Sisthe.

In the year and a half since graduating, I've had to explain to many lovely inquirers what my undergraduate thesis was about. I've never quite satisfied myself or the person asking with the explanations I produce and usually end up waving away the whole project as somehow at once convoluted and trivial. In some sense it's true, but not by accident: the appeal of the idea was that the claim is self-evident (to the point arousing confusion) but applies to the most convoluted objects we can set out to analyze: the nervous system, language, fiction, or poetry. It is really an idea about *convolution* as such, about the way the structure of complex objects is apprehended in the register of quality.

This kind of turn in analysis, where a word (here, *convolution*) that appeared first in-context is pulled into focus as a new proper topic, is a type of wordplay I failed to resist when writing the thesis. Though great fun and high Comp[-Lit], this has the unfortunate effect of focusing the argument on text and its properties, when it is meant much more generally. I am writing this to right that wrong and hopefully create a fair and succinct explication to which I can from any future point. I will first discuss the claim, then briefly mention how it works in relation to the topic of each of the three chapters: first, histology, the study of biological tissues, second, George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, and third, Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry.

The Claim.
Here is the claim. *Texture works as an index of affective capacities.* If you prefer: *the texture (of a thing) works as an index of the affective capacities (of that thing).*

By *texture* I mean the compositional relations that structure objects. Thinking physically, consider a collard green. What is the difference between the fibrous stalk and the thin, tender leaf? There are two ways that difference registers: on the one hand, there are quantitative data (the hardness of materials, the number of fibers in the bundle, the tensile strength of those fibers), and on the other, there are qualitative data (the stringiness of the stem when you chew it, the way it feels to roll it or try and break it; the velvety feeling of the leaf; etc.). We use texture to talk about both physical structure and our *experience* of that structure.

By the *affective capacities* (of an object) I mean all the ways that the object could act or be acted upon. When earlier I imagined manipulating the stem or feeling the leaf, those are some affective capacities of that object.

Why are these distinct from texture, if texture can include them and even *works as an index* of them? The affective capacities of a thing are fixed to texture – that is, by the compositional relations that structure that object – but while texture includes, or *seems* to include, the possibility of qualitative answers like "what is it like," the affective capacities are determinate and finite answers to the question "what can it do and what can I do with it?"

The point of my argumentation was to show that the relation between these two realms is in fact complete, allowing us to impose the finite, determinate qualities of affective capacities onto texture – and therefore onto qualitative experience. This is all (I think) self-evident: when we consider what a collard stem is like, we are considering part of a limited real thing: what it is like, or, the set of its affective capacities.

What about when we consider other things, like a novel or a poem? Or a person? For every one of these we are accustomed to providing answers to the "what is it like" question. Less commonly do we consider how it is structured or composed, and when we do, it is usually as a sort of supplement or very partial explanation. So the collapse of qualitative and quantitative dimensions asks more of us in domains ruled by judgements of taste: it requires that on the other side of our apprehensions of works of literature, beautiful and terrible works of art, or beautiful and terrible people, there are in fact determinate objects, against whose affective capacities we are forming a textural impression.

Histology.

The first chapter in the thesis is about histology, the study of biological tissues. It goes through the history of that study and gets lost over and over again in the metaphorical interchange between texture, tissue, and text. The creation of anatomical knowledge about the body was a long process of information transfer across these realms: books were slowly put together while bodies were slowly taken apart.

The process conspicuously fortified a wall between the body constructed in those texts and the minds undertaking the analytic dissection and construction of that anatomical knowledge. The whole process revolves around texture as an interface between body and mind, corpse/corpus and natural philosopher. So far as anatomy divides and organizes the body as a system of discrete systems, organs, and mechanisms, the distinction of mind and body is only reinforced, since the unity and continuity of mental experience distinguishes it from the dissected, discontinuous body. The discovery of cells seems at first the crown jewel in this distinction, but a peculiar problem arises when cell theory makes it to the brain, its final frontier.

By the turn of the twentieth century, there was no more any doubt that the body-qua-body was made up of distinct cells, each living out a local life, responding to local stimuli. It was a harder pill to swallow about the seat of consciousness. The debate was explicitly textural: one side argued the cells in the brain were physically fused together, forming a network or *reticulum* across which information could travel in any direction. The other, eventually victorious, argued that the cells (which they called "neurons") were independent and that information moved in only one direction. I argue we can read in the conviction of the reticularists a textural logic: because consciousness is (for them) continuous and unified, it must be the textural apprehension of a continuous and unified system.

