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She Did Know a Few Things: Georgia O'Keeffe as an Intellectual

Abstract: Despite the fact that Georgia O'Keeffe is one of the most biographized, analyzed and interpreted modern American artists, her writings, which include voluminous correspondence, numerous artist statements and an autobiographical narrative, remain underrated. Taking at face value the painter's disclaimers about her intellectual interests and ambitions and her insistence that she was "quite illiterate," art historians and critics all too often fail to note that even when, as the only prominent female member of the Stieglitz circle, she seemed to accept the role assigned to her by "the men," she retained her intellectual integrity. Even though she sometimes seemed to confirm such a perception, a closer look at her texts reveals that, well-educated and well-informed, she possessed literary skills on par with her plastic sensibility and imagination. Her use of verbal language, even more than her paintings, testifies to her unique intuition, intelligence and aesthetic sensibility as a quintessential American modernist.

Keywords: Georgia O'Keeffe, American art, modernism, intellectualism, gender stereotyping, artists' writings

> I have a million things to do
> Must paint too
> Must write too
> \- Georgia O'Keeffe, letter to Paul Strand, 15 November 1917

> The painter using the word often seems to me like a child trying to walk. I think I'd rather let the painting work for itself than help it with the word
> \- Georgia O'Keeffe, letter to Fiske Kimball, 26 May 1945

In the opening pages of a 2016 catalogue accompanying Georgia O'Keeffe's retrospective at Tate Modern in London, the largest O'Keeffe exhibition to date outside the United States, curator Tanya Barson writes: "There are few artists more clearly and resolutely associated with the United States, and with identifying and embodying what it means to be both 'American' and 'Modern,' than O'Keeffe" (9). In perhaps the most exhaustive study on the iconic artist so far, seven scholars attempt to shed new light on O'Keeffe's place in American art history by surveying her relationship with Stieglitz not in time-worn terms of romance but with regard to their artistic dialogue, taking a fresh look at feminist approaches to the painter's work and life, examining her connection to the American landscape, and situating her late abstractions within the context of other artists' abstract works from the 1950s to the 1990s.

For a long time, however, O'Keeffe's status as an emblematic American artist did not protect against incomplete or skewed readings of her work and thought. Not even the 1976 autobiographical *Georgia O'Keeffe* that she produced to set the record straight ten years before her death—a significant contribution given that it was the only disclosure of this kind from the otherwise taciturn artist—could help to rectify the situation and broaden the scope of interpretations offered by both her detractors and admirers. These remained either one-sided or simple-minded. Addressing the "poverty of the critical writing" about the painter and her art back in 1977, the art historian Barbara Rose complained that although O'Keeffe "is one of America's most popular painters... very little of interest has been written about her" (Rose).

Today, forty years later, O'Keeffe's significant contribution to the development of modernist American art and aesthetic thought seems to have finally been given due consideration by critics and scholars of stature. Most of the recent exhibitions around the world presenting the artist's oeuvre have been meant to expose more thoroughly than ever the richness and complexity of her painting and ideas. Novel comprehensive studies undertaken by art historians, theorists and curators have sought to challenge pernicious gendered stereotypes about O'Keeffe as a woman painter and a muse and wife to Alfred Stieglitz and fill in the gaps in the fragmentary, and often biased, recognition of her flowers and desert landscapes.

Yet, what many of these undeniably insightful and original recent contributions to the discussion of O'Keeffe's work seem to overlook is the fact that she was not only a prolific and accomplished artist but also a prolific and dexterous writer, mainly of letters, most of which she was reluctant to make public. But, as Rose persuasively argues in her review of O'Keeffe's sole autobiographical essay, any serious analysis of the artist's visual works must recognize the significance of her writings. That is why, unlike others, Rose focuses on the formal qualities of the artist's writing style and its possible literary influences and affinities rather than on the text's historical-biographical content. In doing so, she acknowledges O'Keeffe's "unexpected" literary talent and her ability to spin "provocative" and "unornamented" passages; but the short review format does not allow her to elaborate on the discoveries she makes, although she does bring up a few poignant observations. For instance, as one of the first critics to do so, she points to Gertrude Stein's and the transcendentalists' influence on both O'Keeffe's painting and writing. Unfortunately, only a handful of studies of the painter's life and work published since Rose made her case take a closer look at her intellectual ambitions and accomplishments—this despite the fact that her extensive private correspondence has been available to scholars since 2006. The exceptions include Bonnie L. Grad's essay on how O'Keeffe's reading of D. H. Lawrence's writings influenced her artistic vision and Sarah Greenough's editions of O'Keeffe's letters. Greenough's commentaries and annotations, like Rose's insights, signal that the way O'Keeffe worded her thoughts is at least as significant as their subject matter.

This essay considers O'Keeffe's love affair with language and argues that, contrary to the widely held view of her as instinctive, anti-intellectual and ultimately

exclusively visual, her writing reveals a wordsmith, deliberate, articulate and as confident of her pen as she was of her brush. Or as critic Anna Chave notes, although O'Keeffe was perceived by many as "an intuitive creature who groped her way along," in reality she "was no plant, no amoeba, and no dimwit" but "a self-possessed literate person" (116).

