

*The Construction of Narrative in Three Modernist Moments: riverrun past A Carafe  
to The Red Wheelbarrow*

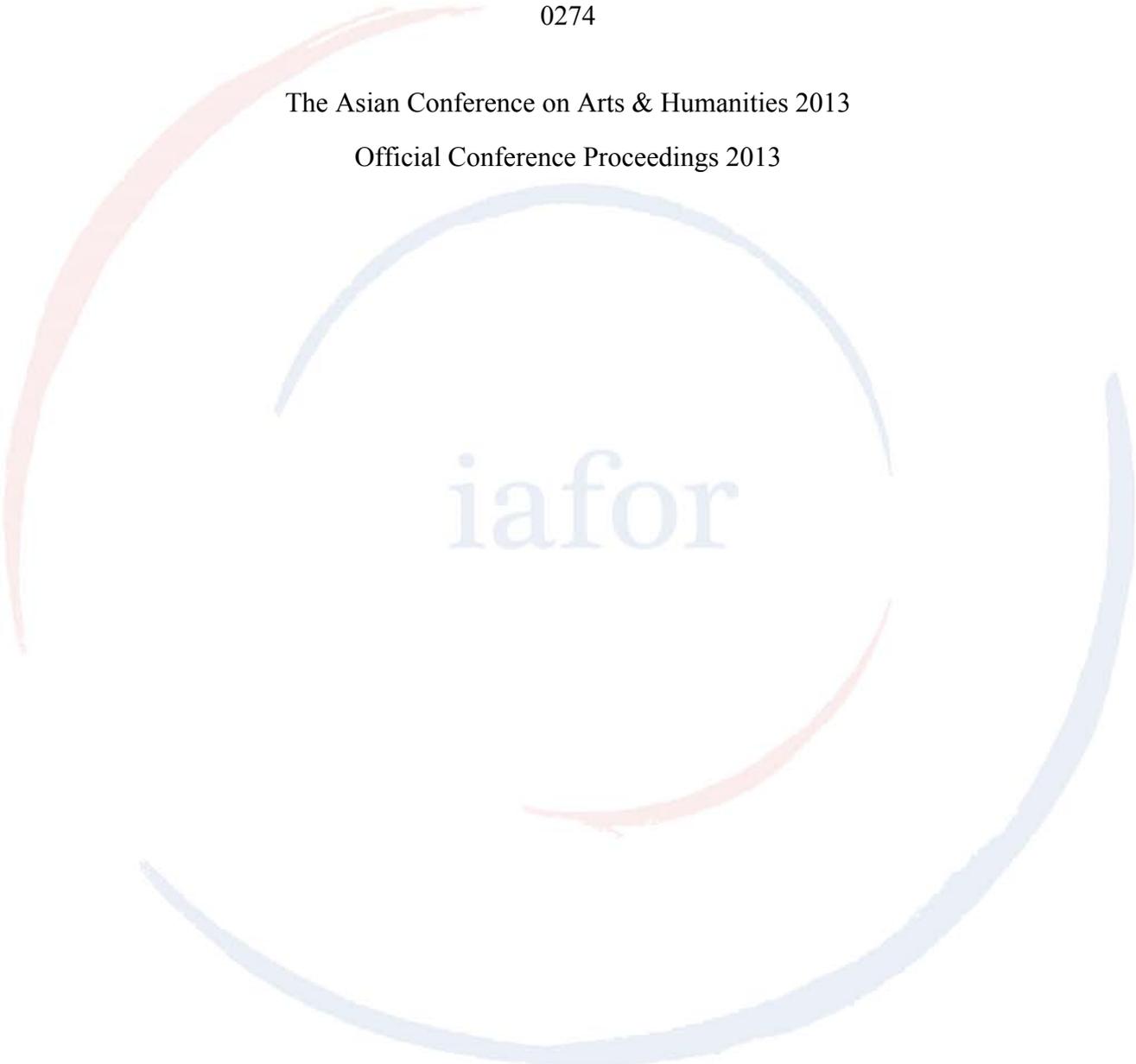
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The well-known ending stanza of Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" reads like this:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.  
(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172206>)

Some recent developments in neuroscience and neurolinguistics offer suggestions about the location of that maker of order in the human mind, about the sources for that "rage for order," and also about the accuracies or distortions of the human mind's making of order. Words of ourselves and origins are as often as not distortions and confusions; they are indeed ghostly demarcations, no matter how keen we assert their value. Moreover, the word as physiological event precedes the word as meaning, an observation anticipated by many modernist writers: the word-as-thing before it is the word-as-meaning was addressed in varying ways by writers as different as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and William Carlos Williams. The making of order from the raw data entering the brain is normal and necessary. But it is often pre- or unconscious processing, regularly wrong, inevitably reiterative and adaptive. Some modernist techniques of composition underscore the brain's requisite, partial, and false attempts at order.

