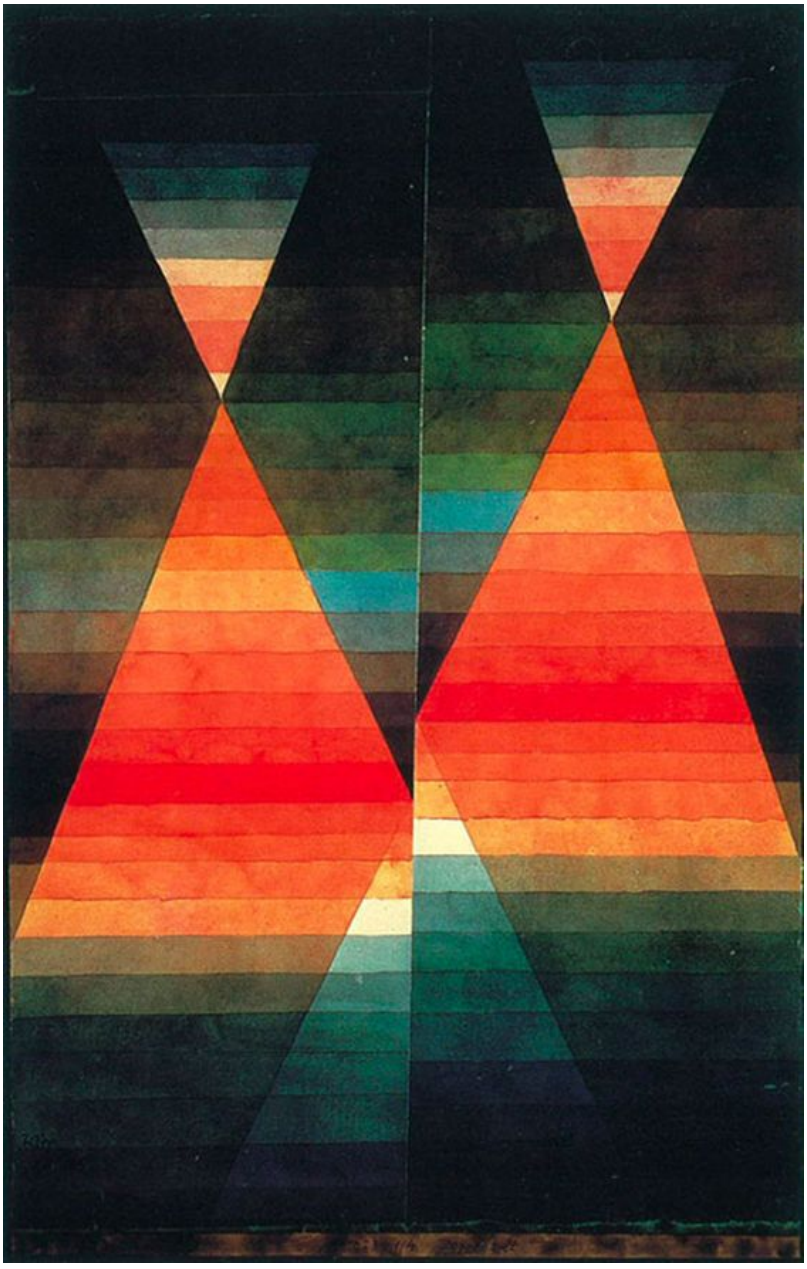
Demoting Wittgenstein, Mourning Trumbull Stickney

by Samuel Hux (April 2018)



Double Tent, Paul Klee, 1923

I am tone-deaf to Ludwig Wittgenstein. I'm not proud of that fact—but I'm not embarrassed either. I am *almost* tone-deaf

to Mozart, and I am embarrassed to admit it. I know at some necessary level (because I am not an idiot) that he is superior to Jan Sibelius, but I would rather listen to the Finnish master any day. I cannot think at the moment of any philosopher I would not prefer reading to Wittgenstein, whether one as lucid as I find William James or as beating-my-head-against-the-wall as I experience Immanuel Kant—so I am not tone-deaf to Wittgenstein because he is too difficult, but because . . . well, because I find his relative lucidity *barren*.