The widespread view that O'Keeffe "lays no claim to intellectualism," as her fellow painter Marsden Hartley observed (*On Art* 106), stems from several assumptions, the most significant of which is that represented by Stieglitz, who from the beginning championed her art as a direct expression of her femininity. This notion, in turn, influenced how writers and critics, both within and outside of the Stieglitz circle, approached his protégé in their reviews of her work. Stieglitz's peculiar strategy of promoting O'Keeffe as innocent, guileless and unschooled in art history and theories was a consequence of his deep conviction that to be modern art should look for ways to counter the deadening forces of Victorianism by being more authentic and more expressive of one's inner nature. Embracing the natural physicalness of the body and unencumbered intuition as an antidote to the materialism of American society, Stieglitz staged a series of exhibitions of children's and African tribal art to draw attention to immediate, non-analytical and non-intellectualized artistic expression.[1] Women's art, which he saw as another facet of primitivism, similarly interested him as an unmediated record of emotion, devoid of rational premeditation and calculation. "Woman *feels* the world *differently* than Man feels it," he noted in a 1919 essay, explaining that "the Woman receives the World through her Womb. That is the seat of her deepest feeling. Mind comes second" (qtd. in Wagner 37).

Stieglitz's decidedly sexist view had serious consequences for how O'Keeffe's artistic identity came to be perceived both by her fellow artists and by critics (with a few notable exceptions), and ultimately by O'Keeffe herself. Promoted by her mentor as the embodiment of the "Great Child" and the "Great Woman"—defined by him as the modern age's true intuitive "geniuses"—and as a consequence denied the status of a rational creator, a position reserved exclusively for men, O'Keeffe was forever branded as inherently, albeit naturally, inarticulate. Curiously, she reinforced that reputation herself not only in her written exchanges with Stieglitz, but also in less intimate expositions in letters to others and artist statements she was sometimes forced to create. Writing to Stieglitz, soon to be her lover and then husband, she willingly assumed the identity he forged for her, repeatedly referring to herself as "baby" or "child." She equated freedom of expression with innocence and femininity, occasionally hesitating when she reflected on her own identity: "I don't know if it's woman or little girl—I am mostly both" (*Faraway* 167). Elsewhere, amused when Waldo Frank called her "intellectual" (*Art & Letters* 185), she announced to him: "I

1 Between 1912 and 1916 Stieglitz mounted a sequence of exhibitions at 291 presenting *Unguided Children, Aged 2 to 11* (inaugurating three shows of child art) and *African Savage Art*, the first ever held in an art gallery in the United States, showing objects from the Congo, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast.

am one of the intuitives,—or subjectives" (*Art & Letters* 184). She thus reaffirmed Frank's claim that when among men she was "as quiet as a tree, and almost as instinctive." He explained: "If a tree thinks, it thinks not with a brain but with every part of it. So O'Keeffe. If a tree speaks or smiles, it is with all its body" (qtd. in Lynes 255). She seemed to confirm, or even flaunt, her inarticulateness by resisting Stieglitz when he urged her to give her paintings elaborate meaningful titles and refusing to sign them with her name.

As a mature artist, she tried to free herself from Stieglitz's overly controlling mentorship by reinventing her artistic persona and constructing an image of herself as a self-reliant desert hermit. But even then she only bolstered the perception of herself as an instinctive and sourceless creator who responds to her inner voice rather than an intellectual who, drawing from literature or art, consciously processes various influences. Tight-lipped about what she read and what might have inspired her thinking, she would surprise the critical world after her death when her rich Abiquiu library was opened to the public and made accessible to scholars. Undisclosed by O'Keeffe during her lifetime and conspicuously absent from the numerous photographs and descriptions of her home, her "book room," as she preferred to call it, contained three thousand volumes, a testimony to, as Grad puts it, "a thinking artist keenly aware of art, books, and ideas" ("Book Room" 29).

Some of the authors included in her library were writers, poets, painters, photographers, architects, and critics whom she considered close friends—such as Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, D. H. Lawrence, Ansel Adams, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Allen Ginsberg. Others were simply members or associates of the Stieglitz circle who, as colleagues, sent her their books with warmhearted and applauding inscriptions. Many volumes in O'Keeffe's collection are first editions, which, as Grad notes, "suggests that she was *au courant* when it came to new and radical developments in the discourse of modernism" and had extensive "knowledge of modern literature and poetry, philosophy, religion, photography, architecture, art theory and aesthetics, and non-Western arts and monuments, especially Asian ones" ("Book Room" 29). Grad also points out that the artist continued to acquire books into the late 1970s, a "poignant" confirmation of her unfaltering devotion to reading and its deep significance in her life at a time when she was effectively half-blind.[2]

Yet, both publicly and privately O'Keeffe repeatedly declared that she was "quite illiterate" (*Art & Letters* 222), a puzzling assertion by somebody submerged in literature and a compulsive letter-writer. Indeed, with Stieglitz alone she exchanged more than twenty-five thousand pages. But what did she mean when she wrote: "Words and I are not good friends" (*Faraway* 4)? One thing seems clear: she was not indifferent or hostile to words but, rather, was thoughtfully reserved about the expressive capacity of language when compared with visual art. For instance, she writes: "The feeling that a person gives me that I can not [*sic*] say in words comes

2 As she gradually lost her sight, O'Keeffe purchased audiobooks or had books read to her, a return to an earlier ritual from those days she shared with Stieglitz.

in colors and shapes" (*Art & Letters* 218).[3] And this: "It is easier for me to paint it than to write about it and I would so much rather people would look at it than read about it. I see no reason for painting anything that can be put into any other form as well" (*Art & Letters* 202). Her conviction about the supremacy of images was so strong that it in fact became her artistic creed. She opens her autobiographical text with the following declaration: "The meaning of a word—to me—is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words.... I am often amazed at the spoken and written word telling me what I have painted" (*O'Keeffe*).