Regarding the magnitude of unconscious or preconscious information received by the brain Leonard Mlodinov remarks that "the human sensory system sends the brain about eleven million bits of information each second. . . . The actual amount of information we can handle has been estimated to be somewhere between sixteen and fifty bits per second" (33). This results in vast unconscious processing of sensory information. Because of this vast filtering, what arrives to conscious mind is necessarily selective and discriminating, if not indeed biased, ill-informed, and discriminatory.

Perhaps more disconcerting, Michael Gazziniga asserts that "When we set out to explain our actions, they are all post hoc explanations using post hoc observations with no access to non-conscious processing. Not only that, our left brain fudges things a bit to fit into a makes-sense story" (77-78). We are unable to access the non-conscious data, due to the architecture of the brain, and so what arrives to consciousness is distorted, imprecise, ghostly, and so are the resultant demarcations. In addition, it "is the left hemisphere that engages in the human tendency to find order in chaos, that tries to fit everything into a story and put it into a context. It seems that it is driven to hypothesize about the structure of the world even in the face of evidence that no pattern exists" (85).

Explanations and understandings, manufactured orders and structures, interpretations and patterns all appear as forms of "truth" and seem to result from "reasoned thinking," but these constructs are tricks of mind: "When asked to explain ourselves, we engage in a search for truth that may feel like a kind of introspection. But though we think we know what we are feeling, we often know neither the content nor the unconscious origins of that content. And so we come up with plausible explanations that are untrue or only partly accurate, and we believe them" (Mlodinov 191). In this way,

our unconscious creates a model of the world (Mlodnov 45). One of the ordering factors necessary for the creation of this model is time: events occur in time, language (a specific kind of event) occurs in time, narratives depend on time. The construction of causal relationships, like the construction of syntax, requires a temporal arrangement of events.

Time and its relation to the activities of the brain alter two more significant aspects of the creation of order. The first of these refers to our unconscious misrepresentations of time in the mind. All perceptions of the present are in fact distortions, post hoc explanations of events and apprehensions that have already occurred. The physiology of the brain requires this lapse, which is about half a second (500 milliseconds). Benjamin Libet observes that the “brain needs a relatively long period of appropriate activations, up to about half a second, to elicit awareness of the event! Your conscious experience or awareness of your finger touching the table thus appears only after the brain activities have become adequate to produce the awareness” (33). Since, as Libet remarks, “awareness of all sensory stimuli is delayed by about 0.5 sec,” the result is necessarily that “our *awareness of our sensory world is substantially delayed* from its actual occurrence” (Libet’s italics 70). And not only is our awareness delayed, but our reporting of what we have observed, of our awareness may be “considerably different” from what is observed: “For example, if a prudish man were shown a picture of a naked lady, he might report seeing something quite different, or he might report that he saw no image . . . . Given such unconscious modification of what we become aware, there must clearly be some delay in the awareness during which such a subjective modulation can be produced” (70-71).

Not only is the brain playing tricks with interpretation and reporting, it tricks consciousness: “Subjects unconsciously and automatically refer the timing of the sensory event back to the time of the initial fast response of the sensory cortex. They are not aware that the sensory experience *did not actually begin* until adequate cerebral stimulation of up to 0.5 sec in duration had taken place” (Libet 79-80). So the brain receives vast sensory information, filters and selects it unconsciously, projects its simultaneity with experience, interprets it with varying degrees of accuracy, distorts both the apprehension of the information and its timing, and projects some model or creation of order and reality.

Language, as we might expect, behaves along similar lines. In number of studies of response time of the brain to words, measured by magnetoencephalography (MEG), Liina Pylkkanen, Andrew Stringfellow, Alec Marantz and other neurolinguists have found indications of averaged brain activity at 170 milliseconds for high probability words, 250 milliseconds for low probability words, and 350 milliseconds for non-words (see, for example, Pylkanen et al.). By this measure, combined with Libet’s conclusions, even non-words are processed prior to consciousness. In this sense, the word is a thing in the brain before the word is meaning in the mind. This concern with word-as-thing, whether those words were non-words or neologisms, common words in uncommon contexts, or objects to be placed in relation to each other, modernists explored the mind’s making or order from word-as-thing first, then word-as-conscious-or-cognitive-meaning later.

