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Reginald Shepherd

Orpheus in the Bronx

ESSAYS ON IDENTITY,
POLITICS, AND THE
FREEDOM OF POETRY

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For Robert Philen

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“On Alvin Feinman’s ‘True Night’” has appeared in Joy Katz and Kevin Prufer, editors, *Dark Horses: Poets on Overlooked Poems*, published by the University of Illinois Press. It also incorporates elements of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Alvin Feinman,” which appeared in *Passing the Word: Writers on Their Mentors*, edited by Lee Martin and Jeffrey Skinner and published by Sarabande Books.

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By Way of Introduction

The essays gathered here range in topic from the autobiographical to the exegetical to the theoretical, in style from the narrative to the lyrical to the analytical. What unifies them is a resolute defense of poetry's autonomy, and a celebration of the liberatory and utopian possibilities such autonomy offers. As the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard writes, "Artistic and literary research is doubly threatened, once by the 'cultural policy' and once by the art and book market." For some time it's been the fashion to see literature as a social symptom or at best an epiphenomenon, to think that social conditions and social identity completely determine the nature and value of a piece of writing. But art's utopian potential lies in the degree to which it exceeds social determinations and definitions, bringing together the strange and the familiar, combining otherness and brotherhood. I have been oppressed by many things in my life, but not by literature, which enacts possibility rather than closure.

As a writer raised in poverty who is among other things black and gay, as a writer who has always wanted to write more than simple or even complex affirmations of a fixed and known, even if "oppositional," identity, and as someone who has looked to art and literature as a means for the expansion rather than the constriction of horizons, I have often felt burdened by the expectations placed on my work because of my social identities, especially given that part of my attraction to poetry has always been its challenge to those terms of social definition and obligation. It's obviously not that poetry has no dealings with the social realm, but rather that at its best poetry is an equal partner in that relationship, and even answers back to the social with the reproach of what Adorno (after Stendhal) called its promise of the happiness (real enough even if constantly deferred) that

the social world denies us. History, politics, economics, authorial biography, all contribute to the matter of poetry and even condition its modes of being, but they don't determine its shape, its meaning, or its value. Similarly, it's not that a poet's social position and background don't matter and shouldn't be discussed—they obviously condition (but do not wholly determine) who he or she is and what she or he writes—but that they don't define the work or its aesthetic value. They should not be used to put the writer into a box or to expect him or her write in a certain way or on certain topics, to obligate him or her to “represent” or speak for his or her social identity (as if anyone had only one, or even two or three).

Given that I am and am primarily known as a poet, most of the times when I have been asked, invited, inveigled, or commanded to write prose, I have been asked to write prose about poetry, and most of the times that I have given myself such an assignment, the questions I have hoped to answer or at least clarify have been about poetry. But poetry leads to and opens itself up to many other things, events, activities, not least among them self and society and, ubiquitously, inevitably, inescapably, language and what sort of thing language is, if it is a “thing” at all. So these essays both circle around the same topics and figures and cast off from them in search of, if not the new, the distinctive or unique.

Since most of my prose writing has been at others' behest (and I am grateful for such requests: without them, most of this book would have remained unwritten), and on what might be called assigned topics, the poets discussed in depth or in passing by no means constitute a representative sampling of the poets who have been most important to me in my own development as a writer. Among such writers not discussed in these pages are Louise Bogan, Paul Celan, Louise Glück, H.D., Osip Mandelstam, W. S. Merwin, Jean Valentine, and James Wright. I hope at some point in the future to have the opportunity and the incentive to write about some of them.

These essays aspire to be literary in style as well as topic, combining belletristic sparkle (I have always loved shiny things) with intellectual rigor, often theoretically informed. While I deplore the misuse and overuse of “theory,” I have found some of it very

helpful to my work. A writer must not only write but think if he or she is to produce work of interest to the intelligent and informed mind and not simply repeat him- or herself within an ever-narrowing compass. And many of the impasses in which one finds oneself as a writer must be not only written through but thought through if one is to come out on any productive other side. The mutually reinforced and reinforcing barriers between literature and criticism, between creation and reflection, so prevalent today, and so alien to the modernist writers who are my primary forebears, have always seemed to me unnecessarily limiting to both endeavors. These days there seems to be a renewed interest in the relationships among poetry, language, and thought, and a greater realization of the possibility that one may indeed by taking thought add a cubit to one's stature. I would like this book to play a role in the renewal of relations between poems and ideas and the rearticulation of relations between poems and the world they are both part of and apart from.

Portrait of the Artist

To Make Me Who I Am

I

I have no records of my earlier life (my previous life, I almost wrote): no baby pictures or childhood memorabilia, no proof of who I was or even that I was at all. I can't even find my original birth certificate. I assume that I must have been because I am now, but all I have is memory, notoriously unreliable and famously changeable.

I have no pictures of myself before 1993 (the year of my first author photo), no photos of my late mother or my younger sister Regina, no way to corroborate, contradict, or simply contextualize the collection of mental fragments that constitutes my childhood. I threw away all my high school and college journals—it was too depressing to be reminded in such detail of past miseries. I also threw out most of my early poems, because I felt them to be mere personal documents, insufficiently achieved as aesthetic objects. (My collected poems will contain no section labeled “Juvenilia.”) I miss some of those poems now, their youthful recklessness and rawness, their breaking of rules of which I wasn't even aware, but I don't miss the states of mind that produced them. Between my own disinclination to collect souvenirs of past unhappiness and my highly peripatetic life, I have little documentation of my past selves. For a long time I even had a philosophical objection to such tokens, a determination not to turn my past into a collection of mementos. One's story about oneself can so easily become a burden, though of course that story needs no props.

