Transatlantica
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2016
Ordinary Chronicles of the End of the World

International Conference "American Literature and the Philosophical"

Paris, March 23-25, 2017, Institute of Advanced Studies, Hôtel de Lauzun / Université Paris Diderot

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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8283
DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.8283
ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher
Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference
Florent Dubois and Marie Fahd, "International Conference "American Literature and the Philosophical"", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2016, Online since 30 August 2017, connection on 02 February 2023. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8283 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.8283

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International Conference “American Literature and the Philosophical”

Paris, March 23-25, 2017, Institute of Advanced Studies, Hôtel de Lauzun / Université Paris Diderot

Florent Dubois and Marie Fahd

1 The international conference “American Literature and the Philosophical” was held in Paris on March 23-25 and was organized by Richard Anker (Université Clermont Auvergne), Thomas Constantinesco (Université Paris Diderot / IUF), Mathieu Duplay (Université Paris Diderot), Cécile Roudeau (Université Paris Diderot), and Stéphane Vanderhaeghe (Université Paris Vincennes Saint-Denis). For three days, the forty-seven speakers examined how literature can be apprehended as a philosophical discourse in its own right. Although they resorted to various schools of thought and examined a very diverse set of literary texts, the speakers all showed how literature can articulate its own theory—or how literary texts sometimes engage directly with philosophy (panels 2, 6, and 9)—and even how, in the case of Emerson, the literary can serve the philosophical (panel 1 and keynote 3). Such explorations naturally led the participants to ponder the boundaries that separate literature and philosophy, a problem that was more directly approached by Ralph Berry in his keynote speech. On the whole, the conference made it clear that the major questions of philosophy could all be tackled through literature. The speakers addressed political and ethical questions—how a community is formed (panel 3), how the other can be acknowledged as a subject and thus integrated into the community (panels 3, 7, and 8), how to understand power and sovereignty (panel 8, 15, and keynote 1)—as well as more metaphysical interrogations on the self (panel 11), conscience (keynote 1), agency (panel 15), non-consent (panel 10), will (panel 13), time (panel 10), and the relationship between body and mind (panels 4 and 13). Slightly more peripheral to philosophy, perhaps, but central to literature were the questions of how philosophical concepts or theories inform literary texts (panels 4, 5, 10, 12, 14, and 15) and how literary critics use philosophical tools to approach their objects (panels 12 and 15).

2 Aside from these profound questions, the program included a few simpler pleasures. On the first day the participants, most of whom had come over from abroad, were given a taste of historic Paris at the 17th century Hôtel de Lauzun on the Île Saint-Louis (4th arrondissement), before assembling for the next two days in one of the brand-new buildings of the Grands Moulins campus of the Université Paris Diderot (13th arrondissement). On the first evening of the conference, they were treated to a recital by soprano Amélie Halary, a graduate student in English at Paris Diderot and a voice student at the Conservatoire de Paris. Accompanied at the piano by Valéria Monfort-Suchkova, she presented a selection of songs and arias by Purcell, Mozart, and Richard Hundley. On the second evening, the participants enjoyed a traditional French dinner in the rustic atmosphere of the Coupe-Chou restaurant (5th arrondissement).

Keynote 1: Nancy Ruttenburg (Stanford University): “Conscience, Rights, and the ‘Delirium of Democracy’”

3 The title of Nancy Ruttenburg’s presentation finds its origin in one of Ruttenburg’s current books in progress entitled *Conscience, Rights, and the ‘Delirium of Democracy’* which explores the secularization of conscience in post-revolutionary America. Bringing to the fore the idea of the inner voice of conscience, the “phenomenon” of conscience itself, Ruttenburg emphasized in her presentation the problematic “reconceptualization” of conscience from colonial to (post)revolutionary America as *inalienable.* Shedding light on conscience and its antinomian turn, Ruttenburg referred to Charles Brockden Brown’s *Memoirs of Carwin, the Biloquist* as a case in point, as well as to Wieland. Focusing on the secular form of “the embodied/disembodied” corporate and individual voice, Ruttenburg demonstrated how Brown’s eponymous protagonist Carwin the ventriloquist epitomized the “desacralizing” effects of conscience redefined as inalienable right. Ruttenburg threw into relief the two ways in which Carwin’s voice may be considered inalienable, namely Carwin’s right of “self-preservation” and the “tautology” that is to be found in Carwin’s voice, the latter leading the ventriloquist to conceal his power since the only proof of Carwin’s voice, as Ruttenburg put it, is the voice itself. Introducing Ludloe, Carwin’s enigmatic mentor who is planning to establish a new nation, Ruttenburg confronted the “totalitarian visions” that are at stake in the novel namely Ludloe’s political, authoritative and radical view and Carwin’s view of the self as “invisible” and immensurable. Citing French philosopher Claude Lefort, Ruttenburg analyzed the limits of totalitarian ideology in the novel. She concluded that Carwin, who is not to be seen as Ludloe’s democratic counterpoint, “literalizes” the double status of no-bodiness and nobody-ness.