It may be that I've spent so much time discussing and lecturing on Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Descartes, James (to name but a few I delight in) who tackle what I take to be the great problems of Western philosophy, that I find Wittgenstein so prickly and niggling, but I cannot be proud of the fact that I cannot follow my betters such as Bertrand Russell in discovering what made his colleague Ludwig so wonderful. Not that Ludwig appreciated Bertie's appreciation. When the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) was published in English in 1922, by Russell's intervention, Wittgenstein was angry at Russell for his introduction, claiming Russell did not understand the work. If Russell did not understand Wittgenstein, who does? Certainly not I. Nor, I suspect, do his enthusiasts, much less those who think him the greatest philosopher of the 20th century. I should amend that last sentence: they do not understand the significance of the fact that Wittgenstein is so celebrated. Which judgment, however, gets me ahead of myself.

I remember being stunned several years ago by the realization that I had heard more classical concerts than had Mozart. I hear not only what's played in concert halls but on the seldom-silent radio in home or auto; Mozart, without my

technological advantage, could hear only what was played in his presence. Here's a relevant analogy: I have read more classical philosophy than Ludwig Wittgenstein. A philosophy major or minor at a respectable college or university (before at least the "relevance" revolution in higher education) has read more. Wittgenstein, finding the classical tradition of Western philosophy even into the 20th century a large mistake, read relatively little of what he found mistaken. (Which fact did not really make him an eccentric in Oxbridgean philosophical circles. Bryan Magee in his memoir *Confessions of a Philosopher* recalled how there were extraordinary gaps in the philosophical curriculum at Oxford when he was a student, great swathes of thought, Kant for instance, foreign to the anti-metaphysical bias of logical positivism and other forms of British-style "analytic philosophy.")

While tone-deaf to Wittgenstein as I've confessed, I am not resistant to his (very) occasional charm. His favorite actress, according to his friend Norman Malcolm (*Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*), was the "Brazilian Bombshell" Carmen Miranda—which can be read as a total lack of taste or, as I read it, a lovable bit of insanity. And then there is one of my favorite sentences in the philosophical literature, the first proposition of the *Tractatus,* "The world is all that is the case." First response: Well, what the hell else would it be? Then: Since "world" is not a geological designation, but all the somethings in coherent order, "The facts in logical space are the world,"—then what better way to say it than "The world is all that is the case"? Maybe there are better ways, but not more quirky-charming. But very quickly my patience with the *Tractatus* begins to recede.

I do not intend an analysis of, or another introduction to, Wittgenstein. (Should one need or want one, I know no better

example of each than A.C. Grayling's *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction*, in the Oxford University Press short introduction series, for its readability—especially given a subject that defies the adjective *readable*—and given the absence of hero-worship, by which I mean Grayling considers the possibility that Wittgenstein may be, instead of a great philosopher, "one of the great personalities of philosophy.") I intend, as is already obvious, a kind of complaint, and incidentally a wonderment at the worshipful attitude of the academic profession I have myself professed—not very main-streamly I realize.

As I recall my undergraduate days at the University of North Carolina before its philosophy department became as I assume it did an American island of British philosophical instruction, when it was instead a home to "Continental" philosophical biases, I have loving memories of being introduced to questions such as the nature of existence, of the soul, the limits of knowledge, the possibilities of choice, ethical standards, God or his absence, what beauty is, and-and-and the mystery of what lies beyond-behind perceivable physical reality and the necessity of *talking about these matters.* But if I am to believe Wittgenstein, all these matters and all talk about these matters that changed my young life were merely the result of Western philosophy taking the wrong path because its practitioners did not grasp the nature of language; if philosophers made the nature of language their focus then the old questions which engaged my young mind would be shown to be spurious and would disappear. (Not quite incidentally, Martin Heidegger's prejudice—that word intended!—that philosophy took the wrong path with Plato accounts in large for my inability to engage fully with another candidate for "greatest philosopher of the century.")

Granted, there were modifications of the views Wittgenstein expressed in the *Tractatus*, those modifications appearing in his later work, most famously in *Philosophical Investigations,* but the "linguistic" emphasis remains, and the extraordinary reputation of Wittgenstein had set in like concrete long before there were any modifications.

In any case: the clear message of the *Tractatus,* so exciting to a certain kind of philosopher, was anti-metaphysical. (Forget all the exacting particulars of the argument which are not my immediate concern here, and are available to any reader wishing to tackle the *Tractatus* or to be instructed by, let's say, Grayling.) Hence the famous last proposition of the work; which proposition is preceded by the statement that "The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science [since metaphysical statements are of necessity nonsense]." So: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.* Or in the most popular translation, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

Granted, Wittgenstein does not say that what I and others have thought to be the "great questions" do not exist, they simply cannot be spoken of. Ethics, for example, may exist and we may *be* ethical, but ethics cannot logically be talked about because it has nothing to do with the "world that is all that is the case." The same with theological matters, which may . . . etc. But I really do rebel at this *diktat*, this assertion that *whereof we cannot speak . . .* because, as a matter of fact, *we can*! At least poor benighted Kant thought he could: *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Rudolph Otto had a lot to say about the ineffable: *The Idea of the Holy.* Perhaps they would have been rendered mute had they tried to speak in the pure

language of logic, *if p is q,* etc. But, *thank God*.