For one thing, from early on in O'Keeffe's career she had good reason to feel distressed about the potential of words to distort and even ultimately misconstrue what she felt her work was about. More importantly, over time she grew indignant with those critics who persistently viewed her first as a woman and only secondarily as an artist, offering highly sexualized, Freudian readings of her art. In particular, her floral images were notoriously interpreted as shameless and provocative representations of genitals. She also resented the hyperbolic language infecting commentaries about her art, such as the following description by Marsden Hartley of her early abstractions:

> With Georgia O'Keeffe one takes a far jump into volcanic crateral ethers, and sees the world of a woman turned inside out and gaping with deep open eyes and fixed mouth at the rather trivial world of living people.... O'Keeffe has had her feet scorched in the laval effusiveness of terrible experience; she has walked on fire and listened to the hissing vapors round her person. (*Adventures* 116)

While members of the Stieglitz circle were accustomed to Hartley's exalted prose, a similar lack of restraint was simply inappropriate when exercised by the group's chief champion among the critics, Paul Rosenfeld, who wrote about O'Keeffe and her work in these words: "It is female, this art, only as is the person of a woman when dense, quivering, endless life is felt through her body, when long tresses exhale the aromatic warmth of unknown primeval submarine forests, and the dawn and the planets glint in the spaces between cheeks and brow" (qtd. in Wagner 38). O'Keeffe did not mince words in responding to what she considered an unacceptable aggregate of overblown rhetoric and straightforward sexism. In the opening paragraph of her autobiography she explained: "I write this because such odd things have been done about me with words" (*O'Keeffe*). Earlier, in a letter to Mitchell Kennerley, who had sent her two reviews by Rosenfeld, she rebuked her exegetists:

3 When citing O'Keeffe's correspondence I follow Sarah Greenough's editorial choice to retain O'Keeffe's idiosyncratic punctuation, spelling mistakes and erratic use of apostrophes. Therefore subsequent quotations from the artist's letters will not be riddled with the use of [*sic*].

> Rosenfeld's articles have embarrassed me—I wanted to lose one for the Hartley book when I had the only copy of it to read—so it couldnt be in the book. The things they write sound so strange and far removed from what I feel of myself They make me seem like some strange unearthly sort of a creature floating in the air—breathing in clouds for nourishment—when the truth is that I like beef steak—and like it rare at that. (*Art & Letters* 170-171)

In contrast to the affected verbosity of her male peers, O'Keeffe's simple and unadorned language comes across as unrefined and casually matter-of-fact. She appears to have made a point of not writing the way they did, crafting her own—unique, lucid and sparse—way of expressing herself. Even her desire to please Stieglitz with her art could not make her express herself in a more genteel and lofty manner. Her language stood in glaring contrast to his eloquent, though often intemperate, diction. Consider, for instance, this passage from one of his letters to O'Keeffe in which he describes his reaction to some paintings she sent him for viewing:

> —Those paintings!—All three are remarkable—the Portrait uncanny... What a glorious world you carry within you—Glowing with purest light—
>
> As I sat there looking—looking—I wondered what kind of a child you'd bear the world some day!—The Glory of Dawn & the Glory of the Night—& the Glory of the Noon Sun—all combined—within that Womb of Yours—
>
> The Universe—A Woman's Soul! (*Faraway* 162-163)

In another letter from around the same time, he writes:

> You see how much you are giving people—Just in daring to be yourself—I say 'daring'—It isn't 'daring' at all—You wouldn't be to me what you are if it were 'daring.'—The sun doesn't 'dare' to shine—nor rise—nor set—It simply does what is natural to it—So with you—You express *yourself*—all the time—every breath of a moment—That's why you mean so much to me—You live from *within*—way, way, way within—the without is an accident—passing—real & no theory—real because the within is so genuine. (*Faraway* 135-136)

Although less inflated than the purple prose of Hartley and Rosenfeld, the tone of Stieglitz's effusions is the polar opposite of O'Keeffe's plain, unvarnished response: "What you said about being free—Why of course I feel free—Never occurred to me to feel any other way—Why shouldn't I… Free—Yes I'll always have to be—I cannot help it—you cannot help it—No one can help it" (*Faraway* 160).

Unsurprisingly, compared to Stieglitz's epistolary production O'Keeffe's letters were remarkably shorter. His could run for pages—one of them reached

forty-two, which she found "astounding to say the least" (*Faraway* 199). She rarely needed more than a few words to make a statement. But the conciseness of her letters did not make them any less informative, precise or vibrant, nor did the apparent artlessness of her locution preclude the possibility of deeper meanings. Combined with the absence of superfluous detail, this (apparent) artlessness has a parallel in her paintings, in which she tried to get at and bring out the simple, unadorned essence of things and through minimal means achieve maximum expressive power. Although she was not unique in pursuing such a goal—Hartley, John Marin and Arthur Dove also called for simplifying artistic depictions of perceived reality to essential forms—unlike most of "the men," as she referred to her colleagues, O'Keeffe seemed more determined and consistent in this pursuit, and did so both in painting and in writing. The case of Hartley is emblematic. The most prolific and compulsive writer among the painters of the Stieglitz circle, he was rarely able to accomplish verbally what he intended, typically pondering in one of his poems: "How wonderful it is to say / one word—knowing one means it / perfectly" (*Poems* 199).