Panel 1: Emerson & Philosophy

David Greenham (University of the West of England): “The Embodied Eye: Emerson, Metaphor and the Epistemology of Form”
David Robinson (Oregon State University): “The Transcendental Ordinary: Cavell from Thoreau to Emerson”
Yves Gardes (Université Paris Dauphine): “The Emersonian Poet and the Conceptual Persona”

4 It was quite natural for a conference on American literature and philosophy to devote its first panel to Emerson, a figure that Stanley Cavell has taught us to regard as the source of a truly American philosophy—distinct from analytical philosophy, which originates in Europe. David Robinson traced the evolution of Cavell’s reading of Emerson, whom he first called a “secondhand Thoreau” (in *The Senses of Walden* [1981]) before acknowledging him as a serious philosopher able to provide an answer to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. David Greenham was interested in the way Emerson’s thought seems to be inseparable from the form of his writing—what he calls an “epistemology of form”—and provided a stimulating reading of the image of the “transparent eyeball” in *Nature* using Lakoff and Johnson’s Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT). Yves Gardes used Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of the “conceptual persona” of the philosopher in order to account for the apparent contradiction between Emerson’s defining himself as a poet and his conception of the poet as an unattainable ideal. The audience was curious to know how the panelists confronted the conflicting perception of Emerson’s philosophy as either anchored in the body or detached from it. The panelists were adamant that Emerson’s was an embodied philosophy.

Panel 2: Contemporary Crossings 1

Nicholas Manning (Université Paris Sorbonne): “‘Explaining Is Where We All Get Into Trouble.’ Anti-Philosophical Philosophies in the Contemporary American Novel”
Sylvie Bauer (Université de Rennes 2): “‘Literally, Everything I Utter is a Metaphor’: Thought Unhinged in Percival Everett’s Novels”

5 In this panel, the aim was to point out the philosophical and literary crossings in contemporary American Literature. Nicholas Manning explored the “anti-philosophical” discourses and the paradoxes of American Realism in the fiction of Richard Ford (*The Bascombe Trilogy*), Don DeLillo and Philip Roth. Shedding light on the well-known logical antinomy between anti-philosophical philosophy (action, life, experience) and philosophy (*logos*), Manning questioned the very notion of immediacy which pertains to anti-philosophical discourse. Bringing into the open the constant ambiguity that stems from these discourses, Manning both outlined and put into question the solipsistic philosophy that lurks behind contemporary American literary realism which gives prominence to the “existence period” and claims to overthrow philosophy. Manning therefore stressed the inconsistency of such an anti-philosophical philosophical discourse. In this respect, Manning made it clear that if realism stands as

a mode of critique of philosophy, the critique is itself a reflection, thus a meditation on life, instead of life *per se*. In her paper dedicated to "thought unhinged" in Percival Everett's *The Water Cure,* Sylvie Bauer investigated the inextricable links between American Literature and the Philosophical which, as Bauer explained, give rise to an exploration of thought, that of a "gesture" that annihilates categories, as called for by the substantive "Philosophical". Sylvie Bauer examined Everett's fragmentary writing that rejects the very idea of frame. Underscoring the discrepancy of such texts that promote disconnection from meaning while putting the question of sense at their core, Sylvie Bauer highlighted the power, the violence and the manipulation of language within the writing process. In Percival Everett's novels, signs and meanings are being disarticulated. Grammar itself is akin to a "simulacrum" insofar as it is misleading, "equating sense with belief." Drawing upon Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of "the not-knowing," Sylvie Bauer concluded that thought is in itself an "adventure" in the *Water Cure* for thought is "unhinged" in its refutation of fixed forms.