The opening of *Finnegans Wake* provides some examples of non- or recombined words, neologisms, and familiar words in unusual order: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of

recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.” The first word, “riverrun,” which many readers see as continuing the last sentence in the novel, has been glossed by Roland McHugh as “riverain” French for pertaining to a river, and “riveran” Italian dialect for “they will arrive” (3). It is, of course, neither of these, suggestive of both, and the English “river run,” but it is a non-word or at most recognizable, a neologism with indeterminable “transparent” meaning: “If much of the *Wake* sounds to us as Babelian confusion, this must be – so it is assumed – because we are still locked in our monoglot cultural prisons . . . . What is at issue is the hermeneutic drive itself, the urge to translate what is apparently ‘confused’ language into a language which will be entirely transparent, to unweave the polyglot textual thread into the monoglot thread.” (Attridge 158). In Attridge’s view, the *Wake* addresses “the hermeneutic drive itself,” the will to interpret and make order from a text deliberately impossible to negotiate as transparent. Joyce is calling to consciousness the need to interpret and insisting on the tentative, distorting nature of that interpretation.

Samuel Beckett, having served as Joyce’s amanuensis during the writing of the *Wake* is said to have remarked: “You cannot complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something. *It is that something itself*” (<http://www.sheilaomalley.com/?p=1181>). Beckett identifies the primarily aural quality of the work combined with its ontological condition as a thing-in-itself, not a text from which transparent meaning is to be extracted. Joyce is deliberately calling attention to the word-as-thing, to the word as pre-cognitive object, and as polyvalent interpretive object. As such, the *Wake* continually disrupts attempts to make itself clear, transparent, orderly. It calls into question rage for order and narrative constructed by what Gazzaniga calls The Interpreter located in the left brain: “Reading *Finnegans Wake* one is constantly attempted to apply the hermeneutics of suspicion – to doubt your own interpretation and then question the prejudices that have led you to them” (Fordham 31).

So a reading of the *Wake* may reflect some of the developments in recent neuroscience. The mind makes meaning where meaning is uncertain; an interpretation of a passage of the *Wake* calls attention to its own fabrication, partiality, and inconsistency; the sensory data is a thing-in-itself, which we can never get to, only represent: “modern neuroscience teaches that, in a way, all our perceptions must be considered illusions. That’s because we perceive the world only indirectly, by processing and interpreting the raw data of our senses. That’s what our unconscious processing does for us – it creates a model of the world” (Mlodinow 45). Models created by reading *Finnegans Wake* have the appropriate effect and illusion of a dream, the dream world the novel seeks to represent, which is simultaneously representative and distorted.

A different form of representation results from a text like the first “Object” in Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*: “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass” which reads: “A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading”

(<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15396/15396-h/15396-h.htm>). A text like “Carafe” may be paraphrasable, something along the lines of:

The carafe is a kind of object made of glass, and a cousin to other objects made of glass. It is a spectacle, something to look at and something to see through. Its color looks like a bruise, a light purple perhaps, and the mouth points. It is all this, and not quite an ordinary object, different from other glass objects, but not without its own order. Its difference may make us look at things differently.

This paraphrase does not however capture the way the text makes readers re-consider fairly common words in unusual or unfamiliar contexts. Nor does the paraphrase convey the meditative concentration on an object which is apparent in the original text, with its absence of predication, its focus on naming the moment.

Michael Edward Kaufmann argues that “*Tender Buttons* is a narrative of naming – a narrative with no plot, character, or action in the conventional sense – simply a narrative of the mind encountering language and print.” He affirms that Stein “writes not of things in words but of words as things, things with outsides and insides and histories and futures. As Picasso elucidates the essential shape of a carafe, so Stein elucidates the essential form contained in the word” (450). In this context, Stein is interested in the word-as-thing, before it becomes loaded with interpretive baggage, which it eventually must do. We must interpret, we must make sense of the sensory data, we must establish pattern even where there is unfamiliar language or even no pattern. Because we are always 500 milliseconds behind a continuous present, we are representing sensory data and experience more or less falsely and in a more or less false medium, like language or image, which is a sensory thing-in-itself.

Stein insists on this notion of language as object: “Language is a real thing, is not imitation either of sound or colors or emotions, it is an intelligible recreation” (“Poetry”). This “intelligible recreation” entails meaning, even in the absence of pattern and despite attempts to escape meaning: “I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at this time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible.” (“Interview with Robert Haas” in *Primer*).

Where does this making of sense come from? For Gazzaniga, from The Interpreter, that cluster in the left brain that constructs story, narrative, and pattern even in their absence. Stein identifies this necessity to make sense of words. Even though words are pre-cognitive objects, they become freighted with meanings, more or less false, more or less sensible, more or less fabricated by unconscious and inaccessible processes.

