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A Healthy Play of Mind: Art and the Brain in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Expectations of insanity have long characterized the response to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." In her *Forerunner* article "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper?'" (1913), Gilman writes that many male doctors of the era felt her infamous 1892 story was "enough to drive anyone mad to read it"—or at the very least that it was the "best description of incipient insanity" they had ever seen. For Gilman, however, the story's semi-autobiographical depiction of an oppressive rest cure is a warning. Rather than sequestering neurasthenics, allowing them to stew into madness, Gilman writes that women should be allowed to work: "the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite." Gilman, who recovered from her own nervous condition this way, explains that she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" to "carry out the ideal" of her narrow escape: "not to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked." She cites the story of at least one woman whose life had been saved because her family read the tale and repeats hearsay evidence that her physician S. Weir Mitchell changed his treatment of neurasthenia after reading it.¹

Gilman's account is important because it highlights her intent to use the story to reform women's mental health treatment. Criticism surrounding "The Yellow Wallpaper" frequently acknowledges this, though often in quite negative terms. Given the narrator's erratic behavior at the end, critics almost always gloss the story as a worst-case scenario or example of what not to do when addressing women's health and place in society. This is clear in the common assumption that the story ends in madness, whether that madness is caused by incipient insanity, as Gilman's doctors thought,

Poe-like horror rooted in the wallpaper, or patriarchal authority. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's well-known analysis of the story in *The Madwoman in the Attic* is a good example of the third possibility. Summing up the narrator's experience, Gilbert and Gubar write that

As time passes, this figure concealed behind what corresponds . . . to the façade of the patriarchal text becomes clearer and clearer. . . . And eventually, as the narrator sinks more deeply into what the world calls madness, the terrifying implications of both the paper and the figure imprisoned behind the paper begin to permeate—that is, to *haunt*—the rented ancestral mansion in which she and her husband are immured.²

Though not crazy to begin with, the narrator is driven crazy by gender constraint and patriarchal medical/social structures. This makes the haunting not just a genre trope but a stand-in for the narrator's deepening knowledge of her (and all women's) confinement by male texts and institutions. Annette Kolodny writes similarly in "A Map for Rereading; or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," separating the story from the tradition of Anglo-American haunted house fiction yet maintaining that "sanity and freedom [are] unavailable to [Gilman's] heroine" and that there is nothing "to prevent Gilman's protagonist from falling into her own internal 'abyss' . . . given the rules of the social context in which Gilman's narrative is embedded."³ Even Paula A. Treichler, who writes in "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" that the narrator escapes male medical authority by "[d]efying the judgment that she suffers from 'a temporary nervous depression,'" believes only that the narrator's deteriorating mental condition is real and serious, not something her doctor husband should diagnose as a passing fancy. Having escaped that sentence, the narrator then "follow[s] her own logic, her own perceptions, her own projects" not to mental health but to a "final scene in which madness is seen as a kind of transcendent sanity."⁴ Classic feminist readings including Elaine Hedges' afterword to the 1973 Feminist Press edition of "The Yellow Wallpaper"⁵ and Jean Kennard's "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life" repeat this notion, with Kennard holding that it is this "interpretation of madness as a higher form of sanity that allows feminist critics finally to read this story as a woman's quest for her own identity."⁶

These views are persuasive in their massing of critical opinion and remain important to many interpretations of the story. However, if Jane F. Thraikill is correct to note that Gilman did not reject the somatic science behind Mitchell's treatment so much as his gendered application of it (denying nervous women the benefit of work-exercise while simultaneously extending it to men), we must consider whether Gilman's depiction of the rest cure

also provides readers a positive example of work leading to health.⁷ If this example exists in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” then commenters who view the story as antipatriarchal simply because it depicts a woman railroaded into ill health by gendered medicine risk flattening the feminist potential of the work in their rush to confirm the degenerating mental state supposedly figured in the narrator’s response to the wallpaper.⁸

There is a way to reclaim the narrator’s sanity beyond the notion of transcendent madness: a neuro-cognitive way of reading “The Yellow Wallpaper” that jettisons not just the idea that the narrator is mad to begin with but even the idea that she grows worse over time. In short, what if “The Yellow Wallpaper” is not a story of mental decay but a story of accurately modeled neurological health—a health which is only then, and only partially, thwarted by the social structures which inevitably enfold the hardworking, neurologically normal brain? In what follows, I draw on the neuroaesthetic theories of Semir Zeki—theories which focus on the brain’s attempt to, as Gilman puts it, “carry out the ideal” of a given face, object, or situation—to demonstrate that even the most restrictive rest cure cannot prevent the brain from its accustomed work of plastic formation (86). This normal mental work is at least as present in the text as the adverse consequences of postpartum depression and it deserves our attention. After examining the story through a Zekian lens, I turn to the Deleuzian visual arts scholarship of Laura U. Marks and the neuroaesthetic skepticism of Alva Noë to help define the possibilities and limits of such analysis in a humanities discipline (literary criticism) increasingly concerned that science will misunderstand or abscond with its materials.

