cannot fully access because of her personality and fixed ideas about herself (i.e. Olive cannot really know “some very poor girl” because she is not poor herself).

Olive’s longing for the impersonality that will more fully connect her to her cause is what attracts her to Verena. Barbara Straumann asserts that it is Olive’s “cultivated restraint” and the “power and presence” of Verena’s “impersonal voice” that allows the relationship between the two women to exist (91). Olive, as she extracts Verena’s promise to renounce marriage, sees their union as the “partnership of their two minds” because “each of them, by itself, lacking an important group of facets”—Verena a personality and Olive access to the impersonal—“made an organic whole which, for the work in hand, could not fail to be brilliantly effective” (169). Olive rather than acquiring direct access to the impersonality she desires, constitutes a relationship with Verena whereby she can have access to impersonality secondhand. Together they form the person that Olive wants to be (or rather the consciousness she wants to possess).

Olive’s relationship with Verena allows her to maintain her personality and her secret desires for taste, decorum, etc. while simultaneously providing her better access to the masses in which she longs to mingle via Verena’s ability to represent and speak to them. This relationship is an “organic whole” for Olive because she believes it is entirely based on the freedom she promises Verena as she extracts her pledge. The problem with her configuration of their
relationship as a union based on two equal parts that forms something greater than either of them individually (and thus something impersonal), the very characteristics that make the union possible, are also what makes each one of them vulnerable to be affected by the other. LaBrie states that “Olive’s vulnerability lies in the fact that her cause and her ideals are tied up with the idea of freedom, and yet, ironically, she has worked determinedly to bring the life of another human being within her power” (53). Verena tells Olive that she wonders if she should “feel” their cause “so very much” without her. She also tells Olive that she constitutes her “conscience” and is her “form” and “envelope,” which implies that Olive has been successful at exerting her consciousness over Verena and that Verena really hasn’t been free at all (168). Olive herself notes her power and control over Verena in the very passage where she reflects on the extraordinary nature of the organic whole that they form. She thinks that “Verena was often far more irresponsive than she liked to see her; but the happy thing in her composition was that, after a short contact with the divine idea – Olive was always trying to flash it at her [. . .] – she kindled, flamed up, took the words from her friends less persuasive lips” (169). Ironically, the impersonality Olive admires in Verena transforms by her own hand into a reflection of her own personality.

Olive’s vulnerability lies in more than just her confused notions of freedom. Olive’s vulnerability is a direct effect of the degree to which she possesses Verena’s consciousness and in her choice to ignore the knowledge that she has denied Verena freedom in pursuit of a greater and impersonal good of which their relationship is part. For Olive, limiting Verena’s consciousness to the parameters of her own means constructing and, more importantly, preserving the organic whole comprised by their relationship. Yet, by maintaining this relationship, Olive denies knowledge of herself as capable of imposing the type of oppression of
which she seeks to liberate other women. This denial of self-knowledge makes her privy to Verena’s influence and, subsequently, to the economy of devastation.

Though Olive’s relationship with Verena immediately triggers small changes in Olive’s character like the ability to deceive, once Verena comes to live with her Olive notices that “her aspirations” are “immensely quickened” and she “begins to believe in herself to a livelier tune than she had ever listened to before” (173). This newfound confidence in herself and her ability to participate in her cause derives solely from Verena’s acquiescence and acceptance of Olive’s control. Olive, however, attributes this change to the idea that “when spirit meets spirit there must be either mutual absorption or a sharp concussion” and Olive readily chooses to believe that she and Verena are mutually absorbed (173). Regardless of Verena’s level of commitment to their relationship, the problem in an economy of devastation is that a “mutual absorption” is not mutually exclusive from a “sharp concussion” so that Olive must also undergo what Banta terms a “spiritual murder” that “annihilates personality” due to her contact with Verena.

When Basil confronts Verena with an alternate mode of knowing herself, he too forces Olive to acknowledge what she has been up to this point successful at denying—that she has been too forceful in her control over and possession of Verena and her conscious. This image of herself first presents itself in New York through both Basil and Mrs. Burrage and again at Marmion when Verena begins her courtship with Basil.\(^\text{35}\) When Olive first sees Basil in New York, she is described as “white with the intensity of her self-consciousness” and “altogether in a very uncomfortable state” (253). Compelled to acknowledge this vision of herself, Olive cannot help but to reflect that Verena had an “extraordinary generosity with which she could expose

\(^{35}\) Mrs. Burrage tells Olive that she knows Verena “saw through her eyes, took the impress of all her opinions, preferences” (302). Though Olive replies with “She is absolutely free; you speak as if I were her keeper!” she also reflects that “This description of Verena was of course perfectly correct” though “not agreeable” to her (302).
herself, give herself away, turn herself inside out, for the satisfaction of the person who made
demands of her” and that she was “deficient in the desire to be consistent with herself” (370).
Confronting these thoughts, Olive must also acknowledge how “she contributed with all her zeal
to the development of Verena’s gift” though she did not contemplate the “consequences of
cultivating an abundant eloquence” as Verena was “attempting to smother her now in her own
phrases” (371).

Through Olive’s relationship to Verena as well as the dominance she exerts over her,
James can further shape an economy of devastation to depict the consequences of relation on all
participants. More importantly, because Verena acts without particularity and merely reflects
Olive’s conscious back upon her, Olive causes her own victimization in this economy. The
results of limiting Verena’s consciousness to the confines of her own particularity produce a
“fatal effect” whereby Olive must recognize not only the harm she inflicts on Verena’s
impersonal nature and rendering her susceptible to alternative modes of self-knowledge that may
appear preferable to Olive’s tyranny, but also the harm she ultimately inflicts upon herself (373).
By forcing Verena to renounce marriage and denying her both freedom of thought and
experience, Olive becomes a byproduct of the relationship she creates and thus a byproduct of
the economy of devastation, ultimately causing her own renunciation of the self she has formerly
known. Olive’s renunciation also requires her to negotiate some of the contradictions of her own
character: she must reconcile who she was with who she is as well as how that identity fits within
the ideology she wants to present to the world. In other words, Olive must renounce knowledge
of herself as a constituent part of the organic whole she believed she formed with Verena. This in
turn means that Olive must acknowledge Verena’s superficial commitment and motivations for
forming the whole in the first place, which no doubt causes her to question her effectiveness at
possessing Verena. Thus, Olive must negotiate her role in the creation of and demise of their relationship and the relationship’s larger function to the women’s movement in which she so desperately wants to participate. And in these negotiations, Olive ironically ends up experiencing the type of suffering for which she so longs in the beginning of *The Bostonians*.

Although the novel’s final scene is significant because it attempts to demonstrate the effects of double consciousness through Verena’s tears, it is also important because it demonstrates the ways in which the economy of devastation has required Olive to exchange modes of knowing herself to avoid sustaining a condition of double consciousness. As Basil enters Verena’s dressing room in Boston’s famed Music Hall and prevents her from delivering her first real lecture, Olive, who was never free from “self-reference” as Verena was, collides head first with the knowledge of herself that she has so desperately been trying to ignore over the course of Verena’s courtship with Basil. Verena does not take the stage and as Olive loses her grasp over Verena she must finally accept herself as an inhibitor of freedom, which has ultimately driven Verena to accept Ransom’s very different and more appealing, as opposed to Olive’s prohibitive and constrained, version of herself. This forces Olive to confront the humiliation of Verena’s betrayal and inconsistency through the angry cries of the waiting crowd. What once would have been distasteful and lacking social mores to Olive, is now Olive’s only salvation. Rather than submit to her previous fits of shyness and to avoid the very public embarrassment Verena and Ransom have inflicted upon her, she takes the stage herself despite her exclamation that she will be “hissed and hooted and insulted” (432). Olive’s sudden ability to take the stage and speak to the impersonal masses reflects the work of the economy of devastation. Now that she has experienced true suffering through her relationship with Verena, she finally can relate to the crowd she must address. She now has suffering in common with her
audience. Ironically what she trades for the experience of suffering is her advocacy of freedom as she is confronted with her oppressive manner. Though she never fully trades what makes her particular for direct access to that which is impersonal, Olive’s relation to Verena helps her to negotiate her sense of self with the ideology she wants to inhabit and provides her with access to a common and impersonal consciousness that she represents through her cause. The economy of devastation finally permits Olive an experience—through her suffering—that allows her to more readily participate on her own in the movement she so values, but it also costs her what she values most—her relationship to and possession of Verena.

Through his presentation of double consciousness as a condition that necessitates suffering, loss, and even death for the individual who manages to ascertain such a state of being in *The Bostonians* and *The Wings of the Dove*, Henry James effectively demonstrates the various limitations of the human conscious as it strives to possess knowledge of itself. More significant than his articulation of double consciousness and its consequences for individual persons, through an economy of devastation, James takes the particular experience of this condition and demonstrates its effects on the particular social intercourses that govern one’s daily existence. Consciousness in these novels is not only inhibited by the human capacity to contain varying forms of knowledge, but external forces such as the relationships that individuals form with others also restrict the ways in which individuals are able to possess knowledge of themselves. In an economy of devastation, relationships are temporary and only exist as a means by which to exchange self-knowledge. As such social relations help individuals to progress through the temporal world which requires a continual re-knowing of the self in order to continue one’s existence. More significantly, James’s staging of an economy of devastation highlights the
unsustainable nature of double consciousness for either the person experiencing or the persons
who try to maintain a relation to that person.
In his 1955 essay, “Knowledge and the Image of Man,” Robert Penn Warren asserts that “to be a man, to keep from going on all fours, implies the right to knowledge” (238). This right to knowledge for Warren is “simply a way of saying man’s right to exist” in the world in order “to be himself, to be a man” (237). He explains that “only by knowledge does man achieve his identity” because it gives him the image of himself. And the image of himself necessarily has a foreground and a background, for man is in the world not as a billiard ball placed on a table, not even as a ship on the ocean with a location determinable by latitude and longitude, He is, rather in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms his identity. (241)

Knowledge, for Warren, then provides an individual with the tools necessary to construct and shape his identity through “interpenetration” or an “osmosis of being,” which relies upon time and relation in order to piece together and make meaning of various versions of the self over the course of a lifetime. On one hand, Warren seems to confirm a condition of double consciousness as not only possible but also necessary to one’s understanding of self. A person constructs an identity in order to exist in the world, using knowledge of the self anchored both in the “background” of the past and the “foreground” of the present, which essentially is to know oneself, and to make meaning of that knowledge, in two ways simultaneously. To have dual knowledge is what allows a person to “achieve an identity” which ultimately provides that person with a purpose in the world.
On the other hand, Warren also cautions that we must have a “progressive understanding” of “interpenetration” because it is a “texture of relations” whereby “man creates new perspectives, discovers new values—that is a new self” so that “identity is continually emerging, and unfolding” (241). For Warren, the construction of one’s identity reflects a “process of self-definition” that is not static but constantly evolving as new forms of knowledge are encountered through the experience of life (241). The process of self-definition relies upon a relational knowledge that is determined by the interpenetration of the events and experiences that shape a person’s life. The ways in which these experiences and events interpenetrate one another to form a texture of relations will be different at different points of time: a person’s relation to an event or experience is determined by his or her current notion of self and position in life. Warren’s protagonist has the potential to view the same life event or circumstance differently at various points in time. This naturally affects the way a person makes meaning by integrating distinct instances of self-knowledge in order to construct and affirm an identity.