Now I regret the decisions that stripped me of what little material connection to my past I ever had, but what's done can't be undone, though it can be rewritten. I have only these shards of memory, and memory can't be trusted. I could have been

born yesterday, all these things, peoples, and places I think that I remember just planted in my head for some experiment: I've seen such things on TV and in the movies. Sometimes I wish I could retrieve some concrete piece of the past, but when I do I'm usually reminded of why I was so eager to shed them: memory almost always equals misery. Most historical facts are unpleasant, including one's own.

Many (white) (male) (straight) writers these days (fiction writers mostly, but a few poets too) pride themselves on coming from the so-called working class—look how far they've come, look how special they are. I come from less than that, from what used to be called the lumpen proletariat—the people who only intermittently have jobs, who live in fourth-floor walk-up two-room tenement apartments and get by on food stamps and Aid to Families with Dependent Children and sometimes cans of Campbell's cream of celery soup from the church food box (how one got cream from celery was always a mystery to me), single mothers who date numbers runners because they sometimes give them betting tips, and then marry men they barely know (who they later find out already have wives and children back in Jamaica), because they think that being married will give them better lives, give their sons proper male role models. It seems those women always have sons, just one each, and I guess that I was lucky not to be an only son who gets shot one morning on the way to the laundromat just before he was supposed to go off to college on a scholarship. I spent much of my childhood convinced that I would be murdered before my eighteenth birthday (as the news always reminded me, murder was and is the leading cause of death for young black men in America) or, if I managed to reach that milestone, that I'd immediately be drafted to die in the Vietnam War, which had been going on all my life. (I've never believed that one could worry too early or too much.) Instead, I like to say I'm proof that welfare works, or did when it still existed.

II

I was born in Manhattan Woman's Hospital at 3:03 p.m. on April 10, 1963 (or so the birth certificate I finally found says), and grew

up in the Bronx in various housing projects and tenements and housing projects (in that order). My mother had moved to New York from Georgia in search of something I don't think even she could name, though clearly she never found it. Supposedly she trained as a nurse for a while, but I never saw any evidence of that. She had wanted to better herself and had just ended up a poverty statistic, part of the Moynihan Report on the breakup of the black family. Not that we'd ever had a family to break up; it was always just the two of us, broke and breaking down. My mother was disappointed in her life and felt both guilty about having brought me into that situation and determined that I would fulfill all her thwarted, inchoate ambitions. I would be smart, I would get scholarships to private schools and get a real education, I would get out of the ghetto and do something good with my life. As she often explained to me, my mother had a plan: she would have two children named Reginald and Regina, and they would both be smart. Though my mother was no good at planning anything, and even worse at carrying out plans, that one she fulfilled to the letter, even if it did take her eleven years.

I remember when I taught myself to read and write—I was no older than four or five, though I have no evidence even of the approximate date. (Sometimes I think that I write to give myself the record of a past, the proof of having lived, that my daily existence has lacked.) I was so excited that I wrote my name over and over again on the living room mirror with a tube of my mother's lipstick. I don't remember if she got angry, or if she did, whether it was over the wasted lipstick or my unthinking vandalism.

My mother often told me that when I was small she never had to worry about leaving me by myself. She had only to give me a book and I'd stay just where she left me. Sometimes she would call me again and again and I wouldn't hear, too absorbed in the words' worlds. I don't have that kind of concentration anymore, though the desire to shut out the world persists.

My mother had only a high school diploma, from the segregated black girls' high school in Macon, Georgia, and came from a dirt-poor family who were hardly intellectual enough to be anti-intellectual. In apparent reaction to her background, she bought me books before I was born, among them a World

Book Encyclopedia set, and large and lavishly illustrated books like *The Horizon Book of the Renaissance* and Time-Life's *Wonders of Life on Earth*, one of my fondest childhood treasures. I never knew my mother to read anything weightier than a magazine or a *TV Guide*, except to me when I was very little. (I think that one of the reasons I learned to read so early was that I hated being read to, impatient at having the story unfold at someone else's pace and in someone else's voice, at having someone else intrude into my imaginative escape.) But our apartment was full of books, from Gothic romances in cheap book club editions to a hardcover set of *The Kinsey Report*, and every week or so we got another encyclopedia volume from the local supermarket along with our TV dinners and cans of condensed soup. Her books, like the photo albums full of pictures of her younger, slimmer self, posed at a window dressed all in black with a cigarette held at a glamorous angle, were souvenirs of a life she had once had or aspired to have, a life on which she had given up. Reading was one of the things my mother had lost in her fall from whatever grace she'd had, one of the things I was to rescue for her. Books were her past and my future.