The simplest way through all this may be to pause momentarily in our consideration of Gilman and speak more specifically about “neuroaesthetics,” the transdisciplinary field Zeki helped create as a result of his groundbreaking neurological research in the 1990s. Zeki, a well-known neurobiologist at the University College of London, is one of the main researchers responsible for discovering, then charting, the parallel processing capacities of those parts of the human brain which handle visual experience (things such as color, motion, and linear form). As detailed in “Art and the Brain” (1998), Zeki believes that these visual, neurobiological functions have much to say about the aesthetic contemplation of art—or in our case the contemplation of a confusing wallpaper pattern—since there is literally no way for us to experience art visually except through this part of the brain. From there, it is a short leap to what Zeki calls his “somewhat unusual view that artists are neurologists, studying the brain with techniques that are unique to them and reaching interesting but unspecified conclusions about [its] organization.” Refining this, Zeki claims that artists are, in fact,

“exploiting the characteristics of the parallel processing-perceptual systems of the brain to create their works, sometimes even restricting themselves largely or wholly to one system, as in kinesthetic art.” Though artists may not always know that this is what they are doing, Zeki claims, they accomplish their neurological experimentation nonetheless. This is because a faithful representation of our experience of the world, in whatever medium and in whatever style, cannot help bearing the imprint of those processes by which the artist’s brain achieved understanding of that experience. The “general function of art,” then, much like the general function of the brain, is for Zeki a continual “search for the constant, lasting, essential, and enduring features of objects, surfaces, faces, situations, and so on, which allows us not only to acquire knowledge about the particular object, or face, or condition represented on the canvas but to generalize, based on that, about many other objects and thus acquire knowledge about a wide category of objects or faces.” In art as in life, these constancies are not the hard, immutable cores of things but rather the brain’s best and most current distillation of sensory data from an ever-changing world.⁹

Gilman’s story fits this pattern almost perfectly. In “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper?’” she admits that she wrote the story “to carry out the ideal” of her escape from S. Weir Mitchell’s rest cure, even though she herself “never had hallucinations or objections to [her] mural decorations” (86). The “ideal” here is what Zeki would consider the permanent, essential characteristic of Gilman’s flight from male-mandated indolence. As such, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is an attempt to produce what Zeki, earlier in his essay, calls a “situational constancy” (one identifiable no matter what form it takes).¹⁰ Gilbert and Gubar describe the effect of Gilman’s story in similarly Zekian terms sixty-six years after Gilman, but almost twenty years before “Art and the Brain,” when they write that “The Yellow Wallpaper” is “a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which (like *Jane Eyre*) seems to tell *the* story that all literary women would tell if they could ‘speak their speechless woe.’”¹¹ The tale “all literary women would tell if they could” is the situational constant of nineteenth-century womanhood, better expressed in “The Yellow Wallpaper” than in almost any other story attempting to embody that truth. These connections may lead us to conclude that Gilman’s art is not madness-inducing but, rather, representative of quite normal brain activity.

But what about “The Yellow Wallpaper’s” narrator? It is well and good that Gilman demonstrates a healthy authorial brain process, but that does not say much about the character feminist critics liberated from *a priori* madness so that she might slide back into it via patriarchal oppression. How does Zekian neuroaesthetics allow us to claim more for the narrator’s sanity

and neurological agency than Gilbert and Gubar were able to in 1979, even if we cannot undo the notion that something goes wrong at the end of the story due to male oppression? For this we must turn to portions of Zeki's "Art and the Brain" dealing with specific visual processing cells and the brain's so-called storehouse of experience, so that we might compare them to Gilman's actual descriptions of how her narrator views the wallpaper.

Zeki believed that "what we now call the visual brain is actually V1 [the primary visual cortex] plus the specialized visual areas [for line, color, motion, etc.] with which it connects, directly and indirectly. We therefore speak of parallel systems devoted to processing simultaneously different attributes of the visual world." In sum, Zeki writes, vision is "modular." Yet it is also "an active process that depends as much upon the operations of the brain as upon the external physical environment; the brain," he concludes, "must discount much of the information reaching it, select only what is necessary in order to obtain knowledge about the visual world, and compare the selected information with its stored record of all that it has seen."¹² Viewing and later understanding the yellow wallpaper is therefore not something that simply happens to us (the way fate simply happens to Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, for example) but something we do—something we can influence, despite the large proportions of our brains devoted to unconscious processes including the automatic aspects of vision. This is important because it means that however trapped Gilman's narrator might be by patriarchal culture or by postpartum depression, she retains a great deal of neurological agency. Stripped of the ability to exercise her body through physical work and her mind in the act of open journaling, she chooses to do what she can: keep a diary and examine the wallpaper with a mind ultimately inseparable from her body. Though it may not seem so at first, the wallpaper is a kind of exercise, and she steps to the neurological processing of it with the fervor of a nineteenth-century play theorist hooked on calisthenics.

Reference to Gilman's text supports this reading. Take, for example, the sort of work the narrator believes would do her better than all the phosphates and physical exercises in the world. "Personally," she confides, "I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (29). Her answer in the end is to study the wallpaper's perpetual changes with an intensity that terrifies those around her—but first she falls back on writing. This form of artistic (and in Zeki's eyes neurological) expression leads to a great deal of exhaustion, a fact which seems to justify her neurasthenia until we see that it is often not the act of writing that wrecks her so much as the effort of concealing it from her husband and sister-in-law. "I did write for a while in spite of them," she

confesses, “but it *does* exhaust me a good deal—having to be too sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (30). There is no compelling reason for the dash here except to set the reader up with John’s point of view on the dangers of mental work before yanking it away, clarifying that John’s restrictions on thought are the real danger. This prepares readers for the next paragraph, where the narrator repeats John’s belief that thinking about her condition is the worst thing she could do. Since John is wrong about the cause of her exhaustion, it stands to reason that he would also be wrong about the cure, which from now on will be to think obsessively about her “condition”: not the postpartum that complicates matters here but the condition of the trapped woman. This may seem a small point, but it is vitally important for our purposes, since it suggests that the narrator’s constant thinking about the wallpaper is healthy. The obsessiveness of her attention becomes not a sign of deepening madness, but a sign that she is working her neurological cure.

