

Rebecca Ariel Porte (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)

Uncertainties, Mysteries, Doubts: Modernist Aesthetics, Negative Capability, & the Problem of Logical Truth

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” Keats’s famous tautology has preoccupied readers and writers of poetry since its introduction to the discourse. This paper examines the ways in which modernism attempts to revise, expand, and—often—to break down the beauty-truth equivalence. I argue that the dawn of the twentieth century marks a significant change in the discourse of ideas surrounding the word “truth.” The formalized pursuit of truth, in the form of a practice called logic, comes (in the American and British traditions) to refer to the tools of the nascent analytic philosophy advanced by figures like Peirce, Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein: systems of formal language resembling mathematics, a symbolic, deductive, normative, foundational, prescriptive representation of reasoning processes. My paper argues that experimental readers and writers in the twentieth century Transatlantic context respond to the rise of modernist science and philosophical logics by positioning their own aesthetic concerns in relation to these epistemes. I suggest that one catalyst of the formal innovation in modernist poetry was the formal innovation in symbolic logic. In negotiating the relationship of logic to art, modernists make radical decisions about the place of the pursuit of truth in poetry—whether, indeed, poetry is a fit approach to truth. William Empson, I.A. Richards, and William Carlos Williams attempt to distance poetry from notions of logical truth. Meanwhile, Gertrude Stein’s poetics attempt to compete with it. These various forms of poetic logic pose vital aesthetic questions: should art be true *and* beautiful, true *or* beautiful, or something else entirely? The way that modernist poets answer these questions often returns them to another famous Keatsian doctrine: negative capability, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”