Though I was a bright and inquisitive child with an instinctive revulsion from the ghetto and the people surrounding us there, it was my mother's determination and vicarious ambition that put me on the path out of the Bronx. She ensured that I was securely enmeshed in a web of standardized tests, tests that proved I was a gifted child, entitled to special treatment. Special in this case meaning better. I've always loved standardized tests, IQ tests and aptitude tests and admissions tests: they're one area of life in which I've always excelled. If the world were run by standardized tests, I'd be a king.

My mother reminded me frequently, on the bus or on the subway or just walking down the street, "You're smarter than 99 percent of the people on this planet, and don't you ever forget it." She wanted me to remember that I was better than my circumstances, and that I was not only able but obligated to get out of them. In neither psychological nor practical terms could I take myself or my life for granted. I had to be special just in order to have the possibility of what's usually considered a normal, ordinary life. (In the ghetto, an ordinary life for a young

black man consisted of grinding poverty and a statistically probable early death.) Had I been born middle class, I could have afforded to be ordinary and still have had a decent life; but only by being extraordinary could I escape the ghetto.

My mother got me a full scholarship for the third grade to a private school that was seeking to increase its meager “ethnic and economic diversity,” so that I could get out of PS 6, where in the second grade kids sat on my stomach during recess and banged my head into the playground pavement. The Riverdale Country Day School kicked me out after three years because I was “emotionally immature”—the rich white children I got better grades than constantly picked on me, and I always responded, but no matter how sorely provoked I’d been, often in plain sight of the teacher, only I ever got in trouble. But my mother somehow managed to have the State of New York take responsibility for my education, so that I continued to go to private schools, this time at the state’s expense, though they had to be special schools for special students.

III

I remember walking home from elementary school (I must have still been in public school, because I took a van to private school) repeating the word “water” to myself until it lost all meaning, transformed into pure sound: two syllables became two notes in a song I couldn’t quite sing. But I could hear a snatch of it, and it enthralled me.

For all my early fascination with words and my often noted talent in “language arts,” I had little faith in language’s ability to connect me to other people, except in a book or in the voice of a favorite singer. In a book I could travel to distant times and places, be anyone at all; but there were days when I couldn’t even communicate with my mother, let alone anyone less intimate. Talking with other people usually only got me into trouble, further exposing my already too apparent freakhood, not to mention my mixed conviction that I was both better and worse than everyone else. Even when I found someone whom I thought actually understood me, I would always eventually come up against

a wall between us I couldn't scale. But when I wrote things down, people (teachers mostly) praised them: on the page I was the person I wanted to be and could never approach in my daily life. There I was graceful and worthy of love.

Off the page, I never fit in anywhere and could never figure out how I could or even why I should—fitting in seemed so much like being beaten down, and if I had nothing else I had my pride. Books were my refuge and my friends, along with music and the fantasies I wove out of television's flickering pixels—sometimes all at the same time (I often read while listening to music, and sometimes with the television on as well). Books represented another world than that of the Bronx tenements and housing projects, than that of the public school where I was beaten up and mocked for being an egghead, of the private schools where I was taunted and ostracized because I was poor and black and smarter than the white kids who thought so very much of themselves just because their parents owned the world.

Though we had little money, my mother never denied me anything that I wanted, and what I wanted, besides many too many sugary or salty snacks and bottles of cherry soda, were books and records. Her relatives, and later my abusive Jamaican stepfather, said that my mother spoiled me, but she always replied that sitting at home reading books or listening to records was better than running around on the streets. My stepfather sometimes futilely insisted that I go out to play with the other kids, but I explained that they were a bunch of ragamuffins who would never amount to anything. Even if I'd wanted to play with them, their ideas of fun were bad for my health.

My favorite books were science fiction and fantasy novels (though I was more interested in the worlds than in the plots), and histories of Europe and Asia (American history seemed both too close to home and too mundane)—books that provided experiences of being elsewhere, being somebody else, as far away as possible from my mere life. They allowed me to travel to worlds where being black and poor and rejected by everyone except my mother (who had no friends herself) didn't matter, worlds where I didn't have to be myself.

Besides history and sci-fi, I read books about mythology constantly, mostly Celtic (especially Welsh) and Greek (the Romans

just annexed their gods and changed their names). Among my early favorites were the little Mentor paperback of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, a remaindered hardcover edition of Bulfinch's *Mythology* (though his use of the Greek gods' Roman names annoyed the pedant in me), and D'Aulaire's *Book of Greek Myths* (written and illustrated by a married couple whose name seemed delightfully and appropriately exotic), a coffee table book one of my grade school teachers gave me. (I never got along well with other children, but adults and particularly teachers liked me.) I soon graduated to books like *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, the two Penguin paperback volumes of Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths*, with all its alternative versions of the myths (he left in the homosexuality) and his fascinating and sometimes outrageous speculations, and Graves's *The White Goddess*, though I couldn't help but note its many glaring errors of fact and interpretation.