The story picks up in earnest a few paragraphs later, when John moves their bedroom to the top of the house, into a former nursery with barred windows in all directions. John’s thought is that here his wife can still get fresh air, even when she is too weak for outdoor activity. This paragraph includes the narrator’s first encounter with the wallpaper, which has “rings and things” in it (30). Describing the paper’s eye-rending pattern in more detail, Gilman’s narrator claims that it was

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.
(31)

The narrator’s judgment that the pattern is flamboyant and artistically sinful places us squarely in the realm of the aesthetic, which for Zeki is also the realm of the brain taking and making much of the visual cacophony this pattern offers.

Gilman’s descriptions resonate with Zeki’s notion of essential, enduring visual features as well. The first paragraph above deals largely with the pattern’s linear features: its “lame uncertain curves” and the way they “plunge off at outrageous angles” (31). That is, it deals in large part with that portion of the “receptive field” in the brain’s parallel processing system devoted to lines. According to Zeki, the receptive field

refers to the part of the body (in this case of the visual system, the part of the retina or its projection into the visual field) that, when stimulated, results in a reaction from the cell, specifically, an increase or decrease in its resting electrical discharge rate. To be able to activate a cell in the visual brain, one must not only stimulate the correct place . . . but also stimulate the receptive field with the correct visual stimulus, because cells in the visual brain are remarkably fussy about the kind of visual stimulus to which they will respond. The art of the receptive field may thus be defined as that art whose characteristic components resemble the characteristics of the receptive fields of cells in the visual brain and which can therefore be used to activate such.

Line-specific visual cells cluster in V₁ (the primary visual cortex) and one of its adjunct processing units, V₃.¹³ Other receptive field-related cells cluster elsewhere. For example, the color center of the brain is in V₄, which operates so quickly that color perceptions become conscious to us sixty to a hundred milliseconds earlier than other forms of perceptual data.¹⁴ Understanding this allows us to notice how Gilman's narrator models a distributed neurological process in the excerpt, stepping through neatly separated bursts of neuro-perceptual activity the way fitness enthusiasts of the period might step through exercises working different parts of the body's distributed muscular system. First, the narrator works line; then she works color.¹⁵ Looking deeper, we note that this color section is really two short paragraphs with three attempts at naming the color, like repetitions of the same exercise. The metaphorical barbell goes up once on "unclean yellow," again on "dull yet lurid orange," and again on "a sickly sulphur yellow" (31). That the narrator can identify the wallpaper as a single thing with a dominant color (yellow) despite its intense variation in color and pattern is a triumph of Zekian "color or object" constancy: part of the same system we use to know that an apple is still an apple whether green or red, rotten or firm, and which only works because the brain has experienced enough "apples" of various kinds to know what an apple, or what yellow wallpaper, is under a variety of circumstances.¹⁶

There are, of course, many other ways to read the perceptual data in Gilman's story. Susan Lanser's "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America" reads the wallpaper's hue as an indication of Yellow Peril anxieties in Gilman's California, though Lanser notes that the period's definition of yellow in this sense extended beyond Asians to any number of supposedly unassimilable racial or ethnic groups. Many white Americans of the day, including Gilman in *Concerning Children*, worried that the supposed moral, mental, and behavioral failings of these groups would compromise the "free and progressive thought and healthy activity" of better-bred Americans, making them as subservient and vulnerable to external influence as those from Asiatic cultures were reputed to be.¹⁷

Marty Roth amplifies Lanser's analysis in "Gilman's Arabesque Wallpaper," albeit focusing on line rather than color. Tracing European reaction to the arabesque, Roth notes John Ruskin's influential dislike of style—particularly Ruskin's linking of interwoven line and color with the ignorance and inborn cruelty of exotic predators. Roth quotes Ruskin's belief that all Oriental art is hallucinatory to claim that "Gilman's wallpaper reproduces a common sign of opium intoxication, producing a synaesthetic response in the narrator."¹⁸ Both Lanser and Roth emphasize Anglo-American fears of racial/mental compromise: fear not just of yellow people but their malleable "yellow" brains. Though not formulated in racial terms, fear of the push-button brain seems also to underwrite the concern of critics who would excoriate Zeki on the charge that we are more than gray matter reacting to stimuli. In this view, neuroaesthetics is too cognitively deterministic to apprehend human psychology or cultural constructs like race, gender, and class.

In moderation, however, neuroaesthetics can help the literary critic produce nuanced arguments along just these lines, as is the case, for example, when we combine Zekian neuroaesthetic constancies and the more culturally-minded psychological approach to color in Goethe's *Zur Farbenlehre*. Gilman, who attended the Rhode Island School of Design in 1878, would likely have known Goethe's 1810 rebuttal to Newtonian color theory. For Goethe, yellow connotes a brightness, serenity, gaiety, softness, and warmth which, "applied to dress, hangings, carpeting, etc., [. . .] is agreeable." Beholding yellow, "the eye is gladdened, the heart expanded and cheered, [and] a glow seems at once to breathe towards us." Yet Goethe also cautions that yellow is "extremely liable to contamination. . . . Thus, the color of sulfur, which inclines to green, has a something unpleasant in it," as does Gilman's sulfurous wallpaper.¹⁹ Goethe clarifies, however, that this contamination is from the color's presence in situations where it cannot "appear with full energy."²⁰ Neuroaesthetic contemplation of the wallpaper's color restores this missing energy, and yellow's healthy associations, because it invokes the purer, more enduring version of that hue despite the degraded versions the narrator sees. Yellow in this positive form then breathes out toward the narrator like the trapped woman. None of this denies the racist ends toward which a writer might also bend the psychological interpretation of color.²¹ It only adds to our understanding of the many culturally and psychologically-inflected ways this color may operate in the story.