Panel 3: Thinking and Writing the Community

Thomas Claviez (University of Bern): "A Metonymic Society? Towards a New Poetics of Community"
Marianne Noble (American University, Washington D.C.): "A Motive to Love your Fellow Man: Hawthorne, Stowe and Sentimental Moral Philosophy"

6 In this panel, both speakers focused on literary and philosophical models of community that endeavored to bind members together. In the first paper, Thomas Claviez placed the emphasis on the "reconceptualization" of the very notion of community. According to Claviez, the pervading "metaphoric" conception of community, grounded in the existence of a *third*, no longer applies to the United States. With the advent of globalization and its impact (migration, mobility), "metonymic" community, as Claviez put it, now stands as a "modern" experience of community where two of its tropes prevail, contingency and contiguity in space. Drawing on Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Melville's "Bartleby," Claviez asserted that the United States should be regarded as "the first historical case" of a modern and metonymic society. Citing contemporary philosophers Agamben and Deleuze, Claviez demonstrated how Bartleby, "the man without references" (Deleuze), was "in" and "of" metonymic society, epitomizing contiguity itself in such an "inoperative community" (Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of *communauté désoeuvrée*). Throwing into relief its resistance to transcendence, Claviez explained how metonymic community is akin to globalized community insofar as members of both communities rely on "the mutual" and "ethical exposure" to *otherness* (Levinas). In the second paper, Marianne Noble highlighted the "circularity" of love and lovability inherent in sentimental literature. Exploring the sentimental aesthetics of "sympathetic identification," Noble pointed out the performative role of the reader. While acknowledging the influence of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in the fiction of Hawthorne and Stowe, Noble demonstrated how both writers departed from Smith's view—which erased the individuality of others—and succeeded in creating a literary form of community that "revises" the concepts of sympathy. Noble concluded that *difference* truly acts as the very essence of sympathy.

Panel 4: Melville & Philosophy

Michael Jonik (University of Sussex): “Melville and Spinoza” Edouard Marsoin (Université Paris Diderot): “Melville: the Belly Philosophical (Melville, Nietzsche, and the Ascetic Ideal)” Chad Luck (California State University, San Bernardino): “The Aesthetics of Usury: Melville, Derrida, and the Interesting”

7 The three talks given in this panel pointed to Melville’s ambiguous relationship with philosophy, showing him both as a (probably secondhand) reader of Spinoza (Jonik) and as an antiphilosophical fiction writer, *à la* Nietzsche (Marsoin) or *à la* Derrida (Luck). Michael Jonik’s presentation was an overview of his current research on the complex genealogy of Spinozist thought in Melville. Commenting on Melville’s markings in his copies of Matthew Arnold’s works—in particular, the essay “Spinoza” and the poem “Heine’s Grave,”—Jonik showed how Spinoza came to embody “non-anthropocentric philosophy” for Melville, a philosophy that he seems both to embrace —in his reading of Goethe’s poetry, for instance—and to deride—in a few satirical passages where Spinoza or Spinozist characters appear. Following recent critics who uncovered hidden affinities between Melville and Nietzsche, Edouard Marsoin engaged in a close reading of passages in Melville and Nietzsche where digestion serves as both a metaphor for the thought process and a reminder of the physicality of this process. He then proceeded to analyze a few Melville novels in light of this connection, relying mainly on Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche. In the wake of “new economy” scholars who have shown how economic metaphor structures society, Chad Luck proposed to explore the homologies between literature and economics by examining how usury is represented and used as metaphor in the “China Aster” subplot in *The Confidence-Man*. To this end, he drew from Derrida’s narrative of the development of philosophy from concrete metaphors to abstract concepts through a process similar to usury, in which something is added to the original value of the metaphor every time it is taken up, to the point of eventually obscuring the metaphorical origins of the concept. Luck argued that the China Aster story is not only a satire of Transcendentalism—as critics have often remarked—but also a proto-Derridean critique of the naïve faith in origins or originality and a meditation on the generation of new texts through borrowing.

Panel 5: Echoes of Pragmatism: William James in Literature

Chloé Thomas (Université Paris 8): “‘That is where philosophy comes in’: Gertrude Stein making the *Making of Americans*”
Michael Manson (American University, Washington D.C.): “Running to Philosophy: Robert Frost’s Struggle to Write Poetry”
Jessica Luck (California State University, San Bernardino): “Lyn Hejinian, William James, and the Phenomenology of the New Sentence”