I also loved novels based on mythology, like Evangeline Walton's vivid retellings of the four branches of the Mabinogion, the Welsh mythological cycle she brought back to compelling pagan life, or Mary Renault's retellings of the Theseus myth. Renault also wrote historical novels about a proudly homosexual Alexander the Great, and her reimagination of his love for men in a book like *The Persian Boy* entranced me. Similarly, the out of print and all but forgotten Thomas Burnett Swann's recreations of the worlds of ancient myth, and the imaginative territories where they blurred into ancient history, a lost world of beauty and sensuality, absorbed me, especially his retelling of the David and Jonathan story, which restored the sexuality of the young men's love affair and placed it in the context of a struggle between an accepting and open pagan tradition that celebrated the body and a punitively judgmental monotheism that abjured the flesh. We know which side won, and though Swann's vision of the lost world of paganism was obviously idealized, he made me regret its defeat. I was always ready to identify with the losers, those who didn't get to write the histories. Those books' idealized, chivalric vision of a man's love for another man inspired and seduced me. When I finally, much later, made contact with a gay world not made out of words, I was to be bitterly disappointed.

Greek mythology, like sci-fi and fantasy, represented an elsewhere and an otherwise to my uninterestingly unhappy life, a realm where ordinary misery was ennobled (as I put it in an early poem, “There is no pain. There is only grief”), where things need not be pleasant but they mattered. As someone wrote of Joseph Cornell’s magic boxes, there “Anxious need finds the serenity of exalted yearning.” In that world suffering and death were made beautiful and important: mundane experience underwent a sea change into something rich and strange. Pain was sublimated, in Hegel’s sense, canceled out and raised up, both transcended and made transcendent. Everything in myth meant something, unlike my own unmanageable, amorphous desperation.

Greek mythology presents gods and demigods and heroes who are projections and embodiments of human fears and desires and primal impulses, and it presents them as pure existence, to whom moral or ethical categories don’t apply, any more than they apply to hurricanes or tornadoes or sunrises or the light of the full moon over saltwater. In Nietzsche’s phrase, they’re beyond good and evil, beneath them too (in the sense of being more primal, more basic). The Greek gods are pure force and pure grace and pure beauty, and to look at them directly, without disguise, is to be burned to ash, as Semele was destroyed by gazing upon Zeus in his full glory.

The world of Greek myth is very plastic and capacious, able to take in all kinds of things, but at the same time it has a great formal elegance, and that became a goal for my poetry: to have that elasticity and amplitude of emotional and intellectual range but at the same time to remain shapely, to contain that force within form. I was and am drawn to myth’s simultaneous presence of glory and catastrophe, the way that overweening grace and overwhelming chaos coexist. Greek mythology played the role for me that it played for the Greeks, as a means to channel, order, and give shape to feelings and forces that would otherwise be completely overwhelming.

Those myths’ world of power and beauty and force corresponded much more to my sense of a world ruled by arbitrary powers answerable to no one than did the ethical prescriptions of Christianity, whose threats were always more believable than its promises, and whose insistence on a world ruled by law and

justice and a moral order bore no resemblance to the world I suffered every day, except in the harshness and rigidity of its proscriptions: I was quite familiar with those aspects of the world's power over me. And the punishments and rewards proposed by Christianity seemed no more fair or fairly allocated (and a good deal less interesting) than those of pagan myth, nor did they have any more basis in any reality I had ever experienced.

For the ancient Greeks, the hero is a hero because he is strong and beautiful, not because he is good. He has virtue in the original sense, in that he contains and embodies force and power. He's infused with a divinity that enlarges him but will not save him, and he refuses to fear his inevitable death. He courts his death like a lover or a brother—they will go down together in a blaze of myrrh and glory, piled kindling and incense. As a child, I was always oppressed and affronted by the fact and threat of death; but for the hero, death is part of his definition, the culmination of his singable deeds.

And of course, comic books. I read them constantly, collected them, borrowed them from friends, paid schoolmates a dollar a piece for old issues of *Captain Marvel* and *The X-Men* (they were potential collectibles). DC comics, Superman, Batman, and the like, never much interested me: they were much too bland and two-dimensional. Though I would have liked to have been as strong and invulnerable as Superman, to read about someone like that was simply boring, especially since the writers never bothered to equip him with much of a personality. But then, what sort of personality could such a being have? (He probably would have been overbearingly arrogant and self-righteous—just like Superman, come to think of it.) I did like Wonder Woman for the Amazon mythology of Paradise Island and for her being an outsider to the everyday patriarchal world (I knew all about Amazons, and the idea of an island hidden from and potentially threatened by the world appealed to me), and I was intrigued by the tension between Batman and Catwoman, sworn enemies and thwarted lovers. What they wanted and what they were obligated to do were at constant odds—that made sense to me. And of course I knew as well as anyone else that Robin was Batman's younger boyfriend, though they remained a remarkably unsexy couple. I longed for a handsome,

wealthy older man to make me his lover and initiate me into his secret world.

But it was the more complex, emotionally nuanced universe of Marvel Comics that really drew me in, with its conflicted, flawed heroes thrown into galaxy-spanning story lines in which they always managed to feel out of place and inadequate while saving the universe. The X-Men were my favorites long before they became a multimedia franchise, when they were just misfits who had banded together in order to help not only one another but the very humans who scorned and persecuted them. They were mutants, a feared, hated, and hunted minority cursed and blessed with special powers that set them apart from ordinary people, that made them better but also made them outcasts, never accepted or understood by society no matter what their efforts on its behalf. I identified with them, or wished I could. My gifts were also my curse, and I wished that my differences (I knew that I was smart and that being smart was better) also came with the power to defend myself against those who rejected me. I longed for a band of outsiders to which I could belong, and sometimes I even wanted the largeness of soul to forgive and even to help those who had wronged me, because that would mean that I'd have risen above my own pain.