The implications of all this for Gilman's story expand with Zeki's claim that perceptual constancy "also applies . . . to faces that are recognizable when viewed from different angles and regardless of the expression worn" and to the broader concept of "situational constancy, when the brain is able to categorize an event or a situation as festive or sad and so on, regardless

of the particular event.”²² This is tremendously important to Gilman’s narrator, as it is the neurobiological basis for her eventual recognition of the woman in her wallpaper (a perception that, by the end of the story, she has constant access to no matter the light).²³ Thus, it is also the neurological basis for her grasp of the situational constancy (patriarchal oppression) noted by Gilbert and Gubar. The narrator only reaches this knowledge after much neurological cross-training, which stocks her storehouse of experience to the point that the woman may step clear of the shifting, strangling male pattern with clarity.²⁴ From a neurological standpoint, these are not the perceptions of someone falling deeper and deeper into sickness. They are the perceptions of someone working toward active knowledge of her surroundings, which (as it opposes John’s injunction against thinking) constitutes health. We may therefore view the narrator’s claim that she flourishes because of her wallpaper with less skepticism. Neurologically and thematically, she is telling the truth (38).

Careful readers of “The Yellow Wallpaper” may object that this account of the narrator’s flourishing because of the wallpaper is contradicted by other aspects of her cognitive experience. Of the paper’s smell, for example, she writes,

But there is something else about that paper—the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room. . . .

It creeps all over the house.

I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs. . . .

It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell.

But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that is it is like the color of the paper! A yellow smell. (38–39)

Surely this is a bad sign, especially when the passage leads directly to the narrator’s revelation of the “long, straight, even *smooch*” running around the room, which her frantic creeping at the end of the story (over an unconscious John each time) has made on the wall (39). Isn’t this proof that the pattern is not strengthening the narrator but driving her insane?

Yes and no. While the narrator’s creeping and later gnawing of the bedstead are deeply troubling behaviors which we must inevitably come to terms with, they do not necessarily contradict the neural agency I have been attempting to reclaim. The narrator’s investigations of the wallpaper may still be considered instances of healthy neural work or exercise, and she is still stronger as a result of them because she gains a more definite knowledge of her situation in the form of the creeping woman. Knowledge, here as elsewhere, offers at least the possibility of its exercise, which equates to

power. What appears as a mental or emotional break is therefore something else: the collision of that agency, that health and that knowledge, with the social impossibility of exercising these powers meaningfully beyond the room where the wallpaper exists. Access to health and the ability to exercise power, I argue, has much to do with why the narrator remains in the room even when escape to the outer world might seem the more obvious path to freedom.

Consider the agency Gilman's narrator has within the room when we refer her actions to intercultural media-art scholar Laura U. Marks' notion of what happens when we view difficult linework. Marks notes the way that mirror-touch synesthetes (individuals with an expanded, neurological ability to feel what they see) often feel engulfed by the patterns around them. These individuals might sense the lines of a given pattern alighting painfully on their skin—even sense their body parts being pulled out of shape by such arrangements. Focusing on an inanimate object causes some mirror-touch synesthetes to feel they are becoming the lamp, potted plant, or abstract pattern under consideration. These effects are not limited to those with mirror-touch. For Marks, “mirror-touch synaesthetes describe attitudes of empathy with objects, a feeling of shared embodiment, that . . . non-synaesthetes can cultivate too. We can do this,” she writes, “by letting go of our human scale a bit and allowing the other thing to fully inhabit our perception—to ‘enworld’ us, as phenomenologists say.”²⁵ In that light, “what the world calls madness” in the narrator's interactions with her wallpaper is simply normative use of the V1 and V3 to access a feeling of shared embodiment almost everyone may access.²⁶ The normative nature of this access means that while the narrator's absorption into the pattern is evidence of a letting go, it is not necessarily evidence of a psychotic break, even if the effect of the enworlding is outwardly erratic behavior.

John and Jennie confirm this neuro-normativity, as they are drawn in by the pattern as well. “I've caught [John] several times *looking at the paper!*” the narrator exclaims at one point, “And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her hand on it once. . . . She didn't know I was in the room, and when I asked her in a quiet voice . . . what she was doing with the paper, . . . she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful” (37–38). This fits with Marks' assertion that “the abstract line is the companion of [Deleuze and Guattari's] haptic space—a perceptual field that invites the eyes not to perceive figures from a distance but to draw close and almost touch forms without distinguishing them.”²⁷ Drawing close is what all these characters do, even the supposedly healthy ones, and that alone conveys a certain amount of sanity on Gilman's narrator. In

addition, the narrator's choice to go further into the haptic space of the abstract line is a deliberate one. "I know she was studying that pattern," the narrator says of Jennie, "and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!" (38). While it is tempting to read the narrator's manic determination as mental illness, her reaction is just as likely that of a sane but obsessively monitored person to the possibility that she will soon have to share, then abandon, one of her last paths to neurological freedom. Her choice to pursue the pattern's meaning more intensely following her interaction with Jennie is therefore evidence of feminist agency—of the desire to gather the pattern's secrets, and therefore its power, to herself—as much as it is evidence that she gives her agency and power away to a foreign object. Interpreters like the physicians Gilman mentions in "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper?'" would have seen this as weakness in response to a corrupting influence. The neurological truth is more complex and potentially empowering.