It should be noted that O'Keeffe entered the Stieglitz circle at a very specific moment, which, as Anne Middleton Wagner observes, was "a rather breathless one," characterized by "general writerly excess"—that is why she calls it "this writerly moment" (40). With her straight-out-of-Texas demeanor, she stood strong—for instance, when she daringly made polemical statements for the purpose of guarding her artistic and intellectual integrity and reputation. The sole woman in the group, she witnessed daily the power of the pen, which many of her colleagues, as Wanda M. Corn observes, "wielded with ferocity and with faith that words could change the world" (4). As O'Keeffe's correspondence reveals, she often wondered what they were all talking about, even, and perhaps especially, when the subject happened to be what she knew very well—her own work: "I would listen to them talk and I thought, my they are dreamy. I felt much more prosaic, but I knew I could paint as well as some of them who were sitting around talking" (qtd. in Robinson 291). Referring to their discussions of the visual appeal of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire, a mountain in Provence that both Cézanne and Hartley painted obsessively, she concluded after visiting the famous site: "All those words piled on top of that little poor mountain seemed too much" (qtd. in Lisle 159).

Skeptical about the usefulness of then current French aesthetic theories, O'Keeffe simply rejected their jargon and said what she meant in no uncertain terms, succinctly and clearly. As in her paintings, she relied on what was familiar and recognizable. One can even say that, whether she worked with her brush or her pen, she flaunted the commonplace and the uncontrived without any fear of appearing banal or prosaic. Occasionally explaining the origin of some of her paintings, O'Keeffe often disappointed those critics who expected elaborate expositions that would support and thus give legitimacy to their own daedal interpretations of her images. For instance, she had this to say of the origins of one of her most renowned series, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit*, executed in 1930:

> In the woods near two large spring houses, wild Jack-in-the-pulpits grew—both the large dark ones and the small green ones. The year I painted them I had gone to the lake early in March. Remembering the art lessons of my high school days, I looked at the Jacks with great interest. I did a set of six paintings of them. The first painting was very realistic. The last one had only the Jack from the flower. (*O'Keeffe* opposite pl. 41)

Many will find the blandness of this straightforward account frustrating, and perhaps even insincere or perfidious, given what they see when looking at O'Keeffe's canvases—shapes that, as Elizabeth Hutton Turner observes, are "erect, bulbous, carnival," a jack-in-the-pulpit which "struts like the rooster of all flowers" (16). In a series of six paintings, O'Keeffe gradually stripped her subject down to focus in the last one on the magnified flower's pistil, its sexual organ. This, one could say, spawned readings of many of her other floral paintings which, like interpretations of her earlier abstractions, explore primal and erotic associations they trigger in viewers. The painter herself did not respond to such readings, emphasizing instead the discipline of exact observation. Stating facts in a deadpan manner, she declared that she simply approached her subject with methodical attentiveness—"I looked at the flowers with great interest"—and implemented the conclusions of her observations on the canvas. The irony is that with *Jack-in-the-Pulpit* and other flower paintings from the 1920s O'Keeffe inadvertently inspired, or provoked, erotically-tinged interpretations of her new work while her decision to turn to the figurative mode was motivated by something completely different—her dissatisfaction with the men's responses to her radically abstract experiments. In a letter to Mabel Dodge, she appealed to a kindred spirit, another woman artist, asking her to "write something about [her] that the men cant." "Men," she explained, "have done all they can do about it" (*Art and Letters* 180).

Having trained under William Merritt Chase, a master of still-life, and Arthur Wesley Dow, one of the chief proponents in America of the Oriental notion of composition (which placed design over representation), O'Keeffe was well versed and technically proficient in painting objects. More importantly, both her teachers, each in his own way, instilled within her a deep conviction that, as she learnt from Chase, "style—color—paint as paint" (*O'Keeffe*) had to enliven realistic depictions and that, as Dow taught, "mere accuracy has no art value whatever" (qtd. in Balge-Crozier 42). These teachings were reinforced by O'Keeffe's readings in modern art theories and by the art she saw at Stieglitz's galleries. Thus, while working in the ostensibly conventional idiom of the still-life, she redefined the genre fully aware of what she was about. Marjorie P. Balge-Crozier rightly observes that "by comparing her work with that of her predecessors, we can clarify how far she transcended their approach to the genre as she adopted a modern, self-reflexive mode that often removed the objects from the culture in which they were embedded and repositioned them in her world as her things." Simply put, "she took still life, called *nature morte* ('dead nature') by the French, and made it *nature vivante*—nature revivified for an

audience that had stopped looking" (43). When O'Keeffe chose to paint a flower that she saw blooming in a field of desert flowers outside her home, she disregarded all contextual considerations (the look of the New Mexico desert, the time of day, other plants, botanical accuracy, and so on) and selected just one specimen to be the sole image in her picture. Guided by her uniquely concentrated attention, she "repositioned" the flower and thus abstracted it without rendering it abstract. She painted a recognizable object as seen by the artist's eye. The image is that of a tangible thing, but one that now exists outside of time, petrified in what Balge-Crozier elsewhere refers to as "iconic stasis" (58).