For Warren, this “progressive understanding” allows identity to continually reshape itself, but also allows it to become “a self-corrective creation” whereby an individual may adjust knowledge of the self according to a current moment by looking at the texture of relations, and editing out parts of the self that are unnecessary or might pose problems for one’s current situation (241). Knowledge, or one’s ability to possess and make meaning from knowledge, is thus dependent upon both time and relation. This then complicates the possibility of a condition like double consciousness because knowledge of the self is not static; even in the moment when one comes to be of two minds about the self, that self is already in flux, which recalls Emerson’s logic in an essay like “Circles.” Because both knowledge and the construction of the self are dependent upon relation and are constantly evolving, knowing oneself in two ways is at once
inevitable and virtually impossible. In this chapter, however, I wish to argue that Warren’s ideas of self-knowledge as relationally and temporally constructed actually works as a salve to the devastating and often fatal consequences that result from the condition of double consciousness.

Jack Burden, arguably Warren’s most famous protagonist, from the 1946 Pulitzer Prize winning *All the King’s Men*, embarks on a process of self-definition. In order to define himself, Jack retells the story of his life through his relationship to Willie Stark. Jack works backward to trace Willie’s rise from a small-town idealistic lawyer to the corrupt governor we see at the beginning of the novel. In the process of telling Willie’s story, Jack reveals the role he played in Willie’s corruption as a journalist and then his employee; and, as a result, Jack must reflect on his past, which generates a personal narrative rather than a simple third-person retelling of Willie’s political career. And it is only as Jack constructs his narrative that he recognizes the interpenetration of his life and relationships achieving an “osmosis of being” in order to affirm his identity at the novel’s conclusion.

The time between the events of the narrative and Jack’s telling of it enable Jack to come to know himself in multiple ways without suffering the consequences of double consciousness. This examines Jack Burden as both a character and a narrator, and it interrogates the relationship between the human consciousness and temporality in order to determine the ways in which time both limits and helps to construct an individual’s knowledge of himself. Through Jack’s narrative, Warren demonstrates the painful “process of self-definition” attached to man’s “right to knowledge,” but also provides a strategy for reconciling competing modes of self-knowledge. This strategy relies upon both time and relation. And time and relation are what helps Jack to achieve a temporary sense of what Warren calls “the ultimate unity of knowledge,” which seems as close as an individual may get to the Emersonian ideal of double consciousness (242).
In other words, *All The King’s Men* uses the technology of the narrative structure as an attempt to tolerate or even remediate the excruciating experience and the subsequent ramifications of double consciousness on an individual that Dickinson, James, and Du Bois describe.

### 5.1 The “one thing” Jack Burden Can’t Know

The act of knowing, as well as the uncertainty and limitations of human knowledge, produce anxiety for Jack Burden. This anxiety is demonstrated throughout *All the King’s Men* as Jack functions as the narrator of his story as well as a character within that story.36 Jack tells his story through Willie Stark, which allows him to act as a third-person narrator. In this capacity, Jack reveals that the story of Willie is actually his story, assuming a first-person identity at the novel’s conclusion, and maintains an emotional distance from Jack the character within Willie’s story. Norton R. Girault argues that “out of the novel’s first person narrator point of view grows an important aspect of the novel’s theme—that an understanding of the world depends upon an understanding of the self: Jack Burden cannot understand Willie Stark” or the world around him until he “understands himself” (220). Similarly, Jonathan Cullick contends that “Obviously Burden participates in the story he tells, giving him the involvement of a character with the detachment of a narrator. He is always narrator-agent rather than narrator-observer” allowing him to participate in the narrative while also progressing “toward acknowledging his participation and the personal responsibility that accompanies it” (197-8). Maintaining this distance from his past self also enables Jack to come to terms with and ultimately face his epistemological fears over the course of the narrative. Girault notes that “phrases along the way

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like ‘at least that was the way I argued the case back then’ remind the reader of the fact that Jack has lived through the actions he is describing and that he is trying to reorient himself in relation to them” and as the story develops that it becomes apparent to the reader that “Jack is telling” as a means “defining to himself what actually did happen to him” (220). As Jack tells his story, and because the narrative spans a considerable passage of time, Jack integrates and reconciles all of the modes of knowledge to which he has previously subscribed with those he attains via personal and lived experience in order to achieve a new understanding of himself.

As both a narrator and a character within his own narrative, Jack demonstrates a complicated and ambivalent relationship to knowledge. He simultaneously seeks and evades knowledge throughout the novel. This ambivalence is revealed early in the narrative as he waits for Willie to deliver an impromptu speech to the residents of Mason City. He describes waiting for the speech while knowing that it will come as similar to coming home late at night and finding a telegram under the door but not immediately opening it. He says that while one stands there with the telegram in hand, one feels “there’s an eye on you, a great big eye looking straight at you [. . .] and sees you huddled up way inside, in the dark which is you, inside yourself, like a clammy, sad little foetus [. . .] The eye knows what’s in the envelope, and it is watching you to see you when you open it and know, too” (13). He goes on to note that the “sad little foetus which is you” is “blind” and “doesn’t want to know what is in that envelope,” that the foetus would rather “lie in the dark and not know, and be warm in its not knowing” (14). And yet, the “sad little foetus” does eventually open the envelope because Jack tells the reader that the “end

37The description of this omniscient eye, despite Warren’s apparent discontent with Emersonian transcendentalism (for a literary example of this discontent, see Warren’s poem “Homage to Emerson, On a Night Flight to New York”) recalls Emerson’s “transparent eye-ball” from Nature. More particularly, each writer’s eye demonstrates characteristics of impersonality in that an individual cannot have intimate knowledge of or see what that eye sees/knows. The implications of impersonality for Warren will be discussed later in this chapter.
of man is to know” but that there is “one thing he can’t know. He can’t know whether knowledge will save him or kill him” though he will “be killed, all right, but he can’t know whether he is killed because of the knowledge which he has got or because of the knowledge he hasn’t got and which if he had, would save him” (14).

This early reflection about knowledge demonstrates Jack’s ambivalence in two ways. First, Jack’s use of the second person pronoun “you” here is representative of both the reader and himself. Though Jack is the narrator of this reflection, he is also a character within the story, and he functions as the reader/listener. In other words, Jack is the “you” to which he refers in this reflection. Thus, he describes himself as a “sad little foetus” who retreats into a womb state within himself where he is not fully formed and not conscious. In such a state, having knowledge and the ability to internalize/understand knowledge is not possible. Girault calls this Jack’s cozy stating of “not knowing” (221). Retreating into himself, or the womb, allows Jack to escape not only the possibility of knowledge, but also the implications and responsibilities of having knowledge.

Though Jack retreats into a state of being before consciousness is possible, he is still susceptible to the gaze of the “great big eye” that sees him from “miles and dark and through walls and houses and through your coat and vest and hide and sees you huddled up way inside, in

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38 Cullick notes that when Jack “speaks of his prior self in the third person, he makes himself his own main character. These various ways of speaking about himself—‘you’ (present), ‘yourself’ (past), and ‘Jack Burden’ (past)—indicate a divided modern consciousness, what Burden calls ‘the terrible division of our age’” (202). The significance of this “divided modern consciousness” is worth noting here as it also reflects the split of Jack’s own consciousness. Vauthier argues that when Jack addresses the “‘you’, the narrator projects a state of split consciousness” and that Jack in fact is a “double whose raison d’etre seems to be his non-subjectivity.” As a result, Jack, for Vauthier, is “unable to see himself clearly” and ‘posits in the subjective ‘you’ the double that embodies him, that makes him visible because he can address it” (184).

39 Critics of All the King’s Men tend to agree that novel’s thematic concern is Jack’s escape and eventual acceptance of his complicity in the events of the novel. A major factor in this interpretation is Jack’s complex relationship with his distant relative, Cass Mastern’s, belief that the world resembles a large spider web. While I don’t dispute that personal responsibility, and Jack’s own personal responsibility in particular, is at stake in All the King’s Men, I do think the way constructions of knowledge, and self-knowledge especially, in the novel play a more significant role in how Jack comes to accept personal responsibility than previously discussed.
the dark which is you” (13). The eye can see Jack even before consciousness or knowledge occurs. More importantly, this eye already has the knowledge that Jack will eventually obtain upon opening the envelope. The omniscient eye in this passage not only sees Jack in his state of pre-knowing, but also knows what will become of Jack once he has consciousness. Jack’s desire not to know is not just a desire to escape consciousness, but also a desire to escape the gaze of this eye that knows the outcome of his life and actions before he does.⁴⁰

The eye is significant to the development of Jack’s consciousness and his ambivalence towards knowledge because it represents Jack’s awareness of an impersonal, governing force that controls a world in which he merely plays a constituent part by yielding and opening the envelope. Recognizing that there is something or someone outside of himself that knows more of the world and himself than he does causes Jack’s ambivalence towards knowledge as it raises questions about his particular role or purpose in the world. Accepting the presence of an external and impersonal force that has the ability to know and control the outcomes of one’s life calls into question Jack’s agency and identity. His actions, ideally determined by the knowledge he gains and possesses, are predetermined under the gaze of the “great big eye.” The eye, at least in this passage, merely waits for Jack, or the reader, to open the envelope in order to know while already knowing that Jack will indeed eventually open the envelope—he will possess the knowledge he wants to escape despite his retreat into the womb. Jack’s desire not to know, not to open the envelope, or not to act matter very little to the eye because Jack will eventually open the envelope, attain knowledge, and then act based on that knowledge. His actions, derived from the

⁴⁰ Though the desire to escape consciousness is described early on through the womb-state, this desire manifests itself in several ways throughout the novel. Later the womb transforms into periods of “Great Sleep” where Jack literally evades consciousness through sleep. The “Great Sleep” then progresses into a theory about the “Great Twitch” where people’s consciousness and emotional reactions have little consequence has humans become mere mechanisms.
knowledge he receives, thus contribute to the impersonal force regardless of his desire to do so, which negates the notion that what makes him personal and particular—his unique identity, desires, feelings, etc.—is responsible for the outcomes of his life.