8 Centered on the dynamic relation of philosophy and literature, the three talks of the panel thus focused on the echoes of pragmatism in American Literature. Chloé Thomas analyzed the interaction of philosophy and literature in Stein’s composition of *The Making of Americans,* and from there threw light on the inner meaning Stein gives to the word “philosophy.” Thomas first pointed to the scientific quality of the very notion of description in Stein’s writing that is in keeping with William James’s concept of “habit.” Thomas then highlighted Gertrude Stein’s shift from empirical characterology to logical characterology in her making of the *Making of Americans.* Thus, Thomas provides a deep insight on the pervading influences of the scientist William James—rather than the philosopher—and the logician Alfred North Whitehead whom Stein regarded as a philosopher. Dwelling on the experimental writing process of the novel, Thomas disclosed Stein’s approaches to philosophy through and within literature. Thomas concluded that philosophy, which is also to be found within the reading experience of the reader, acts as a form of transcendence of failure, *The Making of Americans* being perhaps the result of such an experimental and philosophical process. In his paper, Michael Manson first underpinned Robert Frost’s “struggle” to write poetry and then analyzed how Frost transformed philosophy into art. Taking Frost’s poem “The Lost Faith” and its later version “The Back Cottage” as contrasting case studies, Manson explained how Frost’s aim had been redefined, the portrayal of the world’s “psychological” complexity now taking precedence over Frost’s former attempt at persuading the reader of the truth. By showing how Frost put different beliefs into play in “The Black Cottage”, Manson demonstrated how Frost came to turn pragmatist philosophy into poetry. In the end, Manson tackled Frost’s political poems in order to throw into relief the pragmatist playfulness of such a writing process while explaining at the same time how Robert Frost turned humor into “wit,” so making philosophy into literary art. Last but not least, Jessica Luck explored Lyn Hejinian’s “phenomenology” of the “new sentence” in the light of William James’s work. Drawing on Hejinian’s experimental autobiography *My Life,* Luck regarded the “new sentence” and the fragmented postmodern mind and self as consonant with William James’s *stream* and in stark contrast to Frederic Jameson’s *heap*. In the wake of William James’s discovery of the “law of intentionality of consciousness,” Luck demonstrated how Hejinian propounded intentionality as a “space of praxis” in her writing, thus providing the reader with what Hejinian called “the consciousness of consciousness.”

Panel 6: Systems of Relations in the Nineteenth Century

Mary Grace Albanese (Columbia University): “Poe’s Caribbean Cosmologies”
Paul Hurh (University of Arizona): “Irrelative Scale in Poe’s ‘Washer-Woman’ Philosophy”
Dorri Beam (Syracuse University): “Collective Efforts: Literary and Social Assemblage in the American Age of ‘Fourier’”

9 The panel tackled the complex systems of relations in the nineteenth century. In the first paper, Mary Grace Albanese investigated the development and connection of two Caribbean phenomena, namely the *calenda* (“a Caribbean slave dance”) and the *calenture* (“a febrile hallucination” depicted by white mariners in the early Atlantic world). Using *The Narrative of the Life of Arthur Gordon Pym* as a starting-point, Albanese dwelt on the parallel between these two Caribbean cosmologies that portended an Atlantic world of “convertible” and “unstable ontologies” (men can thus be transformed into women and slaves can become masters). In Poe’s novel, as Albanese explained, this chaotic mode is embodied thrice through “colonial expansion,” “oceanic mobility,” and “systematic enslavement.” Albanese conclusively illuminated how Poe’s Pym enabled the creation of no less than an “alternative philosophical tradition” that brought into the open the Caribbean cosmologies that lurked behind what Albanese called the “American epistemologies of reason.” In the second paper, Paul Huhr considered the concept of “irrelative scale” through the figure of *Eureka*’s “washer-woman philosopher” with the view to re-evaluating Poe’s aesthetic and cosmological “theories of detachment.” Huhr demonstrated how incoherence (between levels of scale), although it undermined Poe’s “analogical devices,” acted as and turned into the very “source” and space of Poe’s aesthetics. In the third paper, Dorri Beam explored the literary and social assemblage in the American Age of the French philosopher Fourier, regarding Fourier’s radical philosophy as an “alternative” history of the American Renaissance. Using Emily Dickinson’s fascicles of 1858-1862 as a case in point, Beam demonstrated how the aesthetics and the social experiment of the age could be precisely “thought together.” Beam elucidated the role of Dickinson’s new process of assemblage that not only conjured up other worlds but led the author to experiment “seriality” within the writing process itself.