William Carlos Williams was also concerned with words as things, with words as pigments in an artistic creation. “The Red Wheelbarrow” is a famous example of a snapshot poem, a moment in time and experience, accompanied by assertion of causality:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens. (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/guide/178804#poem>)

Just what depends on the wheel barrow, rain water, and chickens in the poem is, by intention, never unambiguously named, with a result that the poem becomes a call to “be here now.” While there is no reason not to read these words as referential, in the poem they function as synecdoche for all the mundane objects in our time and place.

But first, before their referential apprehension, the words are words-as-things. A famous line from Paterson, Book I, reads “Say it, no ideas but in things” ([http://allpoetry.com/poem/8501191-from\\_Book\\_I\\_Paterson-by-William\\_Carlos\\_Williams](http://allpoetry.com/poem/8501191-from_Book_I_Paterson-by-William_Carlos_Williams)) refers not only to the subject matter of a poem – it should not be philosophy or an analysis of ideas – but also to the very materials of which a poem is made. The placement of words in this poem in the syntax of the poem reinforces Williams’ insistence on words-as-things:

The word "upon," for example, occupies a position later occupied by a series of nouns, and it completes its verb, just as the nouns complete their intending adjectives. "Upon," then, approaches a literal state of being; it is no longer merely an abstract connective, but a physical presence of consciousness in action. Rather than presenting an icon that we take as a perceptual reality, Williams makes the iconic force of art testimony for the most abstract, yet most intimate of psychological energies: those that define the very form of intentionality. (Altieri)

But while for Altieri this syntax may reflect “consciousness in action,” neuroscience indicates that consciousness in action is really unconsciousness shaping that tiny bit of sensory data that makes it consciousness. “Intentionality” in this context becomes largely unconscious, largely inaccessible, yet clearly marked in consciousness and somehow related to causality as asserted by a constructed narrative, in this case, the poem.

Williams compares words to pigments, indicating words-as-things before they are words-as-meaning: “You notice what I said: there is *no subject the modern poem* cannot approach. There is *no selected material*. It's *what you do with* the work of art. It's what you *put on the canvas and how you put it* that makes the picture. It's how the words fit in. Poems are not made of *thoughts, beautiful thoughts – it's made of words, pigments, put on – here, there; made; actually.*” (“The Poet’s Voice”). Williams’ insistence on word-as-thing, on word as something other than thought, means the poet places words, applies words, as objects. As Gary Snyder phrases it in “Riprap”:

Lay down these words  
Before your mind like rocks.  
    placed solid, by hands  
In choice of place, set  
Before the body of the mind  
    in space and time: (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176577>)

It is indeed before the “body of the mind” that words get placed as things.

In this context, mind emerges as a property of brain, reliant on sensory data, but also on neurological pathways established and reinforced. Simultaneously, the brain is always new, always changing – from without and within, and always ordering. Because the brain is multi-layered and operational, social and interactive, interpretation is always partial, different, new. But the brain and mind prefer and construct causality, connection, linkages, orders. “Sense” is tentative, biased, confabulated, partial, subjective, with the unfortunate circumstance that “the ‘casual arrow’ in human thought processes consistently tends to point from belief to evidence” (Mlodinow 200-201). Interpretation, while automatic and necessary, contains at least four dimensions: (1) a pre-cognitive unconscious element; (2) a conscious element of intentionality; (3) belief: in both social and personal constructs; (4) evidence, factored in later. It is therefore to be expected, even demanded that the ending lines of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” are regularly read with different meanings:

And miles to go before I sleep  
And miles to go before I sleep.  
(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171621> )

Same words, different meanings: context, sequence, reconstruction of “meaning” or “understanding,” make a new order of the very same sensory data evidence.

Some modernist texts, like the examples above from Joyce and Stein, by being deliberately “difficult,” “demanding,” even “unreadable,” underscore the necessary and falsifying interpretive acts of the mind/brain as it negotiates, constructs, and re-constructs meaning in a social human context. The brain makes sequence, order, interpretation, no matter how seemingly chaotic the sensory evidence. But even “simple” texts, like the passages from Williams and Frost create these interpretive high jinks. Gazzinga’s Interpreter and Mlodinow’s unconscious turn out to resemble Wallace Stevens’ “Man on the Dump,” as

One beats and beats for that which one believes  
That’s what one wants to get near. . . .  
. . . . .  
Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.  
(<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-man-on-the-dump/>)

The Interpreter and the unconscious beat for the mind’s own beliefs, make order according to pre-conscious and unknowable processes, re-write, over-write, re-configure, fabricate, and construct valuable and practical orders from the interaction of sensory data and neural patterns. The truth? It is something like the the – a thing before a meaning.

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