What can we make of the fact they were wrong? There are two options. Option one: all experience is really more discontinuous and fragmented than we thought and the mind is really more like the body: made of many interacting and semi-independent elements, carrying out many obscure processes at once. (You might note here that a pre-psychoanalysis Freud was at work on the histology of the brain at the onset of this debate, trying to figure out how nerve cells combine and communicate to form nerve fibers.) Option two: we take our experience of continuity as primary, and decide to consider embodied experience as the unified experience of a composite object.

The chapter is a story of the journey to the idea that a person's qualities are fixed to a determinate thing (under extension, their body) by the same textural logic as the collard stem or a poem. Ramon y Cajal, the architect of the neuron doctrine, gives a story about the evolution of the brain as a complication of the space between input and output, stimulus and motor response.

Middlemarch.
George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* is subtitled *A study of provincial life.* It is modelled in a fashion after a kind of biological observation, as though watching the action in a tide pool. (Something Eliot, like Aristotle, spent some time doing.) A principal character, Lydgate, is a histologist on the hunt for the "primitive tissue." (Eliot's joke, since she sets the novel just before the establishment of cell theory, is that he is on the wrong track.) Eliot herself, alongside her ~husband G.H. Lewes, kept abreast of biological advances and, as I argue in the chapter (following others), her character descriptions take advantage of a material, textural register derived from this material.

Take this characterization, for example: "the circumstance called Rosamond was particularly forcible by means of that mild persistence which, as we know, enables a white soft living substance to make its way in spite of opposing rock." Now compare this passage from Raspail, a famous French Histologist, which Eliot copied out in her preparatory notes for the novel: "Il reste une substance blanche comme l'albumine coagulée, mais bien moins élastique, que les alcalis ou les acides concentrés désorganisent ou dépouillent, mais ne dissolvent jamais entièrement."

Lydgate himself is in the middle of morphogenesis. "For character, too, is a process and an unfolding. The man was still in the making … and there were both virtues and faults capable of shrinking or expanding. Among our valued friends is there not some one or other […] whose distinguished mind is not a little spotted with commonness who is a little too pinched here and protuberant there."

Eliot's novel also provides a pivot from explicitly body-mind texture concerns to those concerning the nature of text itself. This is one maneuver the thesis doesn't quite pull off. The idea was to consider the portrayal of Casaubon as a person turning himself into text, stone, etc.

(and so losing his human dynamism). "Somebody put a drop [of his blood] under a magnifying-glass and it was all
semicolons and parentheses." Yet he is also a real person, and Dorothea's recognition of this during their brutal honeymoon in Rome brings home the stunning relativism of apprehension via affective capacities. The whole novel is shot through with these problems of relativism – of how investigation of an object is limited to what the investigator can do to the object and so confuses information about subject and object at the textural interface.

"Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun."

Rilke.
The final chapter turns to the poet Rilke. Rilke's own interest in texture (in the common sense of surface detail) is marked in his essay on Rodin's method of sculpture and in an essay on his obsession (that he developed during his time with Rodin) with the idea of "playing" the cranial suture with a phonographic needle to hear the "primal sound" it produced. Most of the chapter is dedicated to long and probably not so convincing close readings of some of Rilke's poetry with the goal of showing how internal structure in the form of recurring sounds, ideas, or associations gives different sorts of textural qualities to different passages. The proportion of the resulting textual quality which is derived from the author vs. from the object is a basic question about the efficacy of description or expression.

This chapter, I think, largely failed to make any clear argument at all. *Although …* formally, as it performs a failure to convey information about its object of description, it acts out the mechanism of mediation with which (it wanted to argue) Rilke was so obsessed. The reader might in turn suspect the writer is really writing about his own obvious limitations in apprehending and transcribing objects. Lucky guess.

Conclusion.
This is what my thesis was about, more or less. Or less. Strictly less. But that's for the best. I did not include here any of the theoretical or philosophical references. I also excluded an obsession I developed while writing to relate everything to the insufficiency of the priority relations necessary for explanation (x grounds y) to capture the actual all-at-once operation of the real. Equally, an obsession with dynamical systems and the geometries that correspond to their evolutions.

As a piece of argumentation, it did not work. I like to think I know some of why and could do better if for some reason I ever had to write another piece in that style. As a collection of evidence and ideas, I still find it compelling and unsatisfying, each because of the other. Remember to enjoy being alive at least so long as you are.