By carefully selecting things to include in and exclude from her art, O'Keeffe ostensibly seemed to be concentrated on the momentary and the circumstantial but, in making such selections, she simultaneously and paradoxically celebrated the eternal and the universal. Traces of the same approach can be identified in her writing, where omission and suppression of detail are as meaningful as what is verbalized. In her response to Cleveland Museum of Art director William A. Milliken's request to comment on the sources of inspiration for her *White Flower, New Mexico* of 1929, she states:

> I was hoping that you would forget that you asked me to write you of the White Flower but I see that you do not....
>
> At the time I made this painting—outside my door that opened on a wide stretch of desert these flowers bloomed all summer in the daytime—.
>
> The large White Flower with the golden heart is something I have to say about White—quite different from what White has been meaning to me. Whether the flower or the color is the focus I do not know. I do know that the flower is painted large to convey to you my experience of the flower—and what is my experience of the flower if it is not color. (*Art & Letters* 202)

Painted a year before *Jack-in-the-Pulpit*, her *White Flower, New Mexico* is less forthright in its sexual implications, but it exudes a sensuous aura that is equally strong. Enlarged so it reaches far across the edges of the canvas and positioned so as to allow one to look inside it, the flower seems to envelop the viewer with its soft petals, adding intimacy to the aesthetic experience. What O'Keeffe accomplishes by reversing the usual relation between the looker and the thing looked at is quite astounding: for all its fragility, the flower—because of the extreme close-up and the painting's grand scale of thirty by thirty-six inches—overwhelms, an effect thus described by Kathleen Pyne: "Her treatment of the miniature in nature makes us feel as if we have been suddenly reduced to the scale of a Lilliputian world" (255-256). Leaving no space for a background that could somehow anchor the flower in a more concrete setting, O'Keeffe transforms the commonplace that one would either see from a distance or overlook altogether into something new, providing an unexpected vantage point and thus offering the viewer a more than casual glance.

Traits representative of the "modern, self-reflective mode" present in O'Keeffe's still lifes can also be detected in her commentary on *White Flower, New Mexico*. For all its apparent plainness and austerity, this commentary is not an offhand observation—the artist took great pains to compose it so that each word was meaningful in just the right way. In her letter to Stieglitz from 1929, she writes: "I try to think some words to Mr. Milliken in Cleveland—and they don't come readily" (*Faraway* 542). The text she finally produced opens rather inconspicuously, but among some basic, even trivial, facts regarding the painting's origin, she inserts a brief but pointed exposition on an important aesthetic issue. Her "whether the flower or the color is the focus I do not know" reflects her stylistic affinity to both realism (the flower) and abstraction (the color), which is confirmed by these two statements: "Nothing is less real than realism. Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things" (qtd. in Lynes 180), and

> It is surprising to me to see how many people separate the objective from the abstract. Objective painting is not good painting unless it is good in the abstract sense. A hill or tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or tree. It is lines or colors put together so that they say something. For me that is the very basis of painting. The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint. (*O'Keeffe* opposite pl. 88)

Typically, in her statement for Milliken, O'Keeffe shifts from a factual account to formal concerns, bringing into focus the color white (the principal reason why she chose to paint that particular flower) and the large canvas's overwhelming physicality (its sheer size), the two key elements that enable her to establish a unity between her own "experience of the flower" and the viewer's experience of her rendition of it. Significantly, she was fully aware that creative expression—whether in painting or writing—is necessarily anchored in thought, and as such it is an intellectual act, a fact she was ambivalent about as her artistic intuition biased her toward sense perception and feeling. On the one hand she admits to Stieglitz: "You see—that painting was done with my head—before my heart and my body were ready." At the same time, however, she seems to regret that that this is so: "—and what I do with my head may possibly be beautiful—but it hasn't the breath in it that means life" (*Faraway* 524).

Acknowledging that painting and writing have a common substrate, O'Keeffe naturally placed one before the other—after all, painting was her principal means of artistic expression. But it is also a fact that she was skeptical about verbal language's clarity and precision as compared to how clear and precise forms and colors could be. As she saw it, the communicative power of words was often depleted by careless and inflated rhetoric, the kind one finds so often in Hartley. Consistently refusing to explain her own paintings, she stated that words "sound just too stupid and stale—everyone can say similar things and it means nothing" (*Art &*

Letters 196). Yet, she acknowledged that to get at "the real meaning of things" one sometimes needs to find verbal analogues or equivalents of her visual perceptions. This explains why, when she resorted to words, she first of all suppressed what she considered inessential information. Thus, for instance, and rather unconventionally, she declares in her autobiographical essay: "Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant" (*O'Keeffe*). The ingenuousness of this declaration brings to mind not only O'Keeffe's ascetic and austere demeanor, but also the peculiar minimalism even of her exuberant still lifes and landscapes.