Furthermore: since we *can*, isn't it really the case that Wittgenstein might have been more forthright had he pronounced a different *diktat*: *Wovon man nicht sprechen muss, darüber muss man schweigen.* Whereof one *must* not speak, thereof one *must* be silent. I am not at all convinced that the *Tractatus* proves *cannot;* and I suspect that Wittgenstein did indeed, did indeed, mean that metaphysical (and such) matters simply *must not.* There are familiar stories (Grayling repeats some) of Wittgenstein's pleasure when some of his bright students ceased doing philosophy and took to manual jobs instead, working in a canning factory for instance.

Let us be frank and not dance around the issue. What is this, the avoidance of all metaphysical talk that made up the grand tradition of Western philosophy, the avoidance thereby applauded by so much of the philosophical professoriate, but philosophical *suicide*? That's what I meant when I said earlier that I find Wittgenstein's relative lucidity "barren."

I would not be so tone-deaf to Ludwig Wittgenstein had he said something like this: There really are some things that cannot be put in words—what we mean by "ineffable" (in Wittgenstein's German *unaussprechlich)*—but the glory of philosophical endeavor is that although we cannot express certain things, we heroically try to. That's *my* belief, in any case. For instance, Kant made a basic distinction between *phenomena*, all that is accessible to the senses, and the *noumena,* the thing-in-itself (*das ding-an-sich*) which lies-is-resides-hides behind or beyond phenomena and is inaccessible to the human mind. Yet there is a basic hunger to know what it is and how it exists, to the extent that some thinkers have tried to

imagine it: for instance Artur Schopenhauer, who bravely, and to my mind (although I am a "fan") totally unconvincingly, identifies it as the blind "will" found even in us , *der Wille*. Say what one might about Schopenhauer (incidentally dismissed by Wittgenstein for having "quite a crude mind"), who is probably more famous for his justification of physical suicide than anything else, he did not commit philosophical suicide.

Wittgenstein surely knew of Niels Bohr, a vastly greater physicist than Wittgenstein was a philosopher, but I am unaware of any commentary on Bohr's insistence that although the natural language of physics was mathematics, the only logical way to describe events in the sub-atomic universe of quantum mechanics, it was nonetheless the responsibility of the scientist to try to convey to the layman the nature of those events in the language of ordinary intellectual discourse. For instance (my example, not necessarily Bohr's), when, as mathematics tells us, an elementary particle in one "orbit" within an atom takes a "quantum leap" to another, it does not *traverse* the space between orbits, but rather is just "in" the first orbit and then "in" the second without "moving" from one to the other—which defies common sense or even the extraordinary sense of classical Newtonian physics, this movement which isn't movement but rather a kind of ceasing to be "here" and coming to be "there" without any ceasing and becoming having occurred at all. Yet the only way to describe it—an incomprehensible-for-most mathematics aside—is in the language of ordinary discourse as a "leap."

I think the truth is that not only was Niels Bohr a better physicist than Ludwig Wittgenstein was a philosopher, he was a better philosopher. I am tempted to say, metaphorically obviously, he was a *poet.*

Clever transition, because I want now to talk about a poet: one who comes to mind for multiple reasons. But whatever the occasion for my idly recalling or wanting to read Trumbull Stickney again, invariably at some point in the engagement Ludwig Wittgenstein would come to mind. Hence the rather unorthodox linking here of these two historically unrelated figures, whom I doubt have occupied anyone else's mind at the same time. At first I assumed the reason was a matter of disparities: Wittgenstein's 62 years to Stickney's 30; the former's great fame, the latter's relative obscurity; the philosopher's over-blown achievement (in my estimation), the poet's great promise cut off by death. These contrasts are meaningless of course, merely accidental. Gradually I understood what was knocking at my mind for attention: that Joseph Trumbull Stickney (1874-1904) tried to an extent that surpasses what all true poets attempt to a degree, to *say what cannot be said.*

You will not find Trumbull Stickney in the standard anthologies, neither the relevant ones of the several *Norton Anthologies* nor Columbia University Press's *The Top 500 Poems* edited by William Harmon, which includes such dim leading lights as Clement Clarke Moore, Charles Wolfe, William

Allingham, William Henry Davies, and Gelett Burgess—all very familiar to at least five people in the world—while excluding (and in effect de-canonizing) the extraordinary Elinor Wylie, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Conrad Aiken. The exclusion of the first two betrays a hopeless lack of taste, that of the last two is an aesthetic and historical scandal. Stickney's absence places him in glorious company.