Still, how does dissolving one's identity in neuroaesthetic appreciation of a wallpaper pattern strengthen that identity? Even Marks admits that Deleuzian haptic space and the abstract line "raise questions for the limits of what a spectator can stand before she loses her identity altogether." Raising these questions, however, does not automatically trigger a worst-case scenario. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," dissolving the narrator's identity is not fatal because it is not permanent and was never meant to be. When Marks writes of the way non-synesthetes can "cultivate embodied and empathic responses to inorganic forms," she does not assume complete capitulation to the supposedly maddening abstractness of the line. Instead, she notes that "feeling like an abstract line means letting go of the judgements that create meaning for a little while . . . [and] postpon[ing] interpretation—for now." The point of voluntarily surrendering to the abstract, nonrepresentational line processed by V1/V3 is always to make the journey back to normal, representational space, having "exercise[d] our perceptual skills" such that we may "return renewed to the 'meaningful' representation in the subject matter."²⁸

This departure is not evidence of even temporary madness for Marks. Her sources, the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, differ from Freudian psychoanalytic assumptions in their use of "schizoanalysis," a procedure that Daniel W. Smith describes as an "attempt . . . to examine schizophrenia in its *positivity*, no longer as actualized in a mode of existence (an ego)," which lacks something necessary to sanity and must be cured by psychoanalytic intervention, "but rather as a pure process, that is, an opening or breach that breaks the continuity of a personality or ego, carrying it off on a kind of voyage through an intense and terrifying 'more

than reality.”²⁹ While this approaches the transcendent insanity argument for Gilman’s narrator, schizoanalysis disconnects schizophrenia from mental illness to the extent that the process may lead as easily to health as its opposite. The narrator’s synesthetic enworlding is the breach that breaks the continuity of the ego, and each opium-like hallucination is a voyage through the wallpaper’s terrifying hyper-reality. Their sum is a form of healing. Broadly speaking, this process of departure and return mimics that of Gilman in her own mental recovery. What Gilman recovered through the healthful (and for Zeki neurologically meaningful) work of writing out the ideal version of her trauma the narrator recovers in the (also neurologically meaningful) work of entering the wallpaper’s abstract line and making constancies out of what she finds there.

As for the nature of the power the narrator gains in using V1/V3 to almost become the wallpaper’s abstract line, Marks points to Deleuze and Guattari’s section on the smooth and the striated from *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which the pair note that the abstract line “does not serve to delimit a figure but . . . has its own life. This streaming, spiraling, zigzagging, snaking, feverish line of variation liberates a power of life that human beings had rectified and organisms had confined, and which matter,” in this case the matter of the wallpaper and its printed design, “now expresses as the trait, flow, or impulse transversing it. If everything is alive,” Deleuze and Guattari conclude, “it is not because everything is organic or organized but, on the contrary, because the organism is a division of life.”³⁰ In other words, human beings and their biological, cultural, and patriarchal medical rectifications are subsets of a broader power that the narrator taps into via her neuroaesthetic grasp of the wallpaper, at the pinnacle of her journey toward health. Having gone outside the nineteenth century, rectilinear systems that confined her “for a little while,” the narrator returns “renewed to the ‘meaningful’ representation”³¹ of trapped womanhood, in possession of an underlying power that will allow her to grasp and control the “façade of the patriarchal text” noted by Gilbert and Gubar.³² Deliberate neuroaesthetic contemplation of the wallpaper pattern allows Gilman’s narrator to resist the patriarchal medical point of view that would consider her mentally disordered simply because her attention and behavior move asymmetrically. Deleuze and Guattari agree when they claim that

it is through symmetry that rectilinear systems limit repetition, preventing infinite progression and maintaining the *organic* [figurally representative] domination of a central point with radiating lines. . . . It is free action, however, which by its essence unleashes the power of repetition as a *machinic* force that multiplies its effect and pursues an infinite movement. Free action proceeds by disjunction and decentering, or at least by peripheral movement.³³

The narrator is Gilman's central point, and rather than limiting her movement, the infinite, disjunctive, decentering movement of the wallpaper's pattern allows her the possibility of free action—at least once she allows herself to become the line in the manner of a mirror-touch synesthete. Deleuze and Guattari call such a dive into the haptic space of the abstract line and away from geometry an act of “escape” or of “fugitive mobility.”³⁴ Nothing could be more appropriate for Gilman's narrator, a character confined to bedrest in an attic room with barred windows.

All of this suggests why the narrator sees the trapped woman creeping around the grounds of the ancestral manor. The creeping woman comes in part from the narrator's neuroaesthetic experience of her wallpaper's abstract lineation; her strange, furtive movements about the grounds represent the abstract line's fugitive mobility both literally and figuratively. Though the narrator claims that she does not like to look out her windows at the multiple iterations of this figure, this is not a denunciation of the power the woman represents. Though the ghostly woman seems free and creeps quickly, the narrator can see that her power is still just as imprisoned by the rectified male world of shaded lanes, tidy grape arbors, and orderly gardens (41). All are visions of unruly, abstract lines brought to heel and, therefore, antithetical to the creeping woman's power. She cannot survive easily in such an environment, as the narrator suggests when she writes that “most women do not creep by daylight” and opines that it “must be very humiliating to be caught” (39). The creeping woman's discovery by, and humiliation in, the wider male world are givens. It is therefore unsurprising that she takes to hiding under the blackberries (39). Beyond the wallpaper, those unruly plants are probably the most abstractly linear things on the property. Diving under them, the creeping woman seeks a renewed connection with the haptic smooth space from which she draws her unrectified power. “But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope,” the narrator gloats: “you don't get *me* out in the road there” (41). The narrator chooses to stay in her power center, where she can lock the door if she wants to creep by daylight. Capitulation to male-medical reordering and pseudo-recovery would be demanded if she ventured out to the garden, where abstract possibilities have been curtailed (40).

This power-amplifying retreat brings us back to the problem of the narrator's inability to use her newfound power much beyond the room where she controls both the social and neuroaesthetic terms of engagement. According to Marks, the narrator's brush with smooth space via the V1/V3 pathways in her brain should refresh and strengthen her enough to mount a feminist resistance to male cultural and medical ideology. What Gilman gives us, however, is what her physician detractors must have seen as a “depiction of

incipient insanity” (86). Faced with immanent departure from the manor, the narrator first helps the creeping woman rip down as much of the wallpaper as she can reach, then “get[s] to work” by locking the door and acting crazy in other ways (41). She throws the door key down into the front path, brings out a rope to tie up the creeping woman in case she tries to get away, and then gnaws a corner off the bedframe. She taunts her husband about the key when he comes to the door and refuses his demand to open it. When John finally unlocks the door, he finds the narrator creeping “smoothly on the floor,” where her “shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so [she] cannot lose her way.” After John faints, she continues to creep over his inert form and the patriarchal, rectilinear authority it represents (42).