The studied carefulness and refined restraint with which O'Keeffe approached words stood in sharp contrast to how, in her view, others employed them. She not only refused to comment on the allegations that her magnified flowers were disguised portraits of male and female genitals, but openly castigated her colleagues, including Stieglitz himself, for resorting to hackneyed social stereotypes instead of proffering thoughtful insights when they talked about her art: "Words have been misused, so that the usual words don't express my meaning and I can't make up new ones for it" (*Art & Letters* 270). But despite her protestations to the contrary, she did so. Although she did not literally invent new words, by relaxing the stale conventions of writing as a medium of communication she gradually found a way to speak in her own voice and share that voice with her readers. While her early letters followed the rules of conventional syntax and punctuation, around 1915 she stopped strictly following the rules of spelling, rendering her writing more phonetic, and she discarded common punctuation marks, eliminating apostrophes in contractions and replacing commas and periods with dashes. Syntax-wise, short phrases began to dominate in preference to fully-developed sentences, frequently achieving the impressionistic effect of prose poetry, as in the following letter written in 1917:

> Sunday morning—a little breeze—cool feeling air—very hot sun—such a nice quiet feeling morning—strips of green—blue green—pale hazy—almost unbelievable beautiful—out of my window—it startled me when I first saw it—it isnt often hazy here—Ive been to breakfast—brought it to my sister—went for the mail—had a ride—got your package—the little prints—its eleven oclock—I wish you could see the nice color out of my window (*Art & Letters* 163)

Stripping words to essentials, O'Keeffe's writings abstracted from reality in a way analogous to how she proceeded when she painted—by isolation, reduction, and simplification, with no concern for established rules. She explained her painterly procedure in this way: "Sometimes I start in very realistic fashion and as I go on from one painting after another of the same thing it becomes simplified till it can be nothing but abstract—but for me it is my reason for painting it I suppose" (*Art & Letters* 267). The analogy notwithstanding, in writing she obviously also drew from literary sources. For instance, the appearance of the first instances of her freer approach to language coincided with her first reading of Gertrude Stein's unorthodox

verbal portraits of Matisse and Picasso, published by Stieglitz in *Camera Work*. This particular connection has been acknowledged by few critics, one of whom is Barbara Rose. In her review of O'Keeffe's autobiography, she observes that "the unornamented 'American' English of Gertrude Stein" must have influenced the painter, who, like Stein, "chooses to restrict herself to simple declarative sentences, avoiding simile, metaphor, and symbol, the staples of literary allusion"—for instance, Rose points out, O'Keeffe never uses the word "like" (Rose). A decade after Rose, Sarah Greenough remarked—in a footnote—that the artist's "writing style after 1916 was frequently reminiscent of Stein, particularly her use of the present tense, her almost stream-of-consciousness approach, and her habit of repeating the same idea over and over again until she had clarified it in her mind" (*Art & Letters* 138-139).

But the similarities go deeper. It does not seem too farfetched to say that the following "no-nonsense" explanation Stein offered of her disavowal of the question mark could have been written by O'Keeffe: "A question is a question, anybody can know that a question is a question and so why add to it the question mark when it is already there when the question is already there in the writing" (317). Regarding punctuation, O'Keeffe, who often dropped the full stop altogether, seems to have gone even further than Stein, who was surprisingly conservative on that issue: "As long as human beings continue to exist and have a vocabulary, sentences and paragraphs will be with us and therefore inevitably and really periods will be with us" (321-322).

One significant difference between the two women is that O'Keeffe downplayed her involvement with matters linguistic—after all she was only a painter. But "scribbling along with not a thought in [her] head," (*Art & Letters* 186) she made astute remarks on the nature of perception and meaning-making very similar to Stein's reflections. Consider Stein's 1935 essay "Portraits and Repetition," where she wrote: "I began to wonder... just what one saw when one looked at anything really looked at anything. Did one see sound, and what was the relation between color and sound, did it make itself by description by a word that meant it or did it make itself by a word in itself" (303). O'Keeffe asks similar questions concerning representation, and although her focus is not language but image, she arrives at her concluding observation following a path not too distant from the one Stein took:

> A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many associations with a flower—the idea of flowers. You put out your hand to touch the flower—lean forward to smell it—maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking—or give it to someone to please them. Still—in a way—nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven't time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time. If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small.
>
> So I said to myself—I'll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.

> Well—I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower and I don't. (*O'Keeffe* opposite pls. 23 and 24)

This type of repetition-based diction—"flower" and "see" occur seventeen and twelve times respectively in O'Keeffe's full statement—brings to mind the serial nature of the flower motif and serves to demonstrate that looking and seeing are processes, or procedures, that take place in time, and in the head. In other words, looking is thinking and thinking requires a medium, words, which serve as the substrate of perception. The nature of words is such that they allow us to verbalize perceptions and ideas, but there is no guarantee that even if two people use the same words to express the experience of looking at the same thing their perceptions and statements about them would be identical or even similar. In her autobiography O'Keeffe writes: "I long ago came to the conclusion that even if I could put down accurately the thing that I saw and enjoyed, it would not give the observer the kind of feeling it gave me" (*O'Keeffe* below pl. 62). Repetition serves to reiterate her observations and thus pin down "the unexplainable thing in nature" (*O'Keeffe* opposite pl. 100). Like Stein, O'Keeffe could be accused of making a questionable virtue of repetitiousness, but she insisted on doing so because she knew that it takes time and reflection to recognize what that virtue is.