The recognition that something impersonal and outside of himself plays a role in his life leads to the second way in which this passage demonstrates Jack’s initial ambivalence towards knowing. Since “the end of man is to know,” confronting different forms of knowledge and internalizing that knowledge in order to make meaning signifies a loss for Jack. In this passage the loss takes the form of death as man cannot “know whether knowledge will kill him or save him” though he will be killed either way because of knowledge he has or because of simply knowing that he hasn’t got the knowledge to save himself. On one hand, because Jack will “open the envelope” to know and because “the great big eye” knows that he will succumb to knowledge, Jack’s end is the end of his will or agency. He does not, in other words, have the knowledge to save himself from yielding to the will of the impersonal eye and so he must sacrifice his own agency in acquiring or denying knowledge, or in contributing to the impersonal. Knowledge thus kills what makes Jack a particular person with his own individual feelings and desires.

On the other hand, Jack is ambivalent towards knowledge and in his certainty about the power of “the great big eye” because admittedly there is a chance that knowledge may also save him. The possibility that knowledge can provide a means of surviving is what causes Jack to open the envelope and to leave his womb-state, awake from his periods of Great Sleep, and ultimately dismiss his belief in the Great Twitch. In this context then, and this is important for Jack to make sense and come to terms with the knowledge he has of himself as the narrative progresses, there remains a possibility that one’s particularity does in fact matter: to possess
knowledge of oneself doesn't necessarily mean to lose the self entirely or to be absorbed completely by the impersonal forces that exist outside of the self. However, Jack’s knowledge of the impersonal force and the subsequent lack of agency that results from that force may also be what enables him to survive: yielding his own constructions of self—his particularity—in favor of his knowledge that he merely serves the larger purpose of the impersonal may be the very knowledge that keeps him alive over the course of his narrative while others invested in their own particularity are destroyed.\footnote{When I speak of characters invested in their own particularity, I am specifically referring to characters like Willie Stark and Adam Stanton to whom Jack later refers to as the “man of fact” and the “man of idea” respectively and who were “doomed to destroy each other”(Warren 657). Willie and Adam seem to have little cognizance or understanding of a larger impersonal force at work in their lives. Other characters invested in their own particularity are Anne Stanton and Sadie Burke; these women, however, seem, at least by the end of \textit{All the King’s Men}, to accept and acknowledge their roles in the larger context of the world. For an account of Willie’s investment in his particularity, see Norton R. Girault’s “The Narrator’s Mind as Symbol: An Analysis of \textit{All the King’s Men}.” \textit{Accent: A Quarterly of New Literature} 7 (1947): 220-234.}

To retreat into a womb state allows Jack the opportunity to escape from finding out — albeit only temporarily — whether he will be destroyed or saved by different forms/constructions of knowledge. More importantly, it enables him to evade participation either as a particular person who determines his own identity and actions within the world or as a component of an impersonal force where individual identities and actions merely serve as a means to a larger end beyond that of particular persons. Though Jack acknowledges that both options are possibilities during this reflection in Mason City, his consistent withdrawal from people, places, and circumstances that present new modes of knowledge, especially those that require self-reflection that would produce a new way of knowing one’s self, allow him to exist in what James C. Simmons calls a state of “invulnerability” where his “comfort lies in his non-being, his impersonality, his complete dissociation” from people and life (85, 87).\footnote{It is worth noting that Simmons borrows the idea of “invulnerability” from Jack himself. Because Jack is an idealist, he refers to himself as “invulnerable” (239). He says, “nothing happened to Jack Burden, for nothing ever happened to Jack Burden, who was invulnerable” (239). He goes on to say that perhaps his invulnerability is his...}
“nonbeing” or pre-consciousness to a form of impersonality that accounts for much of Jack’s behavior. While Jack desires a womb-state of pre-consciousness, his desire is to escape an omniscient force that renders his particularity inconsequential. Yet by escaping into this state,— no matter which form the escape takes throughout Jack’s retelling (womb-state, brass-bound Idealism, the Great Sleep, the Great Twitch, etc.)—Jack negates his own particularity and thus his ability to fully know and define himself in order to form an identity. What results is that as a character Jack tends to deny his particularity in favor of impersonal forms of knowledge even as he remains anxious, ambivalent, and uncertain about the presence and power of an impersonal entity. For Simmons this tendency towards impersonal types of knowledge results in Jack the character’s “continual flight from involvement” which is a “flight from himself and self-knowledge.” And, it is from Jack’s “fear of self-awareness” that he “dehumanizes others, and thus, in effect dehumanizes himself” (87).

The retrospective narrative functions in a similar capacity. As the teller of his story, Jack maintains a level of “invulnerability” and dissociation from both the reader and from Jack the character’s actions. By functioning as the narrator, Jack dehumanizes himself as a person responsible for the events he narrates and instead avoids (self-)judgment of his past. The narrative distance Jack achieves through this dehumanization and invulnerability is necessary for Jack to examine, internalize, and integrate all of the knowledge provided from his lived experience during his telling of the story. Having the opportunity to process and come to terms with how Jack knew and understood himself in the past is integral to reconciling how he knows himself in the present. And this reconciliation is essential if Jack hopes, as he says to, “go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time” curse. Knowing for Jack does in fact seem to be a curse with a horrible burden that he is unwilling to bear for the majority of the novel.
(661). Jack the narrator uses the retrospective narrative structure and the distance it affords to confront and negotiate his early ambivalence and uncertainty about knowledge—its multiple forms—and its possible outcomes in order to make meaning of himself and his actions in the past and the present, and thus to move forward as an active participant in the future.

5.2 Jack Burden’s Multiple (Im)Personalities

Before examining how Jack’s narrative reconciles various modes of self-knowledge in relation to one another in order to construct and affirm his identity, it is necessary to determine how Jack’s aversions and retreats from knowledge allow him to compose a telos that relies upon impersonality and dehumanizes or ignores particular persons and the knowledge they represent/demonstrate. What results is a Jack who favors impersonal modes of knowing and who distances himself from particularized knowledge. Here, I trace here what I’m calling Jack’s “multiple impersonalities” as they evolve through the narrative’s sequence of events.

Jack begins his narrative as a self-described “Idealist” who avoids particular and personal forms of knowing by studying history. When idealism fails him, he retreats into a period of what he calls “the Great Sleep” where all knowledge is inaccessible to his consciousness. As Jack awakens and goes about the business of life, he avoids particular knowledge by only believing in facts and a theory of “Life as Motion towards Knowledge” whereby a person who has complete knowledge—knowledge of himself as particular and impersonal—is not living. After Jack learns of an affair between Willie and his long-time love, Anne, he can no longer escape his own experiences and feelings, so he instead subscribes to a belief in “the Great Twitch” which is the ultimate form of impersonal knowledge as it works to dehumanize persons and eradicates the need for personal identities altogether. Though Jack evolves over the course of the narrative, Jack maintains his allegiance to impersonal knowledge until his facts work to uncover his true
identity with Judge Irwin’s death and the subsequent revelation that he was Jack’s father. Only after Jack learns of his paternity, and starts to lose faith in impersonal modes of knowing, can he begin to confront what it means to know himself in multiple ways.

After Jack’s initial reflection about the “sad, little foetus” in Mason City, the narrative reveals that he tends to rely on and trust only knowledge that he describes as historical or factual, or knowledge substantiated by empirical evidence rather than memory or emotion determined by personal experience, which according to Jack should not be trusted. As a student, Jack encounters a “principle” for which he says he owes his “success in life” (45). He describes this principle as “Idealism” and refers to himself as a “brass-bound Idealist” (45). Idealism for Jack is a belief that “What you don’t know don’t hurt, for it ain’t real” and that “it does not matter what you do or what goes on around you because it isn’t real anyway” (45). Philip Dubuisson Castille argues that Jack’s interpretation of idealism “implies not reality but the nonexistence of being, since in idealism only ideas have being; yet in Jack’s formulation, not even ideas are real.” Jack then is not an actual idealist, but rather what Castille calls a “nihilist” who believes that “Nothing has being, all action is meaningless, and experience is both incoherent and incommunicable” (27). Regardless of the actual term Jack attributes to this philosophy, his determination that nothing is real—actions, events, even people—is important because it signifies his initial desire to retreat from particularized and personal forms of knowledge. Even as a student, Jack avoids knowledge that he cannot immediately understand and interpret in a coherent and communicable manner. Ultimately, Jack both fears knowledge as well as his ability to construct meaning from

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43 It is worth noting here that when I refer to particularized forms of knowledge, I am referring to a type of knowledge accessed or constructed via personal or individualized experiences. In other words, a person may gain new knowledge through an experience either with another individual or singularly. Thus, meaning is made for a person based on one’s reaction and subsequent interpretation of the events of that particular experience. This differs from an impersonal type of knowledge that Jack comes to favor which relies upon objective, empirical evidence and factual data.
knowledge; under the guise of idealism he averts his fear by dismissing any type of knowledge of which he cannot make sense as irrelevant because it isn’t real anyway.

The best example of Jack’s early avoidance of particularized forms of knowledge occurs when he is a graduate student of history trying to complete his dissertation by editing the journals and letters of his distant relative, Cass Mastern. The journals and letters are largely about Cass’s affair with his friend’s wife, Annabelle Trice, and its subsequent consequences. As a narrator, Jack refers to this experience as his “first excursion into the enchantments of the past” and a failure because “in the midst of the process” he tried to “discover the truth and not the facts” (236). Then, when “the truth was not to be discovered, or discovered could not be understood” by him, he “could not bear to live with the cold-eyed reproach of the facts” (236). After recounting the story of Cass and his affair, Jack confesses that “he laid aside the journal of Cass Mastern not because he could not understand, but because he was afraid to understand for what might be understood there was a reproach to him” (284). Cass’s reflections in his journal and letters—his own attempt at integrating and reconciling different ways of knowing himself—have the potential to shed light on Jack’s own life experiences in order to reveal something about himself. Thus Jack is afraid to confront a new way of knowing himself if he is to understand the “truth” of Cass’s experience. Instead, Jack abandons the project and walks “out of the room, the room where the facts lived in a big box of three-by-five inch note cards” and enters “upon one of the periods of the Great Sleep” (236, 284).

The narrator Jack, who is different from the Jack who walked away from the project, concludes that Cass discovered the “world is all of one piece” and that “the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle” and “springs out to fling the gossamer
coils about you who have touched the web” (283). Alfred J. Levy explains that “The spider web image” for Jack sustains “a view of the world which reflects the interdependence of man’s actions, as well as the corollary that any act, no matter how subtle, provokes a consequence within the surrounding social fabric [. . .] out to the remotest perimeter” where “intentions do not necessarily control the consequences nor, incidentally, do they provide any rationalization” (53). While Jack the narrator can understand what the spider web signified to him at the time of his research and why he feared that knowledge, the Jack performing the research cannot, and so he walks away from the project and from the “truth” of Cass’s particularized brand of knowledge. Cass’s spider web represents an idea that antagonizes graduate student Jack’s belief in idealism. Castille argues that “Jack is afraid to understand Cass Mastern, because if what Cass is saying about human complicity in guilt and history make sense, then Jack’s own philosophy—his way of seeing and understanding the world—is invalidated” (26). Understanding the world as a giant spider web confounds Jack’s ambivalence towards knowledge because it simultaneously depends upon man’s particularity while dismissing those particular motivations or intentions as a person acts: the vibrations of one’s action have an effect on others outside of and beyond one’s original intentions. For Jack, this would mean that his actions are in fact real and have real world consequences; more importantly though, accepting Cass’s philosophy implies a type of double consciousness where one’s particularity co-exists and is even necessary to the existence of the impersonal. Yet to know oneself as both particular and impersonal is destructive and even fatal.