It is clear why this would have looked bad, or medically and geometrically disordered, to a representative of such authority. However, it is just as easy to read this as the feminist resistance to masculine ideology anticipated by Marks and as proof that the narrator has regained her vitality through the work of neuroaesthetic enworlding. Locking the door and throwing away the key protects her workspace and recovery zone long enough to prepare a deliberate performance for her husband, one that she hopes will “astonish him” (41). The rope is neither noose nor hobble but a safety line to keep the creeping woman from mounting a useless escape into the rectilinear road. A few paragraphs later, the narrator secures herself with this rope. This serves the same purpose as locking the room, anchoring the narrator and her hard-won situational constancy to the one place they can exercise their fugitive mobility in peace and grow stronger through repetition.

As for the bedframe gnawing and smooth creeping about the room: these performances of “madness” are resistances, too. The mechanics mirror those in Karen Jackson Ford’s analysis of the “moments of brocade” in the work of another constrained woman writer, Emily Dickinson. According to Ford,

Dickinson wrote most naturally in a style she associated with brocade because of its rich, intricate, multilayered pattern and its golden threads; her audience [most notably her disapproving brother and “preceptor” Thomas Wentworth Higginson], however, demanded that she write in a simple and unadorned style, which she associated with sackcloth both for its plainness and for its suggestion of mortification; and, in her response to their attempts to modulate her unique voice to conform to their notions of proper women’s writing, she intensified her style, shifting into the extreme, where the lavish qualities of the brocade are released once again in what she termed the wilderness, an aesthetic that necessarily throws off the more domesticated cloth metaphors. In doing this, Dickinson was neither utterly rejecting her culture’s conceptions of women’s writing nor acquiescing to its demands; she was rendering the language wild so that it could not tame her.³⁵

If we replace brocaded cloth with patterned wallpaper, gold with yellow, and writing with the actions of Gilman's narrator, we are left with an accurate description of events at the end of the story. Instead of pointing us toward madness, the narrator's excess points toward aesthetic (and neuroaesthetic) choice. As in Ford's account of Dickinson, eccentricity for the marginalized woman writer is a rhetorical strategy.³⁶ Upon its completion, both Gilman and her narrator may be said to have "eluded the disabling alternatives, of complete acquiescence to the dominant culture or outright rejection of it, by engaging in literary [or here physical] excesses that permit both engagement with and resistance to that culture."³⁷ Neither Gilman nor her narrator can elude the world of health-eroding rest cures they have been born into, so they engage it in a way that will "astonish" the men who view them performing their roles too well (41). The work is that of embroidering neurasthenia in such a way that it will, ironically, overcome John's weak nerves and allow her to do what she pleases with his captive body. This overzealous performance of compliance with John's image of the narrator's illness, fueled by her new, neuroaesthetically derived symbol of confinement (the trapped woman), is a protest.

As the narrator says, "I've got out at last . . . in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (42). These are not the words of a madwoman but those of a woman who knows exactly what is at stake: her potential (indeed probable) re-confinement. Despite the power John still wields over her socially and medically, however, he will never be able to put her back in the paper just as she was. This is not simply because the pattern was a prison and the narrator has destroyed it, but because she now embodies that pattern in the manner of a mirror-touch synesthete, through the mechanisms of her visual brain. In a sense, she wears the wallpaper that she has ripped down like a garment or second skin, and this increases the vitality everyone thought they wanted from her at the start. Marks, writing about a similarly difficult, non-symmetrical vine pattern on a wax cloth from Côte d'Ivoire, asks readers to imagine an Ivoirian woman wearing clothing made from such fabric. According to Marks, "The independent life printed," we might say embroidered, "on her clothing will amplify her own vitality and lend it the mysterious depth of a life that originates elsewhere," beyond male-dominated rectilinear space and its cultural institutions.³⁸ As with the abstract line of the wallpaper pattern, that vitality originates from within and cannot be taken away. As with the narrator's attempt to strip the wallpaper, there will always be something left over.

This should matter to us not just because it works our understanding of Gilman's story into something more positive, but because, in a way, the

male doctors Gilman cites in “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper?’” are right about the power of her text. Following the discovery of mirror neurons by researchers such as Vittorio Gallese, modern neuroscience is more convinced than ever that seeing a thing done is tantamount to doing it yourself. For both humans and primates, watching someone steal the nuts out of a snack dish lights up the same brain cells that would light up if we had stolen the nuts ourselves.³⁹ This would seem to strengthen the claim that “The Yellow Wallpaper” is enough to drive its readers mad because, as with mirror neurons and mirror-touch synesthesia, what you see is to some degree what you become. However, this only works if what we are seeing is, in fact, madness that the narrator has no control over. I have argued that what the narrator gets out of the wallpaper, and therefore what we get out of it, is not madness but an intensified social knowledge permitting us to resist what cannot be escaped. Neuroaesthetics allows us to argue that even if some of the male doctors Gilman quotes are more correct than we knew about “embodied simulation” as an aspect of corporeal intersubjectivity, they are also more wrong than we knew about the content of Gilman’s story, which tends as much toward intentionality and self-control as cognitive determinism.⁴⁰

To be sure, cognitive determinism is a danger in the neuroaesthetic criticism of art. Take Alva Noë’s criticisms of “so-called neuroaesthetics.”⁴¹ After summarizing Zeki on the intersection of art and neuroscience, Noë writes that “it would be simpler, and more accurate, to allow that it is *people* who think and feel and decide, not their brains.” Noë proposes John Dewey’s idea of perceptual “transaction,” or dynamic exchange with one’s surroundings, as an alternative to the “trigger-experience” theory he finds in Zeki, where “things just cause the lighting up of experience inside our heads” as though we were directionless machines.⁴² The narrator of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” however, is not a directionless machine. When she allows herself to become enworlded, her choice is intentional, if highly constrained by the circumstances of her rest cure. As for transaction, the creeping woman who manifests in the wallpaper is clearly distilled from the world around Gilman’s narrator. Many small, idiosyncratic examples of female confinement aggregate into one overarching constancy. The narrator then takes the knowledge she has refined through neurological exercise and engages John and Jennie.