Actually, Stickney was never canonized in the first place, although Edwin Arlington Robinson (the near equal of Robert Frost, if the truth be told) said upon his death "We could not afford to lose him." This was not mere pay-back for Stickney being the author in *The Harvard Monthly* of the first positive review of Robinson's poetry: a Robinson biographer makes it clear that the admiration was real. Edmund Wilson (the best American literary critic of the 20th century, bar none) tried to revive his brief reputation in a 1940 essay in *The New Republic* and in his Foreword to *The Poems of Trumbull Stickney* edited by Amberys R. Whittle, in which Wilson suggested why Stickney had not caught on by then, 1966, noting that Stickney was a traditional formalist, "which will probably make [him] seem alien to those who, following the technique of William Carlos Williams, *compose what they call their poems in a kind of broken-up prose*" (italics mine). Indeed.

Since the reader cannot be required to know Whittle's 1974 *Trumbull Stickney* or the English poet Seán Haldane's far more entailed 1970 critical biography *The Fright of Time* (the title a Stickney line), here's a quick look at Stickney's brief life. He was born in Geneva in 1874 while his father, a classics scholar and professor at Trinity College in Harford, Connecticut, was on extended leave in Europe—a very extended leave indeed, since the Stickney family—the parents, Trumbull, and three siblings—spent most of its time abroad in Switzerland, Italy, France, Germany, and England, as if it were a creation of Henry James. At seventeen in 1891, privately educated except for a couple of brief stints, Trumbull entered Harvard. There he ignored the newly instituted elective system and chose the more demanding older course requirements including those in literature, philosophy, and foreign languages: beyond the modern ones, Latin, Greek, and even Sanskrit. (Much later he with the Parisian professor Silvain Lévi would translate the *Bhagavad Gita*!) At Harvard he was from his freshman year on a member of the editorial board of *The Harvard Monthly* (which was far from a typical student publication) where he began his poetry publishing career, and gained the admiration of a man not given to admiration, George Santayana. Upon graduation he pursued successfully a doctorate at the Sorbonne, the first ever awarded an English or American. While in Paris, he published back home his only non-posthumous book of poems, *Dramatic Verses* (1902). While in Paris, he wrote two dissertations for the *doctorat ès lettres,* one written in Latin on an Italian subject, one in French on Greek poetry. With doctorate in hand, he returned to Harvard in 1903 to teach Greek. By the summer of 1904 he was suffering from a brain tumor, lost his sight; in October he slipped into a coma and died.

It is not only for this reason that I find Trumbull Stickney *one of the most* heart-breaking of poets. John Keats was *the*

most. But on the other hand, Keats at twenty-five had already fulfilled his great promise, for how much greater could the second best poet in English have become? Stickney was only close to realizing his promise. Of course he had five years more than Keats. But weigh this fact. Robert Frost published his first book when almost forty years of age, and lived two years beyond his reading at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy. Frost was born three months before Stickney in 1874.

Odd that a life that meant so much to older gentlemen—like Santayana, who wrote movingly of Stickney in *The Middle Years* (volume II of his *Persons and Places*), and the historian, novelist, and autobiographical author of *The Education of Henry Adams,* whom he knew in Paris—odd that it should be so remote from fame. Stickney was also a favorite of his contemporaries at Harvard who recalled him with such affection, such as the poets George Cabot "Bay" Lodge and William Vaughan Moody, who saw to the posthumous publication in 1905 of Stickney's then-available poems.

All who remembered him commented on his great sensitivity, cultural endowments, and exquisite taste in all the arts. Santayana called him "one of the three best educated persons I have known." Should one get the impression of a merely desk-bound presence in a library or studio, one should be corrected; Moody described him thus: "a picture of radiant youth—very tall, a figure supple and graceful as a Greek runner's, a face of singular brightness," which squares with the memory of a younger friend in Paris, that Stickney was 6'4" and "much resembled a Greek god, in spite of his curious staring eyes." The recollections of this younger friend reveal Stickney as, beyond the picture of aesthete and handsome devil, an extraordinarily responsible friend.