After I stopped reading children's books, I never read fiction that wasn't science fiction or fantasy, with the exception of a few young adult novels like *The Outsiders*, with which I was obsessed for all the reasons that its title implies. But I wrote constantly, abortive science fiction and fantasy epics (I had issues with plot, though my maps were lovingly drawn, my historical time-lines and royal genealogies carefully annotated), kept voluminous though intermittent journals chronicling my sufferings and disgruntlements, and elaborate sexual fantasies (often revolving around the Hardy Boys or Starsky and Hutch or Hawkeye and the Mike Farrell character from *MASH*—how I wanted *him* to be my stepfather, kind and gentle and intelligent, and sexy too).

Poetry wasn't a part of my consciousness, though I do recall a couple of lines of a poem I wrote in elementary school: "Thoughts of love run through my head / In this maze I'm being led." Doubtless a deathless masterpiece lost forever. Some lines of Byron a suicidal girl quoted in a made-for-TV movie

struck me: “He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan / Without a grave, unknelled, uncoffined, and unknown.” Yes, I thought, that’s how I’ll die, and no one will remember me or care. (For that matter, I don’t remember whether the girl in the movie survived, though I probably cared at the time.) I didn’t find out until many years later what poem those lines were from (“The Sea,” for the curious). Or poetry was the brooding lyrics of Tim Buckley, Neil Young, and Jefferson Airplane I copied into blue-lined notebooks, cueing up the records over and over to make sure I hadn’t missed a word. To this day, listening to “Coming Back to Me” or “Today” can bring me to the verge of tears. I wrote down all the words to “MacArthur Park” and Cream’s “Tales of Brave Ulysses” (particularly excited that my obsession with mythology could merge with my musical obsessions), Simon and Garfunkle’s “I Am a Rock” and Dan Fogelberg’s “Nether Lands,” Tim Buckley’s “Morning Glory” and Fleetwood Mac’s “Silver Spring,” and all the words I could make out of Patti Smith’s “Easter” and “Because the Night.” Music for people too sensitive for this world, who had only books and music to protect them.

My attachment to the music I loved was as much about what I wanted to feel or thought I should feel as about what I actually felt, about becoming or pretending to be the kind of person who felt those things. Music represented something that was not me, but felt like a truer version of me. The songs did the feeling for me, an externalization of my own emotions. Later, poems, my own and those by others, did that work too. (As Eliot wrote of the poet, “emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him.”) For a long time when I listened to that music and relived the periods of my life with which I associated it, I felt nostalgia for times when I felt an unhappiness that in retrospect seemed more pure, more noble, even, though there was nothing elevated about it at the time. I would listen to sad music to make myself sad, trying to recapture that negative golden age, seeking a sense of connection with periods when I felt more deeply, endured a sadness less adulterated. (By, among other things, practical concerns: to be able to lie in bed hating one’s life, to be miserable and not have to *do* anything about it, is a great luxury.) I went in search of lost

misery: remembrance of sorrows past. Now I hate to be reminded of those times, and wish that I could listen to that music remembering only what it meant to me, but not the pain. I look back on my past as a blighted wasteland, and what survives of value are music, poems, and a few friendships. And now there is my partner, Robert, who saved me from myself. Everything But the Girl sang that both desire and despair are hard to sustain, but I have managed both for too long.

And when I actually am sad, I find myself consoled by sad songs. They confirm that I am not alone in my misery; they make my mundane unhappiness something shapely and beautiful, something the world not only wants to hear but wants to listen to. As Louise Glück has written, “There is always something to be made of pain.” I find that assurance comforting.

Patti Smith was my first image of what “a poet” might be (except perhaps for Neil Young, longing to live on Sugar Mountain, wondering what color is left when black is burned). She turned social ostracism into rebellious outsiderhood, loneliness into proud isolation from the uncomprehending mass. The mass of people I encountered couldn’t comprehend me: perhaps I could be a poet too. “Outside of society, that’s where I want to be”: I wanted to be there too, instead of just being on the bottom of society’s shoe. Listening to Patti Smith eventually led me to read Rimbaud, though he was more important to me as a figure of what a poet could and should be (a *voyant*, a visionary, an other to himself and the world) than as a writer, especially since I didn’t read French. I was more fascinated by the translator Paul Schmidt’s account of having tried to relive Rimbaud’s life, of having deranged all his senses in the hope of inhabiting Rimbaud’s skin, than by the lively but, I was told in college by friends who read French, rather inaccurate translations.