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44 The image of the spider web in *All the King’s Men* has garnered much critical attention. The underlying concept, which appears in several of Warren’s novels, has caused Warren scholars to dub it the “web of being.” For treatments on the web of being specifically in *All the King’s Men*, see Levy’s “the Web and the Twitch: Images in *All the King’s Men*,” *Forum* 25(2): 53-56, Castille’s “The Book I Began Years Ago: The Construction in *All the King’s Men*,” *rWP: An Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies* 4(2004): 21-39, and Robert S. Koppleman’s “All the King’s Men: Spiritual Aesthetics and the Reader,” *Mississippi Quarterly*, 48.1 (1994): 105-114. For treatments of the web of being in Warren’s fiction more generally see Barnett Guttenberg’s *Web of Being: The Novels of Robert Penn Warren* and Koppleman’s *Robert Penn Warren’s Modernist Spirituality*. 
to individual notions of selfhood. Perhaps more importantly, Jack cannot coherently understand himself in both capacities and thus avoids this knowledge altogether by abandoning his dissertation project and retreating into “the Great Sleep.”

Jack describes this particular period of “the Great Sleep” as a time when he “would sleep twelve hours, fourteen hours, fifteen hours, feeling himself, whole asleep, plunge deeper into sleep like a diver groping downward into dark water feeling for something which may be there and which would glitter if there were any light in the depth, but there isn’t any light” (284). Jack’s periods of “the Great Sleep” resemble his escape into a womb-like state in that both make consciousness and, more importantly, self-consciousness impossible. Castille notes that “In this dark vortex all ideas collapse” and that “The Great Sleep asserts a reality which is absolutely dead [. . .] Under the spell of the Great Sleep everything looks alike: ‘God and Nothing’ are the same, good and evil merge, memory and history disappear, self-knowledge dissolves into unconsciousness” (23). Jack’s description indicates this when he describes the sleep state as one where an individual feels for something that may be there but cannot be found in the darkness: in other words, consciousness exists unlike in the womb—the state of pre-consciousness—but is unattainable and makes knowledge inaccessible. Simmons call these states “impulses of retreat and withdrawal” that resemble a “near-catatonic state” dominated by “lethargy” and produce “the security of a dreamless sleep away from those periodic intervals” of knowledge that may be “too painful” for Jack to confront (85). The problem, however, is that as with the “great, big eye” that sees Jack and knows that he will emerge from the womb, Jack cannot sleep forever and

45 Jack’s other periods of “the Great Sleep” occur during his marriage to Lois and later in Long Beach, California after he discovers Anne Stanton’s affair with Willie Stark.
46 Simmons ultimately argues that Jack suffers from “symptoms of catatonia” and is a double to the catatonic patient that Jack watches Adam perform a lobectomy operation on in hopes of giving the patient a new personality (84). Simmons concludes that watching Adam perform the operation allows Jack to confront his own symptoms of catatonia—the womb-like retreat, the Great Sleep, the Great Twitch—in order to experience a “rebirth” which is necessary for Jack to produce the narrative.
must eventually wake up. As he wakes, he must again enter into consciousness where access to knowledge is not only possible, but, if one is to live his life, inescapable. Because Jack cannot fully and completely escape consciousness, except through death, he develops another strategy for avoiding forms of knowledge derived from “truth,” or personal experiences which are often left up to individual interpretation in order to make meaning. Jack avoids looking for “truth” altogether and instead finds solace in the “facts” he initially walked out on during his dissertation project.

“Facts,” for Jack, are a trustworthy form of knowledge because there is no particularized or individualized meaning; rather, facts present evidence in the form of empirical data such as dates and times. Knowledge in the form of fact is also impersonal and detached from personal experience, emotion, and desire as factual knowledge is objective. An advocate of fact, Jack also advocates impersonal forms of knowledge because impersonal knowledge detached from human experience does not require any sort of self-consciousness or personal responsibility. It comes as no surprise then that after Jack emerges from “the Great Sleep” that follows his failure to understand and communicate the truth of Cass’s story that he finds a job as a newspaper reporter where he is only required to report the facts, not interpret them. According to Simmons, as a reporter Jack remains “the detached, curious, distant, and accurate observer of events, the aloof commentator who falls back on his flippant and sarcastic wit to maintain the distance and keep himself uninvolved” (85). He continues that Jack’s “‘plain curiosity’” is “exclusive of himself” and “excludes any situation or person which obviously threatens introspection” (85). This sense of “plain curiosity” exclusive of Jack continues as he transitions from newspaper reporter to Willie Stark’s personal researcher.
Once employed by Willie, Jack describes himself, as the one-time “student of history” who “does not care what he digs out of the ash pile, the midden, the sublunary dung heap, which is the human past. He doesn’t care whether it is the dead pussy or the Kohinoor diamond” (235). Jack does not care what he finds as either a reporter or as Willie’s researcher so long as what he finds are facts. The mere existence of these facts proves their realness and thus renders them indisputable. In other words, Jack has no stake in the facts that he finds and cares little for the consequences that his “research” might have on others because if the facts are present in the first place, they exist objectively. More importantly, Jack performs “historical research” and digs his facts out of the “past,” in order to maintain the belief that objective truths which exist outside of individual experience are real and the only trustworthy form of knowledge. Fact-finding allows Jack to justify his research to himself without worrying whether or not he has touched Cass’s spider web so-to-speak. He remains detached from his own actions and from any sort of self-reflection that might result from not only his actions of finding the facts, but also from what the uncovered facts might reveal.

Detachment is necessary for Jack the character’s survival from the threat of knowledge as the narrative unravels. If Jack were to stop and reflect upon how his research impacted others and the world more generally, he would have to acknowledge his role in providing knowledge that was destructive and thus “the end of man,” or particular individuals. And recognizing his own guilt in the destruction of others, especially when working for Willie, would threaten the way in which Jack has come to know himself. Hiding behind facts keeps Jack safe from knowledge’s fatal qualities and allows him to maintain a relatively clear conscious about the knowledge he produces for the purposes of blackmail. It is important to note here that facts, because they are objective and result only from empirical evidence, are a limited and partial way
in which to gain knowledge. Though facts present one type of truth—an objective truth—they are void of the particular or personal interpretation or experience which would form what Jack would consider something akin to the “truth” he was trying to discover from Cass’s story.

Jack’s acceptance or reliance on a limited, objective type of knowledge void of human experience is significant to his ambivalence because it signifies his desire to retain his particularity even as he puts stock only in knowledge that exists outside of particular conceptions of what it means to have knowledge. The tension that Jack feels from this paradoxical relationship causes him to shift his belief from “idealism” where nothing is “real” to a belief that “Life is Motion toward Knowledge” (226). Jack tells the reader that “If God is Complete Knowledge then He is Complete Non-Motion, which is Non-Life, which is Death” (226). In an encounter with Ellis Burden, the Scholarly Attorney who Jack believes to be his father for much of the novel, Jack explains this philosophy further:

‘I’ll draw you another picture. It is a picture of a man trying to paint a picture of a sunset. But before he can dip his brush the color always changes and the shape. Let us give a name to the picture he is trying to paint: Knowledge. Therefore if the object which a man looks at changes constantly so that Knowledge of it is constantly untrue and is therefore Non-Knowledge, then Eternal Motion is possible. And Eternal Life. Therefore we can believe in Eternal Life only if we deny God, who is Complete Knowledge.’ (227)

Limited knowledge enables Jack to live while complete knowledge—that is knowledge of both “fact” and “truth”—would be death. Moreover, though accessible to a person, knowledge is not stable or static, but fleeting and temporary. In turn, the instability of knowing makes meaning difficult to ascertain. Complete knowledge for Jack then resembles the condition of double
consciousness because an individual is incapable of reconciling “fact” with “truth” because truth is temporal; the inability to reconcile the two, while disconcerting to someone like Emerson, is what assures Jack of his survival and ability to live. In this sense, knowledge has the ability to do what Jack earlier tells himself and the reader that it does: to both kill and save man. Limited constructions of knowledge save, while complete or reconciled constructions result in death.

Paradoxically, or perhaps even ironically, Jack’s evolving ethos reinforces his ambivalence about knowledge and prevents him from fully committing to an identity as either a particular person or constituent part of a larger impersonal whole. Though Jack puts his faith in impersonal forms of knowing as represented by fact, his “Life as Motion toward Knowledge” denies the existence of a larger and impersonal force that governs the world such as God. To believe wholly in God, or the impersonal, would equate to death for Jack. Yet, to accept and make meaning from particularized knowledge such as “truth,” would devastate how Jack has come to know and identify himself. This would result in a type of figurative death for Jack as he would then be forced to ascertain and accept an alternative way of knowing himself in order to construct a new identity and to keep living “out of history into history.”

Jack’s “Life as Motion toward Knowledge” philosophy combines his theory of idealism to relegate both the impersonal and the particularity of individuals to a present absence. The impersonal for Jack, and here represented by God, is the absence of motion and the absence of life. Jack says, “For God and Nothing have a lot in common. You look either one of them straight in the eye for a second and the immediate effect on the human constitution is the same” (150). Similarly, to know and to recognize oneself solely as a particular person with a unique and individual identity is possible for Jack but he also recognizes this type of self-consciousness as temporary and not safe from the view and power of God or the “great, big eye.” To embrace
only limited forms of knowledge then allows Jack to maintain his ambivalence, keep his
construction of self intact, and remain “invulnerable” to the possibility of death that an
integration or reconciliation of knowing oneself in multiple ways would cause. Recognizing the
existence of both modes of knowledge, but failing to participate or commit to either one allows
Jack to remain detached and ambivalent and thus able to survive. In his detached and observatory
state, Jack physically survives without investment or involvement in everyday life.

Jack’s invulnerability and denial of different forms of knowledge as well as his desire to
treat life as a linear movement towards knowledge are forms of escape akin to the womb state
and the “Great Sleep.” Jack tells the reader that “Life is a fire burning along a piece of string [. .
.] and the string is what we don’t know, our Ignorance, and the trail of ash, which, if a gust of
wind does not come, keeps the structure of the string, is History, man’s Knowledge, but it is
dead, and when the fire has burned up all the string, then man’s Knowledge will be equal to
God’s Knowledge and there won’t be any fire, which is life” (226). Moving towards complete
knowledge by only having limited knowledge along the way allows an individual to escape
history, and more importantly personal histories, as the past “is dead” or a decomposing string
and therefore not real or relevant to the present. In other words, the past is not real, unless facts
can substantiate it, and thus cannot have any sort of particular or personalized effect on persons
or left open to subjective interpretations resulting in “truth.” Likewise, limited knowledge
implies ignorance which is necessary for life and for motion.