Panel 7: Skepticism, Pragmatism, and Phenomenology in African-American Literature

Jennifer Lewis (Bath Spa University): “‘Tak[ing] care of the philosophy’: Frederick Douglass’s phenomenological interventions”
Harvey Cormier (Stony Brook University): “W. E. B. Du Bois, William James, and Literature”
Greg Chase (Boston University): “Trying to Build a Bridge of Words: Other-Mind Skepticism in Wright’s *Black Boy* and Ellison’s *Invisible Man*”

10 This panel was the occasion to reflect on the ways in which African American authors have engaged with philosophy, a discipline that was once considered to be reserved to the white man. When Frederick Douglass began framing his accounts of his life in broader political and ethical claims, his white friends told him that people would start doubting he truly was a slave, one abolitionist urging him, “Give us the facts, [...] we will take care of the philosophy.” Jennifer Lewis argued that Douglass’s philosophizing was not limited to political statements and indeed developed toward a phenomenology of the black body. Using Fanon and Merleau-Ponty, she showed how Douglass became aware that his forgetting his blackness among his white friends, a new feeling which he first welcomed, was another form of coercion applied to his body, one in which he was made to deny his experience as a black slave. On the plantation, black bodies learn to make themselves invisible; here Douglass was taught another form of invisibility. This notion of invisibility was also tackled by Greg Chase using Stanley Cavell’s notion of “acknowledgement” of the other. He claimed that Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison used writing as a way of making white readers acknowledge them as human beings, their narratives showing how white people constantly fail to acknowledge black people as adult subjects. W. E. B. Du Bois, Harvey Cormier contended, tried to provide his readers with a different worldview from their own, following William James’s pragmatic theory of truth and meaning.

Panel 8: Henry James as Philosopher of Power and Vulnerability

Julie Rivkin (Connecticut College): “Maisie’s Body and Butler’s Radically Inequitable Corporeal Vulnerabilty”
Phyllis van Slyck (City University of New York, La Guardia): “‘I See Nothing But You’: Vulnerable Levinasian Encounters in James’s Late Novels”
Rory Drummond (Independent scholar): “Henry James, Guy Debord and the Critique of Spectacular Power”

11 The three speakers, all Henry James scholars, submitted their papers together, offering the organizers an already coherent panel. The first two speakers were interested in what Judith Butler calls the “precariousness of life.” Following her observation that

"corporeal vulnerability" is "distributed globally" in "radically inequitable ways" (in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* [2004]), Julie Rivkin proposed a reading of *What Maisie Knew* that focused on the correlation between power and embodiment. Rivkin showed how Maisie's body is dislocated by the shock induced by her parents' divorce and how that dislocation paradoxically leads both to her being identified with subaltern subjects like the domestics and to the rejection of non-European bodies, as if, Rivkin hinted, xenophobia could be a response to the dislocation of the sense of safety. Phyllis van Slyck explored scenes from *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, in which protagonists recognize the vulnerability of the other—the recognition being conveyed through close-up effects—and yet avoid absorbing him or her into their own selves. She contended that those scenes reveal a Levinasian ethical ideal at the heart of Jamesian fiction. After two papers more concerned with James's psychological insights, Rory Drummond looked at James as a social critic who shared some intuitions with Guy Debord, among which the power of the spectacle, the sense of alienation it entails, the advent of the city as spectacle or the redefinition of celebrity in the infancy of mass media.

Panel 9: Wallace Stevens: The Life of Thought

Bart Eeckhout (University of Antwerp, NIAS Fellow): "The Philosopher's Poet: 21st- Century Perspectives on Wallace Stevens" Charles-Henry Morling (Université Paris Sorbonne): "Wallace Stevens' and A. N. Whitehead's Modes of Thought" Respondant: Juliette Utard (Université Paris Sorbonne): "The Necessary Angel': A Few Words on Stevens' Theory as Poetry and his Poetry as Theory"

12 The three papers of this panel were dedicated to Wallace Stevens. In the first paper, Juliette Utard dwelt on Wallace Stevens' paradoxical status. While his work continues to be constantly affiliated to philosophy, Stevens is presented in both literary and philosophical studies as "the impossible philosopher's man" and as a "philosopher's poet." Utard looked for places where Stevens' philosophy is to be found in his work since his essays are not construed as philosophical. By paying attention to the titles of Wallace Stevens' essays and poems, Utard highlighted the "crossing of genres" at stake in his writing process. Utard expounded on the blatant "chiasmus" that occurs in Stevens' writing poetry, as poetry "masquerades" as theory and *vice versa*. In the second paper, Bart Eeckhout, a Stevens scholar and chief editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, investigated the evolution of contemporary writings on Stevens' work from a philosophical perspective. As part of his new research project, Eeckhout brought into play two types of approaches that are at variance with each other. Drawing on an article by American poet and professor David Baker entitled "Feeling Thinking," Eeckhout exposed how contemporary American poets such as Baker— focusing much more on form than content—dodge the issue of philosophy as philosophy and "refuse" to consider the philosophical weight of Stevens' work. Referring to Alain Badiou, Paul Weiss and Peter H. Hare, Eeckout brought to light the thorny question of the philosophical status of Stevens' work from the points of view of contemporary philosophers, from the post-marxist French line (that of Badiou) to the American