Shane Leslie, Anglo-Irish baronet (Sir John Randolph Leslie) was but sixteen and seventeen when he knew Stickney in 1903 in Paris. In three different memoirs published in 1936, 1938, and 1966, Leslie recalled how Stickney took him, young and naïve, under his wing and not only became a kind of cultural guide but shepherded him away from that "Proustian world" in Paris, "a society of secret decadence" like "the Cities of the Plain" (Sodom and Gomorrah), "a whole section of life which was as clear of ladies as an ecclesiastical seminary." I mention this to counter an impression that might be left by Santayana, who remarked that a small student coterie at Harvard disliked Stickney because he called a sunset "gorgeous," thus seeming "too literary and ladylike." Good grief! Even sixty-three years later—injured veteran of World War I, diplomat, prolific man of letters, all-around man of the world, first cousin of Winston Churchill—Leslie's memories of Stickney are nothing less than a kind of retroactive hero worship. Stickney was, in Leslie's judgment (although not in his diction), all that a man should be, which is the meaning of the German and Yiddish word *Mensch.* A Mensch indeed.

Stickney's poems collected in Whittle's edition cover roughly 300 pages. (A selection of fifty or so edited in 1968 by Seán Haldane and James Reeves, *Homage to Trumbull Stickney*, is harder to find.) The Whittle collection has lyrics (sonnets included), dramatic monologues, mini-dramas, long and short fragments of uncompleted verse plays, and an extraordinary array of other fragments, probably a tenth of the above having appeared neither in the 1902 *Dramatic Verses* nor the 1905 collection put together by Bay Lodge and Will Moody. Some of the pieces are "juvenilia" rather than mature work. None of it is dismissible. Although the American critic R.P. Blackmur did just that in 1933, to his eternal shame. Editors at Norton and Columbia U. Press should have listened to poets. Horace

Gregory said, “As one turns the pages of Stickney’s posthumous poems . . . one seems to stand in the unshaded presence of poetic genius.” The editors’ taste did not excel that of some poets themselves who compiled anthologies: Louis Untermeyer, Mark Van Doren, Allen Tate, Oscar Williams, W.H Auden, and Conrad Aiken himself, who wrote that Stickney was “the natural link between [Emily] Dickinson and the twentieth century ‘thing.’”

Among the pure lyrics (non-sonnets) is a sequence of poems, “Eride,” of 138 stanzas, one reason it was never anthologized. To say that the sequence is uneven is true . . . and also irrelevant. It is a heart-stopping expression of love, or better yet memory of a love, the fate of which the reader never really knows. Two quatrains will have to do.

> Brown eyes I say, yet say I blue.
> I think her mouth is a melody,
> Her bosom a petal sunned and new;
> Her hand is a passing sigh.

> Blue eyes I say, yet somehow brown.
>
> Her mouth is the verge of all repose;
>
> Her breast is a smoothed-out viol tone;
>
> Her hand is an early rose.

Well, two quatrains might do if they did not suggest, no matter how beautiful, a poem conventionally romantic (Stickney changed decisively the intended title, “A Romance”). It is a

painful sequence as well, as is indicated by another quatrain later on:

> You have no pity, none. You live
>
> Impatient and unreconciled.
>
> Nay, were you a mother, I believe
>
> You never could well love your child.

Or another:

> Sometimes I think we never met,—
>
> ’T had surely better been, to spare
>
> This nervous wringing of regret,
>
> This hope that tightens to despair.

Stickney keeps returning to his difficult beloved in poems composed later than the sequence, poems, however, if they had not been arranged correctly by Bay Lodge and Will Moody, one might assume were natural parts of the “Eride” sequence.

In the lyric “Once” for instance:

> If once again before I die
>
> I drank the laughter of her mouth

And quenched my fever utterly,

I say, and should it cost my youth,

’T were well! for I no more should wait

Hammering midnight on the doors of fate.