The problem for Jack, however, is that though he accepts only factual knowledge in order
to remain in this passive and detached state, he does not exist outside of “truth” derived from
personal experience. Because Jack exists as a physical person, he participates in and experiences
life even if he does not entirely recognize and integrate that experience as essential to how he
knows himself. Finding “facts” makes him an active participant in the lives of others as well as in the world and has implications on his own life. The act of fact-finding places Jack within the parameters of Cass’s spider web. More importantly, regardless of his acceptance or denial of an impersonal entity, Jack is a particular individual with his own unique emotions, motivations, etc.

Jack, though he can deny and repress his personal history by believing in “Life is Motion towards Knowledge,” cannot fully escape the effects of his past on who he is and how he comes to know himself.

Jack’s inability to circumvent his past is best demonstrated when he learns of Willie’s affair with Anne Stanton, his first love. After learning about the affair from Willie’s first mistress, Sadie Burke, and then having it confirmed by Anne, Jack tests his “Life is Motion towards Knowledge” theory by literally putting himself in motion. The knowledge of the affair challenges Jack’s detachment and avoidance of his past because it propels him into motion with a drive west where he “kept on moving west” (405). Jack says, “For West is where we all plan to go some day. It is where you go when the land gives out and the old-field pines encroach. It is where you go when you get the letter saying: Flee, all is discovered. It is where you go [. . .] to grow up with the country. It is where you go to spend your old age. Or it is just where you go” (405-6). Amy K. Lavender likens Jack’s motion west to his retreats into the womb and the “Great Sleep.” She argues that “By going west” Jack “removes himself from the passage of time and reality” because the West is “timeless for Jack” (77). Jack views the West as timeless because

The West, as an idea, has always been a symbol of both hope and death in America, and Jack, as an American, is part of this tradition. West has always been the direction of death because it is where the sun sets, where it ‘dies’ [. . .]
However, it is purely American for the West to have the dual responsibility of representing both death and hope. The West gives Americans hope because it is a place that wipes the slate clean and allows one to start over. In a sense, it starts time all over again for a kind of ‘new’ beginning. It does this for Jack: it helps him wipe away the time that existed before his visit to the West. (Lavendar 77-8)

On one hand, Jack’s drive westward challenges his detachment from his own past because it forces him to confront his feelings as well as his past relationship with Anne. And if the West signifies death, than it appears that Jack is incapable of handling this confrontation and so drives west in order to die. This produces an interesting paradox: Jack moves west, but this westward movement also propels him forward while also requiring that Jack look backwards to his own history. In either case, whether Jack moves forward to escape his past or backwards to relive the past, he is confronted with death because the past, according to “Life is Motion towards Knowledge,” is a piece of decomposing string while the forward motion ends with the complete knowledge that signifies death. Though his evolving philosophies of knowledge rely on avoidance and denial in order to skirt death and to survive, when presented with his own past and personal experiences, Jack seems to have no choice but to suffer death in some capacity: knowledge must in fact kill him.

Jack describes his drive to Long Beach, California as “a showing of a family movie” where the “past unrolled in his head” because he was “moving back through time into” his memory (408). His drive took “seventy-eight hours” in which he replays the event of his relationship with Anne in his mind. Jack equates this experience to drowning as he says “the drowning man relives his life as he drowns” and that he “was drowning in West” until he reaches Long Beach and sinks “down to the very bottom of West.” And once there he lies in the
“motionless ooze of History” and he enters another period of “Great Sleep” though not before warning the reader that if they “have any home movies” they should “burn them and to be baptized to get born again” (408). While reliving his past with Anne over the course of his drive west, Jack says that “it was not so much any one example, any one event, which” he “recollected that was important, but the flow, the texture of events, for meaning is never in the event but in the motion through event. Otherwise we could isolate an instant in the event and say that this is the event itself. The meaning. But we cannot do that. For it is the motion which is important” (407-8). Jerome Meckier contends that Jack’s theorizing on his trip west has positive implications because this passage suggests “that the reality of an event may be a function of the relationship of that event to past and future events” though he also acknowledges that “the main thrust of the theory seems designed to prevent anyone from pinpointing the meaning of any particular event” (15). Jack’s reluctance to pinpoint meaning in an effort to emphasize the significance of motion results in another mechanism for survival against the threat of knowledge. It allows him to avoid the paradox created by his own theories of forward and backwards movement.

Lavendar argues that Jack travels “back through both space and history at the same time to get to a new starting point so that he, like so many others, can start over again. Only Jack is trying to start over his history, his time, and his memories. In a sense he is born again” (78). She continues that the West as a traditional “place of death” is the place where Jack’s memory or his history goes to “die” but that it also is “a place of hope and renewal as a new and yet unwritten history for Jack Burden begins” so that “the trip to California is the step that begins to bring Jack Burden more in touch with reality and interconnectedness of time and his history. At the beach, he admits his connection to history and that all moments are connected” (79). Lavendar does not
account, however, for the fact that in the moments where Jack makes these connections, he is acting as Jack the narrator and not Jack the character who actually drove West in the first place. There remains a temporal gap between the story Jack recounts as narrator and what Jack the character experiences, which is why he refuses to pinpoint meaning and instead converts his belief in “Life is Motion towards Knowledge” to a belief in what he calls “the Great Twitch.”

For instance, early in Jack’s tale about Anne, he says that after telling Anne he loved her that she disappeared into her room and he didn’t at the time even wonder why, but “later, much later, years later when it didn’t seem that it would ever matter again” that “she had gone up because she had to be alone, to sit by the window [. . .] to accustom herself to her new self [. . .] trying to discover what her new self was, for when you get in love you are made all over again” because “the person who loves you has picked you out of the great mass of uncreated clay which is humanity to make something out of” (423). Later in the same chapter, Jack says “I had not understood then what I think I have now come to understand: that we can keep the past only by having the future, for they are forever tied together. Therefore I lacked some essential confidence in the world and in myself” (467). These passages imply a sense of interconnectivity between events and indicate that Jack has in fact been “reborn,” but his rebirth does not occur in the West. He does not come to believe in interconnectivity in the “West” and this is indicated by his use of

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47 The act of loving, a particularized type of knowledge, implies a form of double consciousness in and of itself. Jack continues the passage with “the poor lumpish clay which is you wants to find out what it has been made into. But at the same time, you, in the act of loving somebody, become real, cease to a part of the continuum of the uncreated clay and get the breath of life in you and rise up. So you create yourself by creating another person, who, however, has also created you, [. . .] So there are two you’s, the one you yourself create by loving and the one the beloved creates by loving you. The farther those two you’s are apart the more the world grinds and grudges on its axis. But if you were loved and were loved perfectly then there wouldn’t be any difference between the two you’s” (423-24). Jack’s failure to form a lasting relationship with Anne during their romance’s initiation represents the condition of double consciousness in that neither he nor Anne can “love perfectly” or reconcile these two versions of themselves as created by love.
the first person, “I,” in conjunction with phrases like “now.” These moments indicate that the
Jack who is reborn is Jack the narrator and not Jack the character who drowns in West.

Although Jack does not go west and experience the “rebirth” that brings him in touch
with reality, history, and the interconnectivity that *All the King’s Men* seems to be about, his
travel west does indicate a desire, perhaps even an intent, to kill himself or to die. He says,
“when you don’t like where you are you always go west. We have always gone west” (464). On
the one hand, because the west signifies death or the end—Long Beach is literally the end of the
American space in which Jack can travel via car—the knowledge of Anne and Willie’s affair,
which betrays “an idea” of Jack’s that “had more importance” than he “had ever realized,”
propels him into motion towards a complete knowledge as he relives “his life like a home
movie” so that he can kill himself (464). Though Jack constantly refers to his “having drowned
in West,” he does not literally commit suicide. I argue that what compels Jack towards the West
is not a literal desire to kill himself, but rather a desire to further suppress or eliminate any
evidence of his particularity, or his personal investment in the knowledge of Anne and Willie’s
affair which renders him vulnerable to that particularity. And this would resemble a figurative
type of suicide or death which would then allow Jack to experience a “rebirth.” When Jack
drowns in West by reliving his past with Anne, he confronts his experiences and what they
meant for him in order to kill them. Once Jack relives those memories to determine how his
experiences with Anne have impacted him, he can allow the “truth” of the experience to remain
in the past and become part of the burnt piece of string that is dead and no longer real. In effect,
who Jack has become because of that experience can also become part of the past and die as
well. Jack drowns in “west” in order to drown out who Jack Burden has become. The rebirth he
experiences then from “burning” his home movie allows him “to be baptized to get born again”
into the arms of the impersonal about which he has been so uncertain through much of the novel (408). Jack’s “rebirth” allows him to find “innocence and a new start in the West, after all” and to convert his belief in “Life is Motion towards Knowledge,” which really ignored particularity more than anything else, to a belief in what he terms the “Great Twitch,” which denies the particularity of all persons including himself.48

“So I fled west from the fact,” he explains, “and in the West, at the end of History, the Last Man on that Last Coast, on my hotel bed, I had discovered the dream” (467). Jack calls this dream “the dream of our age” which is at first “always a nightmare and horrible, but in the end it may be, in a special way, rather bracing and tonic” (467). This dream is the “Great Twitch” which dehumanizes particular persons and renders them as nothing more than mechanisms that serve to keep the “Great Twitch” twitching or moving: “the dream was the dream that all life is but the dark heave of blood and the twitch of the nerve” (467). This dream and his subsequent belief in the “Great Twitch” provide Jack with a strategy for separating himself from both the “fact” and the “truth” of his relationship with and knowledge of Anne as well as his knowledge of himself. Both “fact” and “truth” are temporal and mechanical and only exist in order to give life to the “Great Twitch.” Though this is at first a horrible nightmare because it detaches and negates particular persons from their knowledge of themselves as well as their experiences in life, it is “bracing and tonic” for Jack because it divulges that “Anne Stanton did not exist” and the “words Anne Stanton were simply a name for a peculiarly complicated mechanism” and as words Anne could have no meaning to Jack “who himself was a another piece of complicated mechanism” (468).