Although O'Keeffe's writing is not self-conscious in the same way as Stein's, whose style, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, is characterized by "the mathematical neatness of the permutative process" (59), it is equally "modern" in that it foregrounds the constructedness of writing. This verbal dimension is visible in how her apparently ordinary, vernacular prose reveals her poetic sensibility. The "concreteness, directness, and lofty impersonality" for which, as Rose observes, O'Keeffe's work "came to be appreciated" stems from the fact that "she is also a poet transforming the reality she sees" (Rose). Many passages in her autobiography and letters show that this transformative process takes place not only in her paintings but also in her texts, particularly those that refer to nature. For instance, in this commentary on her 1946 painting *A Black Bird with Snow-Covered Red Hills*, she reveals: "One morning the world was covered with snow. As I walked past the V of the red hills, I was startled to see them white. It was a beautiful early morning—black crows flying over the white. It became another painting—the snow-covered hills holding up the sky, a black bird flying, always there, always going away" (*O'Keeffe* opposite pl. 86). Fascinated by the unexpected view—"her" red hills turned white—the artist invites the viewer/reader to experience "the world" through her eyes. The image and the text both offer and invite the same type of concentrated attention to visual detail, especially colors—red, white, black, and blue (the latter represented by the sky) and shapes—"the V of the red hills," which imparts a sense of visual symmetry, or spatial organization. The image of the black crows against the white snow blends with/into

the whiteness of the page covered with marks in black ink. Having established what triggered a perception which was then transformed into a vision, O'Keeffe simply describes how she translated/transferred that vision onto the canvas. She reduced the visual components of the scene (the seen): the red of the hills is engulfed by the white of the snow that covers them, the black crows merge into one black bird, and the hills are reduced to a support for the sky.

What this passage demonstrates is how painterly terms—composition, structure, shape, and color—reconstruct sensual perception as/in thought. Transforming direct perception into visual and verbal forms was to O'Keeffe a natural process, which, as she put it in a letter to Sherwood Anderson, was, simply, "a working that must be done" (*Art & Letters* 174). Artists, says O'Keeffe, often experience things that are not immediately comprehensible or graspable and "from that experience comes the desire to make the unknown—known." She explains: "–By unknown—I mean the thing that means so much to the person that he wants to put it down—clarify something he feels but does not clearly understand—sometimes he partially knows why—sometimes he doesn't—sometimes it is all working in the dark—but a working that must be done—making the unknown—known" (*Art & Letters* 174). What is crucial here is that for O'Keeffe verbal "clarification" is not only of the same nature as visual refinement of one's observations, but that in fact one aids the other. She confessed this to Anderson: "I probably wouldn't have found a starting point so readily if I hadn't written this to you" (*Art & Letters* 176), the starting point for "catching crystallizing your simpler clearer vision of life" (*Art & Letters* 174).

While primarily concerned with transforming her perceptions and thoughts into visual and verbal condensations of her own experiences, O'Keeffe, as Bonnie L. Grad notes, also "intended her audience to derive some sort of contemplative experience from her images" (*Lawrencean* 3). Resentful about the various "sexual" interpretations of her work, she welcomed spiritual readings. Grad cites Waldo Frank's description of her art as "Scripture," Paul Strand's discovery of a "spiritual reality" in her paintings and Edward Alden Jewell's designation of O'Keeffe as a "mystic in paint" (*Lawrencean* 3). O'Keeffe's spiritual affinity with the transcendentalists is highlighted by Rose, who observes: "There are so many correspondences between her subjects and specific texts by Emerson and especially by Thoreau that we are safe in assuming she was greatly influenced by their writings." Her paintings, the critic goes on to say, "so clearly convey the spirit of their loosely defined nature religion that they may be seen, in a sense, as transcendentalist icons" (Rose). Contestable as this bold claim may seem, many of O'Keeffe's statements reveal how close she was to Emerson, especially in defining her relation to nature. Inspired by his idea that "few adult persons can see nature.... At least they have a very superficial seeing" (1583), she described her feelings about being immersed in the landscape surrounding her New Mexico home in words reminiscent of Thoreau's observations and meditations:

> Today I walked into the sunset—to mail some letters—the whole sky—and there is so much of it out here—was just blazing—and grey blue clouds were rioting all through the hotness of it—and the ugly little buildings and windmills looked great against it.... and I kept on walking—
>
> ….
>
> I walked out past the last house—past the last locust tree—and sat on the fence for a long time—looking—just looking at the lightning—you see there was nothing but sky and flat prairie land—land that seems more like the ocean than anything else I know—There was a wonderful moon—
>
> Well I just sat there and had a great time by myself—Not even many night noises—just the wind— (*Art & Letters* 157)

O'Keefe's spiritual kinship with Thoreau, who asked "Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (*Walden* 153), comes through in her "I feel like a little plant" (*Art & Letters* 183). In numerous other passages in her letters, the artist speaks of her sense of unity with nature, and more specifically, as Anne Middleton Wagner points out, the unity "not so much with the natural world as a whole, as with its fragments and ephemera—bits and pieces one could capture, remove, and paint" (65).

Having departed for New Mexico, at least partly in response to Stieglitz's infidelities, O'Keeffe found comfort in her sense of being at one with her new environment, a feeling she communicated in almost every letter from "the Faraway": "The thing you call holy—I do not feel any less holy—but I feel more like the rocks in the bottom of the stream outside my door—Much water runs over me—and I know it—Everyday there seem to be more things I am conscious of—and I can just let pass over me and be" (*Faraway* 472). She openly acknowledged her elation, which she compared to being intoxicated: "I don't know why this country gets me the way it does—but I just get a feeling of being drunk with it" (*Faraway* 509). Clearly with Emerson in mind, she announced: "And me is something that reaches very far out into the world and all around" (*Faraway* 471).