pragmatist one, that of Hare, the latter contemplating Stevens’ epistemologies as “metaphorical structures.” In the third paper, Charles-Henry Morling highlighted a new approach on Stevens the “metaphysical poet” by exploring the relation between Wallace Stevens’ and Alfred North Whitehead’s modes of thought.

Panel 10: Contemporary Crossings 2

Naomi Morgenstern (University of Toronto): “The Post-Kantian Child in Contemporary American Fiction”
Cindy Weinstein (Caltech): “The sound of time in Nabokov’s *Ada, or Ardor*”
Andrea Pitozzi (Università degli Studi di Bergamo): “Time-Images in Don DeLillo’s Writing”
Arkady Plotnitsky (Purdue University): “Demons of Chance: Thomas Pynchon’s Novels and Philosophy of Randomness and Probability”

13 The four papers of this panel examined the contemporary crossings between philosophy and postmodern literature. In the first paper, Naomi Morgenstern explored the figure of the “post-Kantian” child in contemporary American fiction. At first placing the emphasis on the historical emergence of the “wild child,” Morgenstern referred to the well-known case of Victor of Aveyron who epitomized the “border status” between nature and reason. Taking Shriver’s novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* as a case in point, Morgenstern then analyzed how the post-Kantian child in twenty-first century American narratives embodies the “crisis” of consent and of being, Kevin typifying the figure of “non-consent” in this post-humanist perspective. In the second paper, Cindy Weinstein pondered the sound of time in Nabokov’s *Ada, or Ardor* and the “ubiquitous” presence of the sound “or.” Drawing upon Van Veen’s opus entitled the “Texture of Time” in which the novel’s protagonist conceives time as sound, Weinstein demonstrated how Nabokov’s novel takes up Veen’s philosophical discourse about time and how the novel itself astutely reenacts it “artistically” within the writing process itself. In the third paper, Andrea Pitozzi investigated the role of “time-images” in Don DeLillo’s twenty-first century novels, throwing light on the change that occurs in DeLillo’s writing process, the recent novels being much more philosophically oriented, namely towards time, than his earlier works. Pitozzi therefore explored the congruence between DeLillo’s treatment of time and images in his most recent novels and Deleuze’s cinematic concept of the Time-Image. In a similar manner, Pitozzi also investigated how Bergson’s concept of “duration” prevailed in DeLillo’s experimentation of time in his writing. In the fourth paper, Arkady Plotnitsky analyzed the interrelation between Thomas Pynchon’s novels and the philosophy of randomness, citing Pynchon’s work as “allegories” of quantum theories. Underscoring the very “game of contingency” which is at stake in Pynchon’s novels, Plotnitsky confronted prominent scientific and philosophical thinkers and concepts with the purpose of questioning the nature of chance and probability.

Panel 11: Poetic Speculations

Antoine Cazé (Université Paris Diderot): “Emily Dickinson and the Question of ‘Giving Death’”
Aurore Clavier (Université Paris 8): “The American Modernist Poem, or the Infinite Prolegomena”
V. Joshua Adams (University of Louisville): “No Puzzle: James Merrill and the Philosophy of the Self”