48 James C. Simmons refers to Jack’s “rebirth” in this scene as “a symbolic lobectomy” that provides “contentment,” but that his sense of contentment is “unnatural and superficial” like that of the Adam Stanton’s catatonic patient (85). This artificiality of Jack’s rebirth allows him to return from the West, but also causes his eventual rejection of the “Great Twitch.”
Simmons notes that “Jack’s theory of mechanistic determination effectively increases his distance and remoteness” from others “through a process of dehumanization, that is, by seeing people and their actions in terms of random impulses of electricity throbbing through the muscle tissue, as sequences of mindless, meaningless, unrelated stimuli that proved an automatic response” (86-7). Dehumanizing and mechanizing individuals in this capacity aligns with Jack’s earlier notion that “direction is all” and “Life is Motion toward Knowledge” in that a person’s reaction to the knowledge of an event or relationship is simply an uncontrollable stimulation of nerves; and without this stimulation the nerves would not keep moving or functioning in order to have another random and uncontrollable spasm in which life (or the “Great Twitch”) depends. And because actual persons are nothing more than a “peculiarly complicated mechanism” human experiences are dependent only on the movement of the mechanism and therefore have no larger significance or “truth” to the mechanism outside of providing life. Ostensibly, the limited knowledge represented by Jack’s “facts” does not matter, nor does the “truth” that he cannot or will not understand, because these types of knowing are simply by-products of a reaction that stimulates movement.

The “Great Twitch’s” ability to negate the need for particularity among individuals via dehumanization extends Jack’s previous philosophies of idealism and “Life is Movement toward Knowledge.” By the same token, the “Great Twitch” also resembles Jack’s methods of escape when knowledge appears threatening. However, instead of having to withdraw into a state outside of consciousness through the womb or sleep, the “Great Twitch” permits Jack to remain fully conscious by denying the identities of particular persons. This in turn makes the threat of knowledge that comes from particularized forms of knowing non-existent; it also confirms that factual knowledge has no greater implications outside of objective reality and historical event.
Believing in the “Great Twitch” then allows the narrative to continue and ensures Jack’s survival, even if that survival renders nothing more than a physical existence devoid of any sort of conscious development. Thus Jack returns home because he knows now that “nothing was your fault or anybody’s fault, for things are always as they are,” that “you cannot lose what you never have had,” and that “you are never guilty of a crime which you did not commit” (468).

Despite Jack’s vehemence about his faith in the “Great Twitch,” on his drive home from California he reverts to his usual anxiety and ambivalence about having this “secret knowledge.” At first he says he headed home at “high speed, for if you’ve really been to Long Beach, California, and have had your dream on the hotel bed, then there is no reason why you should not return with confidence to wherever you came from, for now you know, and knowledge is power” (469-70). Though he had envied people in the past for this “secret knowledge,” like Adam Stanton, he was sure that he had “the secret knowledge” and so could “face up to anything” (471). The “Great Twitch” Jack decides “was the live thing. Was all” and that was his secret knowledge (473). But as he continues his drive and picks up a hitchhiker who also seems to have the secret knowledge, Jack begins to wonder, “if the twitch was all, what was it that could know that the twitch is all? [. . .] And if I was all twitch, how did the twitch which was me know that the twitch was all?” (473). Rather than concede that perhaps the impersonal “Great Twitch” was not all and that particular people are perhaps more than just complicated mechanisms, Jack concludes that he cannot attain a complete knowledge of the “Great Twitch” and that it is not important that he know for certain that the “twitch was all” for him to have faith that it is. He says, “that is the mystery. That is the secret knowledge. That is what you have to go to California to have a mystic vision to find out. That the twitch is all. Then, having found that out, in the

49 It is these passages, which appear at the very end of Jack’s journey west, that seem to indicate that Jack has not yet accepted the interconnectivity that Lavendar seems to think he does.
mystic vision,” or in the denial of his particularity, “you feel clean and free” and become “one with the Great Twitch” (473).

Jack feels “clean and free” because under the tenets of the “Great Twitch” the burden of human relationships as well as the emotions and experiences produced by those relationships are repudiated by the fact that the individuals involved have no unique and particular identities and that the existence of any relationship in the first place only fuels the twitch which enables life. However, the isolation that accompanies a belief in the “Great Twitch” is also further grounds for Jack’s uncertainty. Upon his return from California, Jack is eager to see Willie who now has everything, including Anne, but not “the thing” that Jack has which is “the great thing, the secret” (473). Much like Milly’s recognition that her connection to the impersonal isolates her from the other characters in Wings, Jack notes that “Everything was fine just the way it had been before” he left “except that now” he “knew the secret,” but that his “secret knowledge cut” him off. He continues, “If you have the secret, you cannot really communicate anymore with somebody who has not got it” (473). What Jack finds when he returns home is just like the scene in which he left, except now he has completely isolated himself through the dehumanization and mechanization of his friends and associates. By believing in the “Great Twitch,” Jack denies any significance they might have in his life and for the first time finds himself entirely disconnected from others. Willie, as well as the other characters in the novel, remain as Jack left them because they are still invested not only in their own particularity, but also in the particularity of others. Willie and Anne, for instance, still believe that their individual actions are significant to their own lives as well as to the lives of others rather than believing they are a mere series of spontaneous nerve spasms. To divest Willie or Anne from their particularity by telling them the “truth” of his “secret knowledge” Jack feels would be like asking them for “sympathy” or that he
would appear to be “feeling sorry for himself” because he is cut off and isolated (473). Jack says though that to tell the “truth” would not be asking for sympathy, but rather “for congratulations” (473). While on the surface Jack may celebrate his newfound belief in the “Great Twitch” and its ability to allow for his continual existence, the mere fact that he notes the potential isolation of holding such a belief demonstrates his ambivalence in its ability to make sense of the world and, perhaps more importantly, to make sense of his own existence within that world.

Ostensibly, Jack’s belief in the “Great Twitch” is a coping mechanism that keeps him from a (literal or figurative) death caused by knowledge. It prevents Jack from having to engage with and make meaning from the knowledge with which he has been presented. The “Great Twitch” in its ability to dehumanize and render individuals as impersonal entities intensifies Jack’s early methods of retreat and escape from the potential threat that not only certain types of knowledge present, but also the threat imposed by competing modes of knowing. If an event, person, or thing has no purpose in the world other than to stimulate the larger nerve which comprises life in order for life to keep happening, than knowledge, no matter what form it may take, poses no threat to the individual as individual identities are virtually non-existent. Moreover, knowledge loses its ability to kill or save man because it really has no real significance except to help stimulate the twitch.

Paradoxically, these same characteristics that allow Jack to disengage from individual and particular persons also provide Jack continued access to knowledge. This is important because even after he returns home from California Jack continues to find “facts” for Willie. So while the “Great Twitch” serves to protect him from the threat knowledge may pose to his own identity, it also, in its mechanization, renders knowledge safe and thus allows for opportunities to know without having to internalize and construct meaning from that knowledge. The dual nature
of the “Great Twitch” enables Jack to mediate a relationship between Willie Stark and Adam Stanton, for instance, without worrying about the consequences of bringing two diametrically opposed personalities together; and it compels Jack to finish investigating long-time family friend, Judge Irwin, who Willie hopes to blackmail for political gain. Jack’s confidence in the “Great Twitch,” even with his suspicion that it is not “all,” is necessary to the development of the narrative, but also to the self-knowledge that Jack finally arrives at through the telling of the narrative. Without such a belief, Jack would not be able to construct the narrative in the first place as the events in his story would have unfolded much differently, perhaps have even ended when he learned of Anne’s affair.

With his faith in the “Great Twitch” Jack finally finds what he has been looking for over the course of All the King’s Men—the “facts” about Judge Irwin that Willie had requested during the initial trip to Mason City and, more importantly, the “truth” about himself. The problem for Jack is that these “facts,” even with his convictions in the authority of the impersonal “Great Twitch,” reveal a “truth” about Judge Irwin that impact Jack in several ways. Jack cannot escape or retreat from either the “facts” or the “truth” of what he uncovers. He says that though he drove to Burden’s Landing to confront the judge, he considered returning to Willie and telling him that he “was convinced” the evidence he found was not true. Jack says, “But I had to know. Even as the thought of going away without knowing came through my head, I knew that I had to know the truth. For the truth is a terrible thing. You dabble your foot in it and it is nothing. But you walk a little further and you feel it pull you like an undertow or a whirlpool [. . .] there is a blackness of truth, too” (516). On one hand, the fact that Jack is compelled to find out the “truth” by confronting Judge Irwin further demonstrates his ambivalence or uncertainty regarding the power of the “Great Twitch.” If everything, including “facts” and “truth,” are simply stimulants
to a nerve, confronting the Judge would just be another random series of twitches to serve a larger function: the knowledge Jack discovers is immaterial and just another cog to keep the machine that is the “Great Twitch” functioning.

On the other hand, and of particular note, Jack’s desire to confront Judge Irwin and to get confirmation of a “truth” in which the “facts” of Judge Irwin’s history seem to point, undermine the threat he perceives knowledge to contain. Because Judge Irwin served as a surrogate father to Jack as he grew up, confirming the “truth” of the events surrounding the Judge’s past—his involvement with the shady dealings of the American Electric Power Company and subsequent suicide of Mortimer Littlepaugh—will alter Jack’s history, or at least how he has understood his history. Altering how he has viewed his history will force Jack to interrogate how a new version of his past changes how he knows himself as well as how he constructs and projects his identity to others. In his confrontation with the Judge, Jack risks the possibility of attaining “complete knowledge” of his past and of himself: that is, Jack risks testing whether or not knowledge will kill him or save him.

What Jack learns from this encounter with Judge Irwin is far greater than he can imagine. While just an admittance of the Judge’s guilt, who Jack believed to be “clean” and free from events that would make for successful blackmail, would have been enough to alter Jack’s conception of his own history, Jack gains knowledge that forces him into a state of self-consciousness. After leaving the Judge’s house with a confirmation of his involvement in the electric company scheme as well as a refusal from the Judge to yield to the pressures of Willie Stark, Judge Irwin shoots himself and causes Jack’s mother to exclaim: “You did it, you did, you

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50 It is also worth noting here that because of the Judge’s relationship to Governor Stanton, Anne’s and Adam’s father, as well as Jack’s own relationship with the Stanton’s, that his confirmation of the “facts” will alter the history and self-perception of both Anne and Adam as well as himself.
killed him! [. . .] Your father, [. . .] your father and oh! you killed him” (525). Jack learns that his father was not Ellis Burden, or the Scholarly Attorney, with whom he has been disgusted with for much of the novel due to Ellis’s early abandonment of his family as well as his fervent belief in God. Confronted with the knowledge that Judge Irwin was actually his father and that he, through his work with Willie, is ultimately responsible for his father’s death, Jack is no longer able to escape the potential threat of knowledge. He must reflect upon how he has come to know himself as well as how this new mode of knowing himself may alter that method of knowing; and as a result, Jack’s faith in the “Great Twitch” is tested.