Noë is not wrong about Zeki’s emphasis. Zeki, a neurobiologist, understandably privileges brain mechanics when he writes that vision is “an active process that depends as much upon the operations of the brain as upon the external physical environment.” However, this need not be read as a complete negation of the external world or its cultural pressures. The

situation in a situational constancy may be strongly cultural, as with the Descent from the Cross narrative Zeki uses to exemplify this procedure in “Art and the Brain.”⁴³ Noë’s characterization of the brain-as-artist may therefore be slightly misleading. While Zeki does claim elsewhere that “There is, in fact, no logic to color except the logic of the brain,” he follows this by maintaining that the artist can still “juxtapose colors as he wants” and “develop a concept of what colors to invest objects in” that may differ from the conceptions of others. It is simply that the artist “is not at liberty to interfere with the impeccable logic of the brain in constructing colors.”⁴⁴ Broader human agency and human interaction with the environment still exist despite the brain’s unconscious processes, as when Gilman’s narrator embroiders her neurasthenia at the end of the story.

Noë’s objection, then, is only to Zekian neuroaesthetics in its narrowest form. In the case of the narrator’s bizarre behavior, the type of neuroaesthetic analysis we have been pursuing puts us exactly where Noë claims we should be with art. “A work of art is a strange tool,” he writes, “an implement or instrument that has been denuded of its function,” just as the wallpaper has been stripped of its function as light decoration by its disturbing pattern and the narrator of work by the terms of her rest cure. Art, Noë continues, subverts organizing principles and is “bad design on purpose. It calls attention to itself. It begins precisely with this ungroundedness . . . [encouraging us] to take a stand, a stand, critically, on our relation to the background, on our relation to that which we normally take for granted.” The yellow wallpaper is just such a work of art. The narrator attends to it, takes on its properties by choice, and then steps out of the background to which patriarchal culture and medicine relegated her. The yellow wallpaper is a strange tool, and so is the narrator by the end, when she’s strong enough to be up to that task. Like the works of art Noë prizes, the pair “put our making practices and our tendency to rely on what we make, and so also our practices of thinking and talking and making pictures, on display. . . . Art unveils us to ourselves,” he concludes.⁴⁵ Neuroaesthetics does the same, so long as we remember that we must always reconnect it with the social and cultural landscape surrounding the brain when we are through. As Gilman writes, the point of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is not to drive people crazy but to save them from being driven crazy (86). That work implies neurological healing, but it is not the kind of healing that happens only in the brain or comes only from horrific cautionary tales. It is healing that happens in the world as well: the world where Gilman and her doctor-detractors lived, where we all still have some say the brain’s transactions.

Notes

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" and the History of Its Publication and Reception, ed. Julia Bates Dock (University Park: Penn State Univ. Press, 1998), p. 86. Subsequent citations indicated parenthetically. Gilman repeats this S. Weir Mitchell anecdote in a 17 October 1919 letter to W. D. Howells. See *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Denise D. Knight and Jennifer S. Tuttle (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2009), pp. 259–60. She also repeats the conversion narrative in her autobiography. See *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935; rpt. New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), pp. 119–21.
2. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), p. 90.
3. Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading; or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," *New Literary History*, 11 (1980), 456.
4. Paula A. Treichler, "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3, i–ii (1984), 67.
5. Elaine Hedges, "Afterword" in *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on the Yellow Wallpaper*, ed. Catherine Golden (New York: Feminist Press), pp. 49, 53.
6. Jean Kennard, "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life," in *The Captive Imagination*, p. 176.
7. Jane F. Thraillkill, "Doctoring 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *ELH*, 69 (2002), 529, 541.
8. E.g., Monika Elbert, "The Sins of the Mothers and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Covert Alliance with Catherine Beecher," in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Contemporaries*, ed. Cynthia J. Davis and Denise D. Knight (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2004). Elbert writes that "'Bad' mothering in Gilman could be understood as giving in to depression or lassitude, even when it is imposed upon them through rest cures, as in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (113). The source of the mental illness changes, but not the assumption that the narrator gives in to it and grows worse.
9. Zeki, "Art and the Brain," *Daedalus*, 127, ii (1998), 71–78.
10. Zeki, p. 74.
11. Gilbert and Gubar, p. 89.
12. Zeki, pp. 74–75.
13. Zeki, pp. 90–91.
14. Zeki, p. 74.
15. The actual order of neuro-biological observation, which we now know would place color perception before linear perception, is unimportant here. The difference in arrival time for color data vs. linear data is measured in milliseconds, and Gilman wrote more than a hundred years before researchers like Zeki noticed the difference. It is therefore difficult to criticize the prioritization of linear data in this paragraph, especially when the linear that later produces the image of the trapped woman. I have retained Gilman's ordering for the sake of clarity.
16. Zeki, p. 74.
17. Susan S. Lanser, "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies* 15 (1989), 425–32.
18. Roth, "Gilman's Arabesque Wallpaper," *Mosaic*, 34, iv (2001), 148–51.
19. Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Goethe's Color Theory*, trans. and ed. by Herb Aach (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971), 765–70. I cite paragraph numbers as opposed to page numbers, here and below, for ease of reference to Charles Eastlake's 1820 translation.
20. This concern, *vis-à-vis* mothers, occupies Gilman in both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and her later story "Making a Change" from the December 1911 issue of *The Forerunner*. See *The Yellow Wallpaper*, ed. Thomas L. Erskine and Connie L. Richards (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 57–65.