14 The “poetic speculations” at stake here should not be misconstrued as instances of poetry waxing philosophical; they reflect, rather, how poetic form in itself is a kind of philosophical investigation. In the first paper, Antoine Cazé underscored how rarely Derrida’s philosophy had been applied to Dickinson’s poems even though such notions as “bord,” “marge,” or “lisière” seem particularly apt to start an exploration of her poetry. Cazé used Derrida’s notion of the “gift of death” to perform a close reading of the poem “It was not Death, for I stood up.” Attending to the polysemy of some of the words or lines, he showed how Dickinson approached her own mortality through an emphasis on the indefinite and a “negation of negation” that eventually “buries” her own presence in the poem. Aurore Clavier started with the proposition that modernist poetry’s constant questioning of form was a way of striving toward some ontological truth. She then sought to show how poems by Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, or Marianne Moore in fact systematically eschew any kind of ontology and linger rather at the threshold of logical discourse. This refusal of pushing further than the “beginnings” of thought reveals, she argues, a broader American tradition of beginnings, in which a constantly new America is only roughly sketched so as to perpetually postpone the fixation of the ontological contours of the New World. Following recent reappraisals of James Merrill’s reputation as a poet of surfaces, according to which he might have been more philosophical than expected, V. Joshua Adams showed how his poem “Lost in Translation” presents a model of selfhood as translation, which interestingly challenges narrative models of the self while preserving the continuity between past and present that narrative models provide.

Panel 12: History and Influence

Russell Sbriglia (Seton Hall University): “‘The Fervid and Tremendous IDEA’: Whitman, Hegel, History”
William Flesch (Brandeis University): “Three Blackbirds: The Anxiety of Influence, Decision Theory and Preferences among Preferences in American Literature”
Jeffrey Di Leo (University of Houston, Victoria): “Who Needs American Literature? From Emerson to Marcus and Sollors”

15 Russell Sbriglia presented a chapter on Whitman from his forthcoming book on the relationship between American Romanticism and German Idealism. He showed how Whitman was sensitive to Hegel’s views on history and how he substituted America or

democracy—two interchangeable terms—for the Idea. William Flesch used decision theory to show how, in the wake of "Bartleby," a supposedly American conception of preference could be observed in a variety of American texts. He suggested that American writers tend to prefer what things are not to what they are, mirroring their desire not to be literary—i.e. not to follow old models—precisely in order to be literary. Jeffrey Di Leo argued that 9/11 was a watershed in American literature, pointing to America's incapacity to understand the other. Based on Cavell's analysis of the relationship between philosophy and poverty in Emerson and his conclusion that wealth prevents us from understanding the other, Di Leo's argument suggested that the need for a national literature is not as urgent now as it used to be, as evidenced by the fact that more and more publishing houses tend to favor writers who have a global perspective, rather than those who have only a narrowly national one.

Panel 13: Body and Mind in the Nineteenth-Century

Andrew Sydlik (Ohio State University): "Revolution and Cure: Molyneux's Problem, Denis Diderot's *Letter on the Blind,* and Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*"

Dorin Smith (Brown University): "Melville's Neuroanatomies and the Organs of Personality"

Jennifer Fleissner (Indiana University, Bloomington): "Maladies of the Will: The American Novel and the Symptomatology of Modernity"

16 The three talks of the panel focused on the body and the mind in nineteenth century philosophy and literature. Concentrating on the concept of blindness in the philosophy of the Enlightenment through Molyneux's problem, Sydlik examined the influence of Diderot's *Letter on the Blind* on Royall Tyler's American novel *The Algerine Captive.* Sydlik demonstrated how the protagonist Underhill experienced two tropes of the Enlightenment, namely *the blind man given sight* and the *wandering in a foreign land*, leading Underhill to become a "better" American, developing *sympathy* and learning how "to see and know" from a distance. Paying close attention to Melville's "engagement" with neuroscience and the philosophy of mind, Dorin Smith emphasized Melville's concern about phrenology as a "neuro-hermeneutic method." Drawing on the work of Sharon Cameron, Paul Ricoeur and Catherine Malabou, Smith explored Melville's questioning about the self and what Smith deftly called "the ontological dependency of the human self on the nonhuman brain." Finally, Jennifer Fleissner provided the audience with the theoretical framework of her current book on nineteenth century American fiction entitled *Maladies of the Will: The American Novel and the Symptomatology of Modernity* which aims at reframing the American novel's understanding of modern subjectivity around the concept of the will.