Knowledge “kills” man in two ways in this scene. First, Jack’s insistence on confronting the Judge with the “facts” he has dug up, produces a “truth” with a “blackness” that results in Judge Irwin’s death. The Judge kills himself not solely because of the knowledge with which Jack has forced upon him, but also because of the knowledge he has that Jack is his son. Right before Jack leaves the Judge’s house, Judge Irwin tells Jack that he could stop him from blackmailing him. He says to Jack, “I could just—[. . .] I could just say to you—I could just tell you something—[. . .] But I won’t” (523). Jack says, “I stood there irresolutely for a moment. Things were not making sense. He was not supposed to be standing there, brisk and confident and cheerful” (523). Though Jack does not understand what is happening, the Judge knows that he has the power to stop Jack by revealing his paternity. Yet, he does not use this knowledge to save himself from blackmail; instead, he permits Jack’s knowledge to trigger his death. Jack’s earlier reflection about knowledge’s ability to kill man eventually proves to be true. Interestingly enough, in the death of Judge Irwin, the man who Jack had come to identify as his father—Ellis Burden—figuratively dies for Jack from this same knowledge. Jack notes, “I was peculiarly situated. I had lost two” fathers “at the same instant” (533). He also reflects, “I had dug up the
truth and the truth always kills the father, the good and weak one or the bad and strong one, and you are left alone with yourself and the truth” (533).

Second, knowledge figuratively kills Jack, though this death is slower and more painful than the literal death of Judge Irwin. Because Jack is left alone with the “truth” about himself which is produced from the “facts” he has excavated from the past, he must come to terms with and begin to acknowledge his particularity. In other words, Jack has all of the components—or different modes of knowing himself—available in order for him to make meaning of himself and to construct an identity comprised of this new knowledge. Doing so also means that he has to let go of or “kill” the way in which he currently knows himself as well as the other people in his life (i.e. his mother, Anne Stanton, and even Willie), which also requires that he shed his ambivalence towards knowledge as well as forgo his methods of justifying his disengagement such as the womb, the “Great Sleep,” “Life is Motion towards Knowledge,” and ultimately the “Great Twitch.” To deconstruct his identity in order to know himself with the new knowledge requires a killing of the self: Jack must shed his old way of knowing and defining himself in order to process and internalize the new knowledge that he now possesses. And it is here, after the death of Judge Irwin and when his paternity is revealed, that Jack engages with multiple forms of knowledge in order to start the process of self-definition in order to experience a rebirth and acquire a new sense of himself. It is only once Jack has shed or killed off his past construction of self and possessed a new construction that he can affirm his identity at the end of the novel by marrying Anne, leaving Burden’s Landing, and finishing the Cass Mastern project.

5.3 Relation is All: Affirming Identity through Narrative

In “Knowledge and the Image of Man,” Warren writes that “man’s process of self-definition” requires that he “distinguishes himself from the world and from other men” so that
“he disintegrates his [...] sense of unity” and “discovers separateness.” And “in this process he discovers the pain of self-criticism and the pain of isolation. But in the pain may, if he is fortunate, develop its own worth, work its own homeopathic cure” (241). Jack’s rebirth, the way in which he starts to know himself anew, begins a process of “self-definition” initiated by the death of Judge Irwin. Though Jack has isolated himself through his theories of impersonality for much of the narrative, the Judge’s death necessitates a new type of isolation in which Jack must distinguish himself from himself. In other words, once Jack learns the identity of his father, he must wade back through his past in order to reposition himself and his memories with his new knowledge. He must redefine or re-know himself in the context of this new knowledge, but this redefinition requires that he reevaluate how his understanding of the past as well as his past actions will help to shape his new identity. Jack must then dispense of his belief in the “Great Twitch” and become self-conscious, and more importantly self-critical in order to make sense of himself as the son of Judge Irwin.

The process of self-definition or rebirth is slow and painful for Jack because he must dismantle his entire way of knowing the world; and this too requires time as well as relation. In other words, Jack must first come to understand how and why people are more than just impersonal “peculiarly complicated mechanisms” and in turn overcome his fear of the reproach of the truth. Shortly after Judge Irwin’s death, Jack reflects that

By the time we understand the pattern we are in, the definition we are making for ourselves, it is too late to break out of the box. We can only live in terms of the definition, like the prisoner in the cage in which he cannot lie or stand or sit, hung up in the justice to be viewed by the populace. Yet the definition we have made of ourselves is ourselves. To break out of it, we must make a new self. But how can
the self make a new self when the selfness which it is, is the only substance from which the new self can be made? (529)

Up until this point in Jack’s story, his identity has been defined impersonally through his life philosophies as well as his disengagement and disinterest in others and life more generally. His belief in the “Great Twitch” is the crux of the identity he has crafted for himself. Jack has sustained this “pattern” of self-definition impart because of his constant avoidance of new forms of knowledge that would interfere with this pattern, but also because of what Warren calls in the later essay the “incompleteness of knowledge” (243). According the Emersonian ideal of double consciousness, an individual only has access to incomplete knowledge as multiple modes of knowing the self are unable to be reconciled and integrated to decipher a complete picture of the self. Jack confirms this for much of his story by reminding the reader and himself that complete knowledge equates to death.

Yet, Judge Irwin’s death frustrates both the logic of double consciousness as well as Jack’s theories of impersonality that dismiss particular forms of knowing as it forces Jack to acknowledge that an alternative construction of his self-definition is not only possible, but necessary. This alternative self depends upon the knowledge of his particularity whereby he is no longer just an impersonal “heave of the nerve” in order to propel the “Great Twitch,” but rather a son who now possesses the knowledge he has been searching for in order to make sense of his complicated family dynamics and of himself. The Judge’s death thus provides a more complete version of who Jack is though this knowledge contradicts his previous notion of self. Jack’s dilemma then when he asks how a new self can be made out of the existing self is really a question of how one can know the self in two ways. And Jack’s two selves in this instant resemble the Emersonian ideal of double consciousness in that the selves Jack is trying to
reconcile and integrate are not just his past and present selves, but versions of himself that relied upon his respective rejection and acceptance of impersonal and particular forms of knowledge.

It is worth noting that Jack’s process of self-definition is slow and painful because the Judge’s death merely triggers the process. Jack’s dilemma is a result of the “Great Twitch” failing to make sense of the knowledge he has acquired through the Judge’s death. The “Great Twitch” does not provide the evasion for which he typically takes comfort and thereby forces him to possess the “truth” of his paternity. Because he cannot escape the “truth” produced by the “facts” that he himself discovered, Jack has no choice but to accept and possess this new and uncomfortable knowledge. In possessing the knowledge that Judge Irwin was his father, Jack must acknowledge the ways in which this information may alter his identity. Jack though still fears the “reproach of the truth” and complete forms of knowing. The Judge’s death then initiates the process of self-definition for Jack because it forces a new way of knowing upon him; however, Jack continues to live and define himself “in terms of the definition” from which he has previously constructed his identity. He returns to work for Willie, though he requests work that doesn’t involve the blackmail of particular persons and concentrates solely on finding “facts” for bills Willie hopes to pass into law. He remains relatively disengaged from Willie, Anne, and Adam Stanton until Willie’s son, Tom Stark, is hospitalized from a football injury. He continues to possess his newfound knowledge, but does not integrate the knowledge in order to redefine himself as he is unsure of how to do so. His possession and acceptance of this knowledge, rather than his typical avoidance, triggers his process of self-definition because it starts to challenge his previous forms of knowing such as the “Great Twitch” and “Life is Motion towards Knowledge.”
When Jack returns to work for Willie after Judge Irwin’s funeral, he says that “after a
great blow, or crisis, after the first shock and then after the nerves have stopped screaming and
twitching, you settle down to the new condition of things and feel that all possibility of change
has been used up” (534). Jack adjusts because he is sure that the “new equilibrium is for eternity”
(534). Jack’s crisis is the acquisition of his new knowledge and it is only once he has accepted its
reality and existence that he returns to work for Willie. Possessing this knowledge though does
not require an immediate integration or a new self formulated from this knowledge; instead, Jack
gets comfortable in his new equilibrium by simply containing the knowledge and determining
that this particular “story was over” and that he can continue living in terms of the self he has
constructed prior to having this knowledge (534). He has yet to achieve an “osmosis of being”
and maintains his believe in the impersonality of the “Great Twitch.”

Jack does not fully immerse himself in the process of self-definition until Willie’s story
has concluded. Instead, he merely acts as a container for the knowledge he acquires from Judge
Irwin’s death. The conclusion of Willie’s story is necessary for Jack to confront this knowledge
in order to affirm his identity in two ways. First, Jack literally witnesses the ways in which
knowledge can kill man; after all, the knowledge of Willie’s affair with his sister, Anne,
motivates Adam to gun Willie down and get himself killed in the process. Looking back, the
narrator Jack reflects that Adam, “whom he called the man of idea,” and Willie, “the man of
fact” were “doomed to destroy each other, just as each was doomed to try to use the other and to
yearn toward and try to become the other, because each was incomplete” (657). Though Jack
attributes this incompleteness to “the terrible division of their age,” the separation of Adam and
Willie into the man of idea and the man of fact respectively also suggests an incompleteness of
knowledge and the failure of either man to integrate alternative modes of self-consciousness.
Neither Adam nor Willie achieves what Warren calls the “ultimate unity of knowledge” or the “full balance” and “responsibility” of self-knowledge (“Knowledge and the Image of Man” 242, 244). Ironically, and contrary to all of Jack’s previous philosophies that posited complete forms of self-knowledge as death, an incomplete knowledge kills both Willie and Adam. The idea that their union, though doomed from the start, reflects an attraction for each to possess portions of the other’s identity that they may have lacked. Their movement towards knowledge and towards each other to achieve a complete sense of self destroyed them. This experience allows Jack the narrator to reflect upon the destructive qualities of knowledge over the course of his narrative, especially during the early moment in Mason City. But more importantly witnessing the deaths of Adam and Willie forces Jack to confront his belief in impersonal forms of knowledge such as the “Great Twitch” because if these two men had been nothing more than impersonal and mechanized entities, their deaths and the subsequent after effects would not have impacted Jack quite so much. Watching the ways in which knowledge destroyed his friends and forced change in his own life requires that Jack begin to examine and process the knowledge he possesses in a new way.