I suspect that for many contemporary poets popular music formed our first ideas of poetry. Some older poets have written about the importance of such figures as Elvis Presley (who, as Public Enemy rapped, didn’t mean shit to me) or The Beatles, whom I enjoyed but whose songs rarely seemed sufficiently “poetic,” though a song like “Hey, You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away” spoke to me very painfully. (I had a notion of the poetic long before I had any acquaintance with actual poems.) It has

primarily been what used to be called New Wave and its various offshoots that has haunted my poems: arty music for artistically minded misfits, or at least for misfits who hoped that their social dysfunction might mean they were artistic, that being artists might validate their inability to fit in. I wanted to write poems as evocative as Echo and the Bunnymen's "Ocean Rain" or Kate Bush's "The Man with the Child in His Eyes," as coolly passionate as Japan's "Ghosts" or David Sylvian's "Forbidden Colours." (Early in my encounter with poetry I understood that restraint was a form of passion, and longed for that power over my own emotions, which too often overpowered me.) I wanted to write poems as bitingly incisive as the Psychedelic Furs' "Into You Like a Train," poems that captured the perfectly poised sadness of This Mortal Coil's "Song to the Siren" or "I Must Have Been Blind." (Both were cover versions. I learned about intertextuality from music as well.) Along with the artists I have already mentioned, The Blue Nile, China Crisis, The Comsat Angels, Culture Club, The Cure, Brian Eno, Everything But the Girl, The Smiths, Talk Talk, were as much my influences as any poets that I read. That most of these groups and songs were more or less my secret, or a secret I shared only with a few friends, made my relationship to their music feel all the more intimate. It always upset me when a singer or group I liked became popular, as if something had been stolen from me.

Music still possesses my mind and my poetry, holds me in its loving and inextricable grip. My poetry is a palimpsest of various voices and discourses, shot through with song titles and song lyrics. They make up a large proportion of the voices in my head, and hearing a song will prompt a line almost as often as reading a poem will.

It sometimes occurs to me that I know almost no one who still has that particular relationship with music, who still has that degree of emotional investment—everyone has moved past that, though to what I don't always know—and I wonder if my continuing obsession means that I am emotionally stunted, that I have never really grown up. Shouldn't a man in his forties have put away such adolescent preoccupations? But then, Nietzsche did say that poetry was a secondary sexual characteristic (so many people write poetry in their teens, and then they grow up

and do other things), so perhaps to be a poet is to be a perpetual adolescent. Hardly an original notion, but what about adolescence is?

Being assigned to read T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in the ninth grade was my first real encounter with Poetry (the capital P was quite definite). The poem took my mundane misery and loneliness and gave them back to me, transformed into words that made my feelings beautiful and important and not mine at all. It took my experience and my emotions and made them something foreign, and that foreignness, that alienation, was liberating: it was what Adorno writes of when he describes art as turning social alienation into aesthetic objectification, thus both preserving it (not to do so would be a lie) and transforming it.

At the same time that I identified with it (and longed to be the ideally suffering imago I saw in it), I didn't understand much of the poem—what was this fog that licked windows and curled around houses, who were those singing mermaids? This potent mix of alienation and identification both frustrated me and made me all the more determined to find the source of its power over me. The poem's mystery and complexity intrigued and excited me. (The issue of "accessibility" in poetry is a hot topic these days, but part of what drew me into "Prufrock" were the ways in which it was *inaccessible* to me.) I immediately began writing very bad Eliot imitations, wanting to make that power my own, to have that effect on others. While I certainly had effects on others in my daily life, they were rarely effects that I chose or could even reliably predict, and they equally rarely rebounded to my benefit. But poetry seemed a way to make a more direct contact with others—it offered a way to matter to them in a manner I could control. So perhaps my interest in poetry began in a will to power, over myself and over others, a power I could grasp in no other way.

Eliot led me to other poets, in part because I realized fairly quickly that I couldn't imitate him without sounding like a parody of him, and I had to find someone who could teach me to write poems that weren't caricatures of themselves. If Eliot's poems convinced me that I wanted to write poetry, Wallace Stevens's poems convinced me that I could do so successfully,

and I've never wanted to do anything at which I might fail. I admired the chilly yet intimate distances of Stevens's poetry, the sound of misery held at arm's length, where it needn't hurt anymore (how I longed for his snow man's mind of winter, to be able to look at the world and feel nothing), its embodiments and enactments of feeling and intellect in image and landscape (intellect, after all, was all that I had—I just hoped that it could take me far enough), and the extravagant yet poised elegance of his diction and rhythms. Stevens had a style that I could aspire to, as opposed to Eliot's inimitable idiosyncrasies

I was also drawn to the psychological landscapes of W. H. Auden's early poetry, the loneliness and desire embodied in its craggy limestone wastes, desolate cityscapes, and cryptic vignettes of mysterious wars in which opposing soldiers steal moments of intimacy during lulls. His work vividly exemplified Eliot's principle of the objective correlative, in which some concrete scene could contain an otherwise unmanageable emotional content. His poems' overtly homosexual undertones (the paradoxical formulation is intentional) seduced me as well. Love was a secret agent operating in the shadows and interstices, always in danger of being exposed and betrayed.

Hart Crane's extravagances of language and vision also enthralled me: he wrote poems that were unabashedly Poetry, utterly unlike everyday speech. His poems' passion thrilled me, all the more so because it was the passion of a man for other men. That Crane sought transcendence in the flesh of other men made sense: other people seemed both to inhabit and to own their bodies, while I always felt a stranger to mine. The oceanic rush of his words transfigured emotions into "The silken skilled transmemberment of song," proposing voyages I longed to embark upon, by means of which I could transcend my feelings without surrendering them, and end up in the arms of some beloved.