Should one wonder at the title of the sequence, “Eride,” well might one. It belongs to no language that I know of, nor any that biographers have guessed at (or seem even curious about in Whittle’s case). It’s neither in the French, German, Italian, Latin, Greek, nor Sanskrit that Stickney knew. But the verbal clue *Er-* certainly suggests *Eros*, and given the sense of the poems . . . there’s another possibility, although I find it ambiguous. Is it the beloved’s name? If so it could be derived from *Eris*, as is the name *Eridé* (with accent). Since *Eridé* as a first name seems to function only in Lithuanian . . . no need to finish the sentence. (Or maybe there is: we shall see in time.) Since *Eris* is the Greek goddess of *strife* and *discord*, as Stickney would well know, what closer connection is there between love and strife, as the Sanskrit *Kama Sutra* calls sexual love “flowery combat”?

Here’s my guess, although I’ll not make a big conclusive deal of it. Stickney wants to say something of a specific love which is past now, still present, and hopefully may return, with no real borders between past, present, and future because love is not situated comfortably in time. Nor is love *just love,* for there are too many kinds, so many that we can’t be sure what they have in common to justify their having one name. Love of parent (for and by), sibling, friend, intimately beloved, partner, to say nothing of locale or country or hopes or memories or some near stranger whose appeal we cannot fathom—to suggest a minor number of its forms. Love being so

many things and so complicated and so impossible-to-capture in one word, and *Eros* and *Eris* being no better, why not make up a word to suggest something that really cannot be said? So: *Eride.* Perhaps a minor instance of trying to honor the ineffable in one word which isn't a word. More of this a bit later.

Of the completed lyrics in Stickney's oeuvre (none of the intended full-length plays were completed) there are in my judgment—aside from parts of "Eride"—four or five (I'm being conservative) which deserve permanent places in the history of poetry in English. Perhaps the best (this was Edmund Wilson's opinion also) is "Mnemosyne" (memory). I cannot help but to quote its entirety.

> It's autumn in the country I remember.
>
> How warm a wind blew here about the ways!
>
> And shadows on the hillside lay to slumber
>
> During the long sun-sweetened summer-days.
>
> It's cold abroad the country I remember.
>
> The swallows veering skimmed the golden grain
>
> At midday with a wing aslant and limber;
>
> And yellow cattle browsed upon the plain.
>
> It's empty down the country I remember.

I had a sister lovely in my sight:
Her hair was dark, her eyes were very somber;
We sang together in the woods at night.

It’s lonely in the country I remember.

The babble of our children fills my ears,
And on our hearth I stare the perished ember
To flames that show all starry thro’ my tears.

It’s dark about the country I remember.

These are the mountains where I lived. The path
Is slushed with cattle-tracks and fallen timber,
The stumps are twisted by the tempest’s wrath.

But that I knew these places are my own,
I’d ask how came such wretchedness to cumber
The earthy, and I to people it alone.

It rains across the country I remember.

(A similar fragment—“I hear a river thro’ the valley wander / Where water runs, the song alone remaining, / A rainbow stands and summer passes under”—inspired John Hollander’s best poem, “Variations on a Fragment by Trumbull Stickney,” which is clearly an imitation of and homage to “Mnemosyne.”)

As Edmund Wilson observed, not a “poetic” word in the poem, the plainest language with, I’d suggest, only *ember* sounding lyrical, but the impression over-all of the great tradition of English formal lyricism—no “broken-up prose” of a certainty.

I am not as enamored of Stickney’s sonnets as most of his loyalists, but some are startling. “Be still, The Hanging Gardens were a dream” has been his most famous (if that’s the right word). One which always startles me does so primarily not because of its total effect (as in “Mnemosyne”) or its dramatic content, but because of images that could hardly be imagined and never expected. Beginning “Live blindly and upon the hour. The Lord, / Who was the Future, died full long ago,” and moving toward an embrace of Greek paganism—“Thou art divine, thou livest, —as of old / Apollo springing naked to the light”—and concluding with an unforgettable image, “And all his island *shivered into flowers*” (italics mine). Stickney took his turn to a kind of Greek *Weltanschauung* seriously, by the way. He thought Plato’s *Republic,* he wrote in a letter to his sister Lucy, “that greatest book of the human mind.”

A long lyric, far too long for reproduction in an essay—it’s 108 lines of irregular length, rhyming but in nothing suggesting a pattern, so a different formalism than that of “Mnemosyne”—is “In a City Garden.” “How strange that here is

nothing as it was!” the poem’s voice begins. “No, here the Past has left no residue,” he muses before observing “Yet was this willow here.” He is not alone in seeking something, “Some vestige of the living that was theirs . . / Some hint or remnant, echo, clue—some thing, / Some very little thing of what was they.” No surprise, I think, to the reader of “Eride,” that “Here in this place . . / She, as a cloud / All sunrise-coloured and alone, / Thro’ the blue summer trembling came to me.” But he knows this is only a memory and at the same time isn’t only that. “I came today to find her, I came back . . / To her, / I came, I knew she was not here: / Now let me go. / I came because I love her so.”