In keeping with Emerson's conviction that to experience "the whole of nature" one needs to disentangle oneself from society—"a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society" (1583)—O'Keeffe, who had always been a loner, chose a life of seclusion and solitude and thus saw other people's company as a constraint. Self-sufficient and independent, she confided to Sherwood Anderson: "I am having my few great days of the year when there is no one around and I can really breathe—I dont know why people disturb me so much—They make me feel like a hobbled horse" (*Art & Letters* 178). Not surprisingly, then, she was drawn to places where "there is nothing," by which she meant the absence of people. Realizing that her predilection for solitude was not shared by her friends and fellow artists, she wondered: "Maybe there is something wrong with me that I am liking it so much" (*Art & Letters* 158). But then she wholeheartedly embraced the desolate wide-open

stretches of the Southwest, as if heeding Thoreau's call: "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free" ("Walking" 1810). When, after Stieglitz's death in 1942, O'Keeffe settled for good in the remote village of Abiquiu, a long trek away from the main road and inaccessible at certain times of the year, she carved out a truly independent life. Its simplicity and austerity resounds in the language in which she described her solitary existence and her acceptance of what nature offered in the hard conditions:

> —Colored earth—rattlesnakes and a Siamese Kitten for news is all I have—With all the earth being rearranged as it is these days I sometimes wonder if I am crazy to walk off and leave it and sit down in the far away country as I have—at least it is quiet here—I have no radio—and no newspaper—only *Time* that the girl gets when she goes to town—for food—I get vegetables and fruit from the ranch house two miles away—I've only been to town twice since I'm here—I'm having a lovely time—and I hope yours is passable—Too bad you dont like nothing the way I do. (*Art & Letters* 231)

O'Keeffe's serene outlook—which allowed her to savor the nothingness, emptiness and stillness in the barren landscapes of the prairie, desert and mountains of New Mexico—in no way impaired her emotional response to its visual opulence and outright beauty. Describing an Indian dance she once saw in a Pueblo village, she writes: "The monotony of it—the brilliancy of the color—the live eyes—It is terribly exciting—and at the same time quieting like the ocean—I had a great sense of quiet and peace—and at the same time a very—very living excitement" (*Faraway* 433). It is this type of exhilaration that prompts Greenough to describe some of O'Keeffe's letters as verging on giddiness, while others sustain a balance between vividness and lucidity (*Faraway* 408). And yet it is not just O'Keeffe's ability to combine passion, briskness and spontaneity with calmness, sparseness and precision that makes the painter such an engaging and original writer. Her aplomb and self-restraint, marks of emotional and intellectual integrity, were not merely traits of her character. At a time when many of her enlightened and progressive colleagues and fellow artists, almost all of them men, still had a hard time acknowledging that a woman can have a full personality, she was able to convince at least some of them that she was not, as Hartley put it, "modern by instinct" (*Adventures* 118) but was their peer intellectually, and knew it. In this letter to a friend in distress, she tries to raise her spirits but ends up boosting her own: "—the vision ahead may seem a bit bleak but my feeling about life is a curious kind of triumphant feeling about—seeing it black—knowing it is so and walking into it fearlessly because one has no choice—enjoying ones consciousness—I may seem very free—a cross between a petted baby and a well fed cow—but I know a few things—" (*Art & Letters* 201). One of the few male friends who acknowledged her intellect was the African-American writer Jean Toomer, who, observing in a letter to Stieglitz that O'Keeffe liked to pretend "she hasn't a mind," hinted at the nature of their rapport by adding: "I don't think she

thinks she fools me" (qtd. in *Art & Letters* 138-139)

She certainly did not fool Barbara Rose, one of the most perceptive historians of modern American art, who in a rare attempt to give full credit to O'Keeffe's intelligence and knowledgeableness posits that it was probably she who brought to the attention of Stieglitz the ideas of the Orientalist scholar Ernest Fenollosa, called by Rose "a missing link between the artists of the Stieglitz circle and the transcendentalist writers" (Rose). Even more interesting is the possibility that O'Keeffe's reading of Fenollosa's monumental *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design* could have triggered in her certain reflections not just about art but also about language. Such was precisely the impact of Fenollosa on Ezra Pound, who, according to Elizabeth Hutton Turner, believed Fenollosa was responsible for a "renewed emphasis on perception, together with a renewed consciousness of the structure of words—indeed, a renewed consciousness of the root and structure of all language—with enabling modern poets, like modern painters, to break free from the romantic metaphor of mood or impression and to unfold a more objective system of expression (12). That O'Keeffe read Fenollosa for ideas about composition and design seems quite obvious, but she might have also discerned in his study traits that Pound saw as essential for the development of modern poetic expression. This is one more reason why her surprisingly broad and profound intellectual interests are worth examining. O'Keeffe felt no need to showcase her learnedness and, as Wagner observes, she "learned to mask her modernist ambitions" (288), but a closer look at what she had to say and how she said it confirms that she indeed did "know a few things" (*Art & Letters* 201).

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