Eliot wrote that poetry is not the expression of personality and emotion but the escape from them. He also wrote that only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to wish to escape from these things, a marvelously bitchy comment that also contains a profound truth about the burden of identity, the suffocating weight of selfhood. My *self* was always too much with

me, like the world in Wordsworth's sonnet (not that the world, or some prison-like simulacrum of it, hasn't also always been too much with me, and not that I had yet heard of Wordsworth). That self wasn't something I wanted to affirm, but rather something I wanted to get out from under, to somehow get over, around, anything. My search wasn't for identity but for a way out of identity, out of those shackles of a selfhood I'd never chosen, whose terms I never got to define or even effectively question. Encountering Eliot's poetry opened up the possibility that I could simultaneously inhabit and insulate myself from my suffering, that I could not only survive it but make something of it.

To be situated in and constrained by an identity is the origin of the impulse to nonidentity, the longing to be free of the obligation to *be* somebody, somebody everyone else already knew what to call, whether they were black or white or Puerto Rican, whether they were poor and next door or rich and in another neighborhood altogether. Such freedom was one of the largest possibilities that Eliot's notion of poetic impersonality offered to me. The impulse that turned me toward poetry was emotional and personal, but that impulse also pushed me beyond my personal needs and desires, beyond the poem as personal expression and toward the poem as an independent object in the world, like a statue or a painting.

I have heard some gay poets say that they grew up feeling that they couldn't write about their high school crushes and desires. That was never a problem for me: my desires, like my fears, have always been quite immediate to me, and I had no trouble writing them down. What I struggled with was turning those feelings into *poems*, not merely lineated diary entries. My feelings were with me always, whether I wanted them or not: I needed neither to be reminded of them nor to assure myself of their all too insistent reality.

IV

On March 31, 1978, ten days before my fifteenth birthday, the world ended. That was the evening my mother died. After spending the weekend after her death with my best friend

Nathan (whose mother, my mother's best friend, had died only a month or two earlier), while my mother's relatives debated what was to be done with me (my aunt Gladys in New York had declared that I was "dangerous" and should be sent to a foster home), I moved in with my aunt Mildred (about the only one of my many relatives who could be called a human being in any positive sense) in Macon, Georgia, sleeping on a rollaway bed in the den in a three-room house crammed with eight people.

Poetry was the one thing that kept me sane, or as close to sane as I managed to be. Though my cousins mocked me for reading books and talking white (and once took a razor blade to the few books I had, kept on a shelf in the laundry room because there was nowhere else to put them), I burrowed deeper into books than ever before. Not even having a room of my own, the inside of a book was the only space I could claim as mine—that and the blank page of a notebook or a sheet of paper. I read all the poetry that I could find, which wasn't much—the B. Dalton or Waldenbooks in the Macon Mall (to which I walked several times a week along the side of the highway, against traffic so I could see the cars) carried Rod McKuen and Walter Rinder (by an odd coincidence, both were gay), but little that could be called "real poetry." But what they had I read (I could rarely afford to actually *buy* a book), sitting on the floor in the corner absorbed in Eliot's *Selected Poems* or the collected poems of Erica Jong or Alice Walker, reissued because of their success as novelists.

I also spent some of my meager allowance ordering books by mail from small presses like Black Sparrow and Gay Sunshine (commonplace as it is these days, mail-ordering books felt quite exotic then), eagerly awaiting the plain brown packages that contained the pioneering gay poetry anthologies *Angels of the Lyre* and *Orgasms of Light*, both of which I practically memorized, and whose various poems I assiduously imitated, trying to learn how to write poetry that would be satisfyingly gay, trying to write about being gay in a way that would satisfy me as poetry. I also ordered *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, because I had read an essay about him in a Pushcart Prize anthology. I understood his work not at all, but his figure of a man who made himself the slave of words dictated by Martian ghosts fascinated me, as if he were a modern Rimbaud. I too wanted to be possessed by language, to

have poetry swoop down upon me from outer space, and perhaps take me with it when it returned there.

I spent whole days in the public library or the local university library reading rooms, copying out Eliot and Stevens and Yeats by hand into ruled notebook after ruled notebook—I wrote out all of Eliot, the Variorum Edition of Yeats, and Stevens’s selected poems. Every hour I spent at the library was an hour I wasn’t in my aunt’s house listening to my cousin Gregory say, “You know, Shepherd, I could knock that book out yo hand any time I felt like it. Any time I felt like it, I could knock that book right out yo hand,” and finally having to reply, “If you’re going to knock the book out of my hand, could you either just do it and get it over with or leave me alone?” Gregory was twenty-five at the time; I was fifteen. Even then I wondered why he was still living in his mother’s house, picking on kids ten years younger than he was.

I wrote constantly, poems and journal entries and detailed records of my dreams. The aborted fantasy epics fell by the wayside, as did my reading of them, except for writers like Samuel R. Delany and Joanna Russ, who wrote science fiction for thinking adults, whose ranks I aspired to join some day. Delany’s book of essays *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, bought in a mall bookstore for \$4.95 and now long out of print, was some of the first literary criticism I ever read. His insistence on the weight and effect of every word and every phrase profoundly marked the way I wrote and thought about poetry. I imitated the styles and individual poems of any writer I came across and liked (often only in snippets in class textbooks or anthologies checked out of the school library, copied out on the pale blue Smith-Corona Selectric typewriter my aunt Mildred gave me one Christmas), trying to figure out how they did what they did, and I revised constantly, dating each inserted comma, each deleted adjective. After reading an interview with James Dickey in which he said that the young poet should write every day, I set myself that discipline, a salutary exercise that provided me with much necessary practice if not a large body of finished poems.