> Is it not strange
>
> That here in part and whole
>
> The faithful eye sees all things as before.
>
> For past the newer flowers,
>
> Above the recent trees and clouds come o’er
>
> Love finds the other hours
>
> Once more.

This seems clearly the “she” of “Eride” and “Once”—which supposes of course that the relevant poems are recollections and offerings rather than pure fictions. Of course, in the absence of certainty as to the specifics of Stickney’s love life, some will say “fiction,” safe in the truth that poetry does not have to be autobiographical. But, after many readings (the reader is invited to the same), I am convinced the recollection is real. As C.S. Lewis once suggested when arguing that the *Gospel of Saint John* is more than a

theological narrative, is instead a distinct memory: If you don’t see that you simply don’t know how to read.

The now-old New Criticism of the last century tells us we should ignore such biographical questions and matters of authorial intention, but since we are human beings blessed with curiosity instead of citizens of the English Department . . . who was she?

There seem to be two real possibilities and one faint candidate. The faint one was an older married woman, “Ethel,” a friend of the Stickney family, whom Trumbull fell in love with when a student at Harvard. A more enticing possibility (for reasons which become apparent) referred to by Shane Leslie was “Gifford Pinchot’s sister,” like Stickney himself “very tall and good looking.” Pinchot was an American conservationist, later governor of Pennsylvania. His sister was Lady Antoinette Pinchot Johnstone, wife of an Englishman somewhat older than she, and, as the slightly grainy photo online (“the Pinchot family”) reveals, a doe-eyed pensive beauty, no question about it, all six-feet of her to go with Stickney’s six-and-a-third. But the affair was in Stickney’s last year or so in Paris before his return to Cambridge, and since “Eride” was composed in the late 1890s, Antoinette Johnstone could only possibly have touched “Once,” 1902, or better yet “In a City Garden,” 1904. Since that was the year Stickney was slowly dying, I find it easy enough to believe that memories of Antoinette could easily have been super-imposed upon the memories of the heroine of “Eride”—or the other way around.

And who was she? Honors go to Haldane’s heroic labor and speculation (while not certainty): “The impression which

emerges from the poems is of a woman of the world, Stickney's equal in intelligence and emotional depth, unusually independent and active. And it seems she had the means and strength to follow her own inclinations and lead her own life." Trumbull's younger brother Henry, says Haldane, recalled an episode from 1896, when "Eride" was being composed. Stickney was dining with his family in Paris when "a mysterious girl arrived at the door demanding to see him." His parents foolishly forbade him to answer, which Stickney simply ignored, because they considered her "disreputable." The "affair caused lasting disapproval in the Stickney family." Since the parents controlled the purse strings and Stickney had not a dime which they did not dole out (an attempt to gain a diplomatic post while a student at the Sorbonne went nowhere), Haldane surmises that marriage was beyond Stickney's realistic possibilities before he had much later and too late a Harvard salary.

But Trumbull told Henry years later that he should have married her. Not incidentally, the "disreputable" woman was Jewish. Which raises an intriguing possibility. Since as I indicated much earlier the name *Eridé* evidently serves as a first name only or primarily in Lithuania, might not "Eride" be not only the title of the sequence but the appellation of the difficult heroine as well, that is to say, a *Litvak,* a Lithuanian Jewess? That specific being a possibility or not, it pleases me for reasons beyond summary to believe that this was "she." And what argument, pray tell, is there against it? If I could change history, I would volunteer to be the Dreyfusard Stickney's match-maker.

In a literary world woefully deficient in *poetic* drama, no matter how strong the naturalistic theatre of the 20th century and beyond, it is a great loss that Stickney's were never

completed. What was to be “The Cardinal Play” (working title I suppose) is evidenced in one scene and five brief fragments. Another on the life of Emperor Julian “survives” in twenty-two pages of blank verse, which end abruptly with Julian saying, “You know not what it is to be alone; / You know it not,” with that last half line completed by another character, “Oh, God forgive you this.” Oh God, I’d like to know how it ended.

Now, I am well aware that I have made no convincing connection with *saying what cannot be said* (a connection I have implied much earlier), excluding some possibly dubious fancy work with the mysterious title of “Eride.” So . . .