Keynote 2: Ralph Berry (Florida State University): “But Can Literature Know Itself and Not Become Philosophy”

17 The title of Ralph Berry’s presentation is a reversal of the last sentence of Stanley Cavell’s *Claim of Reason*, “But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?” Noting that literature and philosophy scholars share a common self-consciousness in their use of concepts—whose definitions are always problematic—, Berry used Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical investigations* and Cavell’s reading of it in order to think about how we acquire an understanding of such a concept as that of the novel. Wittgenstein notes that when questioned about what we mean by this or that concept we naturally resort to examples, revealing how the meaning of a word is inseparable from the “language-games” associated to that word. Consequently, Berry proposed that instead of directly trying to provide a definition of the novel we first ask ourselves why we enjoy reading novels, thus shifting the focus onto the praxis surrounding the novel. Taking *To the Lighthouse* as case study, he showed that our notions of what a novel, a character, or a story are have been changed by our reading Woolf’s novels. It is when we read novels that challenge our idea of what a novel is that we revise our definition of the novel. Therefore, Berry insists that we should be aware of how much what we have read and our appreciation of what we have read shape our conception of literature. Such an approach might not solve every epistemological issue faced by literary studies but it could at least help us displace our way of thinking about certain topics. Thus, when asked how he would himself answer the question of his title, Berry declared that literature itself provides the answer to that question—a truly Wittgensteinian response!

Panel 14: Thinking in Figure

Francie Crebs (Université Paris Sorbonne): “Kant vs. Cant: Poe’s Materialist Sublime”
Ali Chetwynd (American University of Iraq, Sulaimani): “Joseph McElroy’s *Plus* and the Peircean Optimism of US Postmodernism’s Philosophy of Action”

18 Following cancellations and flight delays, this panel had little to do with what was originally scheduled. Of the three people who were supposed to speak here, only Francie Crebs remained and Ali Chetwynd was reassigned from panel 2 to this panel. Therefore, the two papers had little in common, one being on Poe and the other on postmodernist novel *Plus*. Although critics have often reduced the Kantian sublime in Poe to the dynamic sublime, Francie Crebs argued that such tales as “The Sphynx” provide examples of mathematical sublime that allow for a materialist reading of Poe’s fiction—just as the mathematical sublime, according to Paul de Man, is what allows a materialist reading of Kant. Ali Chetwynd contended that most critics of postmodernist fiction, including McHale, Hutcheon, and Jameson, had shown a negative appreciation of postmodern fiction and presented it as a fiction devoid of agency. Using Peirce’s pragmatism, he undertook to demonstrate that postmodern novels could be

constructive and that more care should be given to the specific style of these texts. His radical stance prompted a lively discussion.

Keynote 3: Isabelle Alfandary (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle): "Unfounding an American Tradition or the Performative Invention of Self in R. W. Emerson"

19 Isabelle Alfandary examined Emerson's texts to show how he founded a specifically American tradition by refusing to establish a tradition, his foundation, therefore, being an "unfounding." She stressed how to undo the umbilical cord that connects America to Europe it was necessary for Emerson to do away with the foreign element in himself. She showed how his calls to understand the world without the mediation of the previous generations of thinkers went hand in hand with the surfeit of perceptions that America offered. Emerson underlines the uniqueness of the real that stands in front of our eyes and the importance to trust one's instinctual reactions to this real. Thus, American philosophy is born through the performative act that rejects all ties—what Emerson in "Self-Reliance" calls "Whim," for lack of a better word. The "I" becomes the authority of philosophy and this new subject is authorized only by himself.

Panel 15: The Politics of Thought

Philipp Reisner (Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf): "Ancilla Theologiae: The Rivalry of Philosophy and Theology in American Cultural and Literary History"
Paul Downes (University of Toronto): "Hobbes in America, or, Is there a Democratic Sovereignty?"
Owen Cantrell (Georgia Institute of Technology): "'Only Hegel is fit for America': Dialectic and Parataxis during the Market Revolution"
Elizabeth Duquette (Gettysburg College): "Tyranny in America: Napoleon, Tocqueville, Séjour"

20 Philipp Reisner offered to reconsider the "rivalry" between theology and philosophy in American cultural and literary history by looking at the reception of Cotton Mather, an early Evangelical who viewed philosophy as "ancilla theologiae," and at the often-neglected religious import of Wallace Stevens's poetry. Paul Downes also aimed to challenge traditional American cultural history by emphasizing the covert influence of Hobbes in lieu of the more obvious one of Locke. He suggested that Hobbes's theory of sovereignty could provide keys to understand a vast array of American texts from those of the New England Puritans to *Moby Dick*. Responding to Lukács's and Jameson's definitions of the dialectic, Owen Cantrell argued that parataxis provided a better model to study literature than the dialectic, which has a totalizing tendency that risks foreclosing texts whose openness to a variety of readings is the very reason why we study them. Elizabeth Duquette explored the figure of Napoleon in American literature and showed how it unsettles the traditional values of American democracy by uncovering hidden tyrannical impulses at its core.

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