The second way that the conclusion of Willie’s story forces Jack into a process of self-definition is, because the experience undermines and challenges his previous methods of knowing, by requiring that he acknowledge his complicity not only in the action of Willie’s story, but also within his own life. By recognizing the implications of his actions over the course of his life, Jack determines that individuals are more than “peculiarly complicated mechanisms” that work as cogs in the impersonal machine of life; thus he must admit the validity of particular identities and the “agony of will” for which individuals are responsible (657). At the end of the novel, Jack says,

This has been the story of Willie Stark, but it is my story too. For I have a story.
It is the story of a man who lived in the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and then it looked another and very different way. The change did not happen all at once. Many things happened, and that man did not know when he had any responsibility for them and when he did not. There was, in fact, a time when he came to believe that nobody had any responsibility for anything and there was no god but the Great Twitch. (656)

Jack reflects that this belief in the “Great Twitch” was at first horrible and then comforting because it invalidated his will and the consequences of any action in which he might partake. But after Willie’s death, Jack discovers that “he did not believe in the Great Twitch anymore. He did not believe in it because he had seen too many people live and die” (657). His faith in the “Great Twitch” is destroyed not only through Willie’s and Adam’s death, but also by his confrontation with Tiny Duffy, Willie’s lieutenant governor. Duffy tells Adam of Anne’s affair with Willie, driving Adam to shoot Willie, which gets him shot in the process. After Duffy offers Jack a job, Jack wonders why Duffy had been so sure he would work for him. Jack the narrator says that in this instance he “read myself to myself” so that Jack the character finally understood. Jack reflects that Duffy “knew the nightmare truth, which was that we were twins bound together more intimately and disastrously than the poor freaks of the midway [. . .] We were bound together forever and I could never hate him without hating myself or love myself without loving him. We were bound together under the unwinking eye of the Great Twitch whom we must all adore” (629). This realization causes Jack to hate “everything and everybody” because they “all looked alike to him” and he “looked like them” (629). Jack, through the use of “fact,” has acted just as Duffy had acted in his dealings with Judge Irwin. He provided the knowledge that impart
caused the Judge to shoot himself—he is just as responsible for killing someone as Duffy is though neither actually ever held a weapon.

Jack’s acceptance of his responsibility, both in the Judge’s death and in the unlikely partnering of Adam and Willie, is what finally sets in motion the isolation and the self-criticism Warren describes as necessary to the process of self-definition. In turn, Jack must accept the consequences of the “Great Twitch”: its power to annihilate the particularity and personality of individuals has rendered his identity the same as Duffy’s, who he finds reprehensible. Thus, he comes to realize the significance of particularity and particular forms of knowing because only this allows him to differentiate himself from others and to differentiate his actions. Accepting his particularity as well as the responsibility that comes with it permits him to accept the tenets of Cass’s spider web and to make more responsible and intentioned choices in his life. This acceptance allows him to refrain from telling Sugar Boy about Duffy’s responsibility thus preserving Duffy’s life as well as enables Jack to rebuild his relationships with his mother and Anne Stanton. As Jack’s knowledge of himself and his actions begins to shift, he notes “there isn’t anything to say to somebody who has found out the truth about himself, whether it is good or bad” (647). He also notes that “all knowledge that is worth anything is maybe paid for by blood. Maybe that is the only way you can tell that a certain piece of knowledge is worth anything: it has cost some blood” (647). The blood that has produced the knowledge Jack needed to accept responsibility and start his process of self-definition is literal in the case of Judge Irwin, Willie Stark, and Adam Stanton.

This knowledge and the recognition that he is more than just a cog in an impersonal machine also figuratively costs Jack his own blood. Even though Jack starts to accept his role in the events of All the King’s Men with the deaths of Willie and Adam and his confrontation with
Duffy, it isn’t until Jack assumes the first person at the end of Willie’s story that he achieves or affirms a new identity that differs from the character Jack. It is only after the events of the novel have unfolded and he has found out the “truth” about himself that Jack is able to assume the role of narrator and recount both the “facts” and the “truth” in order to make meaning of how the two forms of knowledge have worked and are working together to construct the first person Jack Burden.

Warren remarks in “Knowledge and the Image of Man” that the “ultimate unity of knowledge is in the image of knowledge of himself that man creates through knowledge, the image of his destiny, the mask he stares at” (242). Jack, through the narration of his life via his relationship with Willie, stares at the mask of himself he has worn and taken off by the time he tells the story. Staring at this mask and examining it through various moments in time and various relationships allows Jack to piece together these moments and people as if his life were a puzzle so that he may begin to see the full picture—the image of himself that the reader gets at the end of the novel. Warren goes on to say that “the knowledge of make, that of do, that of see, that of be [. . .] ultimately interfuse in our life process” so that “Any change of environment—including any making—creates a new relation between man and his world, and other men. Any doing changes the doer. Any seeing changes the see-er. And any knowledge one has of his own being modifies that being, re-creates it, and thus changes the quality of making, doing, and seeing” (242). Telling his story through Willie is Jack’s way of seeing and making his identity anew not only by putting events and people in relation to one another, but also by putting the knowledge he gained and possessed at each individual moment and through each individual relationship in order to become conscious of and to understand how collectively these events and
people have influenced his identity. In other words, it allows him to construct his self outside of the terms by which he previously lived, but still from his previous self.

In this way, the narrative acts as a mediator and provides the “self-corrective” features of self-definition that Warren describes in his essay while simultaneously providing Jack with the tools necessary to determine the “texture of relations” and the “interpenetration” of his life. Simone Vauthier argues that Jack functions as both the narratee and the narrator so that “the ‘you’ is dependent” on the “‘I’” in order for Jack to form “an image of the Other.” This Other “reveals Jack’s need to extract private meaning out of public events and socialize personal meaning in a dialectic process” so that in Jack’s choice of narratees, Jack “betrays both his anxiety at being limited, defined, limited because defined, and his desire for self-definition” (183). Yet Jack is only able to project this Other in the form of the narratee because the narrative is retrospective—the events of Willie’s story have already transformed him and thrust upon him new modes of knowledge. Though the transformation has already occurred in time, it has not yet culminated in his consciousness. It is only through the narration of the events and the relationship that Jack the narrator is able to draw through relation that he can internalize and make sense of the ways in which knowledge has transformed him: he must tell his story, to himself at least, if he is to “affirm” the identity that has resulted from his transformation.

Vauthier continues that the second person you is so effective “that it is truly a ‘didactic you’” (184). The didactic nature of the narrative, on one hand, allows Jack to reexamine his actions through his newfound acceptance of his responsibility in and to the world. He is able to relive the events of his life and assign meaning to his actions which he previously shirked from as he lived the experience of the events; thus correlating his will as well as his avoidance of responsibility in order to derive new perspectives about himself.
The narrative is then a tool Jack uses to develop consciousness of himself in order to correct and refashion himself and his actions as he ventures out of the past and into the present; but the narrative is dependent upon temporality in that it time must elapse in order for Jack to put his life into relation in order to determine meaning. In other words, to have this new knowledge of himself, Jack can only attain consciousness by projecting himself as an Other, or a character within the story, after the events have occurred and new forms of knowing are made possible. Vauthier notes that “By telling parts of his story [. . .] through a second person, the first-person narrator shows that he is not yet fully aware for all the aspects of his own life or is at any rate reluctant to face them. The ‘you’ which conveniently separates and distances” Jack from his experience also “clarifies” that experience in order for Jack to “make progress in self-consciousness” (185). It is only over the course of telling his story that Jack begins to see clearly the image the narrative creates of himself and thus as the narrator is able to assign meaning to the various pieces of that image. For instance, after Jack the character learns of Tom Stark’s paralysis, Jack the narrator notes that as he “experienced that day, there was at first an impression of the logic of the events, caught flickeringly at moments, but as they massed to the conclusion I was able to grasp, at the time only the slightest hints as to the pattern that was taking shape” which made the incident and the subsequent events (Willie and Adam’s death) feel like a “sense of dreamlike unreality” (577). Looking back as the narrator, after a considerable passage of time, Jack notes that “the sense of reality returned, long after, when” he had “been able to gather the pieces of the puzzle up and put them together to see the pattern” (577-8). To the present Jack, this ability to piece together his reality and make sense of his identity is “unremarkable” because “reality is not a function of the event as event, but of the relationship of that event to past, and future, events” (578).
Time then both limits and affords an individual the ability to attain consciousness of themselves. First, it restricts the ways in which an individual can know himself. As Jack is living through an experience such as Tom Stark’s paralysis or the deaths of Judge Irwin, Willie, and Adam, he has immediate access to the “facts” of that experience (i.e. Tom crushes his spinal cord by playing football), but as time, and thus life, keeps moving forward Jack must continue to live. The consciousness cannot fully process the knowledge, or the “truth” of the event itself as well as its subsequent effects both on the world and the individual, until they have already occurred. Jack’s inability to process the knowledge of the event does not keep these effects from happening or time from moving forward. Conversely, temporality allows for the consciousness to develop through memory and relation. Once time has moved forward and the consequences of an event have taken place, the self in the current or new moment is able to look back on the event and put it into relation to its current experience or position in life. In relating past events to current ones, the self, and Jack in the case of *All the King’s Men*, is able to derive “reality” or meaning from the relationship of the past event to the present one. This meaning allows someone like Jack to achieve a complete knowledge of himself through relation and thus to affirm his identity. And as Jack says, it is “only as we realize this do we live, for our own identity is dependent upon this principle” (578). Yet, it should be noted that this affirmation of identity through complete knowledge of self—that is a knowledge derived from the varying pieces of past constructions of identity—is temporary and fleeting. Because even as Jack is narrating the story, time is already moving forward and thus limits the completeness of this knowledge of self as new events occur and new relationships form, which then produce news ways for Jack to know himself in the future. Jack will have to undergo this process of self-criticism and self-reflection again and again in order to continually reaffirm his identity so long as he is alive,
which confirms Jack’s earlier suspicion that all knowledge worth having is paid for in blood. In his case, as Jack must revisit and reevaluate himself over the course of his life, he pays for his newfound knowledge of self by sacrificing the previous ways in which he knew himself: he trades one identity for a new and more relevant, productive, and responsible one.

The narrative, because of its reliance on time and relation, thus allows Jack to achieve, albeit temporarily, “the ultimate unity of knowledge” as well as the “full balance and responsibility in self-knowledge” that Warren describes and that Emerson hopes for in his idea of double consciousness. Jack, through the narrative, is able to achieve consciousness of how the impersonal and the particular manifested in his prior constructions of self. But he does not reach a true condition of double consciousness because the narrative happens retrospectively after he has already garnered a new identity from his different modes of knowing the self. The narrative merely serves as a device that permits Jack to integrate and reconcile alternative notions of self in order to assign meaning and definition to who he is at the time of the telling. This integration allows Jack to affirm his identity with a full picture of who he was with who he is, but that identity is already shifting because Jack continues to live and time continues to progress. Time then prevents true double consciousness, while still allowing one to get closer to a complete state of consciousness of themselves by permitting a fuller picture of that self at different moments in time. More importantly, because the narrative uses relation to piece together multiple versions so that they can coexist, the individual is able edit that self to exist more responsibly in the present and future.

Warren, through the narrative structure of *All the King’s Men*, offers a method of arranging experience so that a person has the possibility of merging versions of the self over the course of a lifetime without feeling the full extent of the painful consequences of double
consciousness. Because narrative requires a temporal distance from the events, the person involved in the telling embarks on a process of self-discovery that allows for self-editing. Both the necessary distance required of narrative and the subsequent ability to edit the self through that narrative, allow the person telling the story to retain a sense of agency and identity that a knowledge of the impersonal challenges. At the same, however, this strategic form of narrating individual knowledge and experience also moves the teller closer to the impersonal as they are able to shed previous constructions of self and to generate more developed and relevant versions of the self in order to move forward through life.
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