I have lamented the fact that so many of Stickney’s poems are fragments, but the truth is that the fragments—especially the briefest of them, from 21 lines to four—are some of the most stunning, remarkable, provocative of Stickney’s work, perhaps the four-line fragment most of all. But before I go there I would like to return to my characterization of Stickney as one the most heart-breaking of poets.

Whatever he was feeling when his scholarly European sojourn was over—Santayana, still professor of philosophy at Harvard when Stickney returned to Cambridge, thought him somehow wounded and at odds with himself—he was still hard at work aesthetically and as a teacher, many plans for publication and for instructional duties. But by his second semester there was too much to do, so much unfinished, and it was quickly apparent that time was running out. In early spring he was crippled by fatigue and headaches; his vision was increasingly impaired as well as his hearing (all the worse for a lyrical poet!). His letters suggest a growing despair; and despair is often a way of knowing. He soon knew the worst thing, as the

brain tumor was diagnosed in early summer. His friends Lodge and Moody attended him—as he continued to write through all. Doctors feared emotional calamities and tried to restrict visits. Nonetheless Stickney received his old mentor and friend Sylvain Lévi, although now totally blind. Stickney touched Lévi's face and . . . "*O mon papa Sylvain*." I find it impossible to imagine a fraction, a fragment, of all that was going through Trumbull's mind—and I would rather not suffer the pain of even attempting. But I am sure that one thing that pained him was the certainty that he had not said all the ineffable things he wished to say.

We do know what Stickney was writing in the nine months he was alive in 1904, with only half those nine at most in anything approaching bearable health. One thing of course, as I have mentioned, was "In a City Garden," where he was clearly revisiting one and perhaps two of his great beloveds, in a pain beyond my imagining. Will Moody in an essay on his old friend in *The North American Review* in 1906 wrote of "In a City Garden": "There is in Stickney's lyric utterance at its best something momentously unspoken, which betrays to deeper abysses of feeling than are advertised of, which causes the reader, if he be sensitive to such suggestion, to turn and wonder what it is so soul-shaking under the innocent words." But Moody could easily have been speaking of five other pieces which Stickney left unfinished in his last year: five fragments, apparently lines from a play in his head since one of them begins "Enter X, who learns the dispute and says . . ."

The fragments are essentially metaphysical speculations, as for instance one says in part

I used to think

The mind essential in the body, even

As stood the body essential in the mind:

Two inseparable things, by nature equal

And similar, and in creation’s song

Halving the total scale; it is not so.

How typical of Stickney to be dramatically imagining one of the metaphysical problems most notoriously difficult to talk about, called in philosophy “the mind-body problem.” Another fragment, entitled “Blindness and Deafness,” I prefer to pass over in silence.

A third, called “The Soul of Time,” the longest, begins

Time’s a circumference

Whereof the segment of our station seems

A long straight line from nothing into naught.

Therefore we say “progress,” “infinity”—

before the odd shift from such heavy rhetorical weight to the near dismissive and charming

Dull words whose object

Hangs in the air of error and delights

Our boyish minds ahunt for butterflies.

The speaker becomes more assertive, with difficult metaphysical metaphors (or “conceits” as literary criticism used to have it), “a better distribution / Between the dreaming mind and real truth”—to which someone intervenes with “I cannot understand you.” The speaker answers:

’T is because

You lean over my meaning’s edge and feel

A dizziness of the things I have not said.

The fourth fragment is of a different mood altogether, a moment of . . . what? Peace? Loveliness, whatever it is:

Be patient, very patient, for the skies

Within my human soul now sunset-flushed

Break desperate magic on the world I know,

And in the crimson evening flying down

Bell-sounds and birds of ancient ecstasy

Most wonderfully carol one time more.

But, then, the fifth fragment: by legend—and why not?—the last thing Trumbull Stickney wrote. By convention it is thought to

be poetic expression of Stickney's recognition of his mortality, a brave facing of death. Well, I think not, not exactly; I think it an attempt rather to put the essence of a general human vulnerability into words. How does one talk about vulnerability? Seems a very easy question. So . . . how? The problem is that when one tries to say this unsayable thing one can tend to utter banalities trying to assert a brave looking-whatever-in-the-face, or if one is not careful one can tend to sound simply paranoid. Stickney prefers to express this ineffable thing another way.

> Sir, say no more.
> Within me 't is as if
> The green and climbing eyesight of a cat
> Crawled near my mind's poor birds.

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