21. See Goethe, paragraphs 671–72, for examples.

22. Zeki, p. 74.

23. Zeki might consider this an example of the narrator forming a neurological constancy by “discounting the illuminant,” a term borrowed from German physician and physicist Herman von Helmholtz. See Zeki, pp. 76, 97.

24. The gender sometimes ascribed to yellow in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century aids this escape from the strangling male pattern. According to art historian John Gage in *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), pp. 36, 187, German painter Philipp Otto Runge claimed around 1908 that “the warm poles of yellow and orange represented the ‘masculine passion’ and the cool poles of blue and violet the feminine.” Goethe takes up a similarly polarized color scheme, wherein blue is also arguably feminine. “[A]s we readily follow an agreeable object that flies from us,” Goethe writes, “so we love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it” (781). Yellow, by contrast, is more forward for Goethe and therefore stereotypically male (696). This accords with Gilbert and Gubar’s idea that the yellow wallpaper stands for the façade of the male text (90).

Arguments about the affective benefit of pure yellow aside, however, how can yellow be healthy in this story if yellow is male? Zeki alludes to a possible answer in *Inner Vision: An Exploration of the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), p. 3, when he notes the now widely accepted idea that “cells in the visual system that are excited by . . . yellow are inhibited by blue and . . . vice versa.” Exploration of this neural mechanic, called “color opponency,” goes back at least to Goethe, who set yellow and blue, the colors he felt were closest to light and dark, in just such opposition (502). Thus when the narrator sees yellow in the wallpaper, she sees it both because there is degraded yellow there (conveying the humiliation of the rest cure and Lanser’s racial subtext) and because her blue receptors have been suppressed. If yellow in Goethe is warm, masculine, and moves toward its viewer, we might say that what is being suppressed is the narrator’s cool, feminine, draws-you-after-it blue. While the power of the wallpaper to draw attention and subvert masculinity grows over time, amplified by Ruskin’s hated arabesque, it is as easily barred at the start as the sky outside the nursery. This is because (as Zeki says in *Inner Vision* of the reason we do not paint UV light) we cannot work with what we cannot perceive (3). Eventually, though, the blue moonlight that “creeps” through the narrator’s bedroom each night suppresses male yellow enough for Gilman’s creeping woman to emerge in yet another way (Gilman 35–36). The effects of color opponency were well-known to Goethe, who notes them in many experiments with candlelight and moonlight in *Zur Farbenlehre*.

The narrator’s struggle to perceive this impossible woman suggests contemporary attempts to view the “impossible color” yellowish blue, which does not exist in normal color space (as distinct from green) because blue/yellow color opponency makes it virtually impossible to recognize both colors at the same time. Given the right neural exercise, however, some researchers believe it is possible to do so. Hewitt Crane and Thomas Piantanida, “On Seeing Reddish Green and Yellowish Blue,” *Science*, 221 (1983), 1078–80, claims that staring at the boundary between the two colors (and adjusting for retinal movement) allows the brain to bypass yellow/blue opponency and fairly, if tenuously, perceive what might otherwise be considered hallucinatory. If we find the wallpaper to be an analogous liminal space touching both neurological and cultural aspects of women’s mental health, then the wallpaper may be yellow because it is part of a neurologically-founded yet culturally-gendered color dialectic that Gilman seeks to bypass in the same way she seeks to bypass false notions of the “female” brain in Mitchell’s rest cure.

25. Laura U. Marks, “I Feel Like an Abstract Line,” in *Mirror-touch Synaesthesia: Thresholds of Empathy with Art*, ed. Daria Martin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), pp. 151–52.

26. Gilbert and Gubar, p. 90.
27. Marks, p. 154; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987; rpt. London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 543–44.
28. Marks, pp. 154, 151, 156, 163.
29. Daniel W. Smith, “Critical, Clinical,” in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, ed. Charles J. Stivale (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 2005), p. 189.
30. Deleuze and Guattari, p. 550.
31. Marks, pp. 156, 163.
32. Gilbert and Gubar, p. 90.
33. Deleuze and Guattari, p. 549.
34. Deleuze and Guattari, p. 551.
35. Ford, *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp. 25–26.
36. Ford notes this rhetorical strategy in a 29 June 1851 letter from Emily Dickinson to her brother Austin, who had criticized her writing as unladylike (27). Dickinson writes with mock deference that she will be “As *simple* as you please, the *simplest* sort of simple—I’ll be a little ninny—a little pussy catty, a little Red Riding Hood, I’ll wear a Bee in my Bonnet, and a Rose bud in my hair, and what remains to do you shall be told hereafter.” The repetition of “small,” “simple,” and “little” embroiders Dickinson’s compliance so obsessively that the passage connotes resistance. For the full letter, see *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge: Belknap, 1958), I, 117–19. For Ford on “The Yellow Wallpaper,” see her response to Treichler in “‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and Women’s Discourse,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 4 (1985), 309–14.
37. Ford, p. 15.
38. Marks, pp. 154–55.
39. Gallese, “Visions of the Body: Embodied Simulation and Aesthetic Experience,” *Aisthesis*, 1, i (2017), 41–50.
40. Gallese, p. 44.
41. Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), p. 244.
42. Noë, pp. 95, 97.
43. Zeki, “Art and the Brain,” pp. 76, 74.
44. Zeki, *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain: Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 31.
45. Noë, pp. 98, 101.