Yet more standardized tests, my few reliable friends, qualified me for the gifted program at Southwest High School, which consisted of one elective class each term, which most of the eli-

gible students refused to take, afraid that it might be too hard. The one set of tests at which I did badly were those which tested one's creativity: I always chose the symmetrical patterns. Creative people preferred the asymmetrical patterns, but I just thought that they were ugly. We were also tested on the number of things we could think up to do with pipe cleaners. I never understood in what creative endeavor one would use pipe cleaners, but perhaps that was because, as someone who couldn't come up with more than one or two uses for the things, I was simply not creative.

V

I graduated from high school in 1980, a year early so that I could escape that house, that town, that state, indeed so that I could escape the past altogether. Bennington College was about as far from Macon, Georgia, as I could imagine, a tiny college nestled in the woods of southern Vermont that advertised itself as an artistic haven, a community of like-minded souls in pursuit of the Muse. Why, their slim catalogue even listed a course on *The Literature of Male Love*. Bennington was actually my second choice, though. My first choice was Oberlin College, somewhat larger and somewhat more traditional (they had a flexible, arts-oriented curriculum, but I would have had to take math), and though small, less isolated. It was a school with a long liberal tradition—they were one of the first American colleges to become coeducational, and one of the first white colleges to admit black students. One could even major in creative writing there. My aunt had already sent in my enrollment deposit when I received a letter from someone who had been assigned to me as my “big sister.” That she was a black woman from Savannah, Georgia, already made me feel pigeonholed—Georgia was exactly what I was going to college to escape. Her letter said that black and white students didn't mix at Oberlin; I, who had had more than my share of segregation in Macon's recently integrated public schools, in a panic had my aunt Mildred stop payment on the deposit check, and decided to attend Bennington instead. (I was hesitant about attending a school with a large

black population anyway, given the negative responses I had received from other black people all my life.) I know now that black and white students don't mix at any college or university with a substantial black population, but I was young and naive and very afraid.

I would probably have been happier had I attended Oberlin (I might have had a sex life, for one thing, perhaps even a boyfriend), and I might even have graduated on time, instead of dropping out after three years. I would probably have become a more polished and professional writer sooner, but such a polish might have come prematurely, might have foreclosed more possibilities than it opened. Oberlin was and is very plugged into the mainstream poetry world and its prevailing aesthetic of transparency, with which even in high school I was dissatisfied (why bother trying to reproduce the world in less interesting terms?). Bennington was rather out of touch with that world, and its poets were quite determinedly individualist, much more attuned with the modernists and their legacy than with anything happening in contemporary poetry. That also had its limitations, but for me it provided valuable insulation from the dominant poetic conventions. Ben Belitt and Alvin Feinman were both inheritors of Hart Crane, and I loved their poetry as soon as I encountered it, Belitt's for its verbal extravagances and visionary intensities, Feinman's for its austerely rich lyrical focus and concentration. For both of them poetry was a calling of the highest order, and both were far from an aesthetic of plain speech that, though I had as much desire to write about myself as anyone, I knew to be a dead end, and even worse, boring. (I have always been easily bored, and I hate to be bored more than almost anything other than being mocked.) Both were also far from the rhetoric of personal sincerity and authenticity I had imbibed through my readings of such 1960s icons as James Wright, an obsession of mine in high school. Ben Belitt once asked me if I always told the truth in my poems and I, being an earnest and often overly honest young man (albeit one with a slight shoplifting problem), and also being convinced that this was some sort of test of my personal probity, replied, "Yes, of course I do." He smiled and said, "That's too bad. You should let yourself lie in poems." It was his way of reminding me that

art is the lie that tells the truth, and that the truth art tells need not be about oneself. While “honesty” might make the writer feel good about himself, it is beside the point in a poem.

I took my first poetry workshop at Bennington with a poet of much lesser accomplishment, a highly combative teacher easily threatened by smart and knowledgeable students. He encouraged me to expand my thematic, imagistic, and linguistic range, to get out of the trap of the wistful, and to incorporate knowledge and thinking in my poems. (I did, after all, know a lot, much of it only half-digested.) He pushed me to deploy a wider array of emotional and intellectual resources than the Imagist model of the luminous moment or the James Wright model of the deep image epiphany allowed. He also encouraged my inveterate tendency to revise, to fix, to mend, to not rest content with my first word or thought. On the other hand, he also once walked out of a class in which he seemed to be the only one who didn’t understand a poem he had assigned us; when he returned about fifteen minutes later, he was clearly drunk, and acted as if nothing had happened. On a much later occasion he screamed at me in the hallway of the main classroom building because he had decided over the weekend that a press release I’d written and he had approved for a reading of his was secretly an attack, and didn’t understand why I wouldn’t consider forgiving him without the apology he never gave.

Ben Belitt was near retirement when I met him (he died in 2003), a somewhat courtly old man I might call grandfatherly if I could imagine having had a grandfather who had ever heard of poetry. Ben confirmed, insisted even, that it was proper and necessary that I indulge my taste for lavish language and imagery, that I evade the mundanities of anecdote and autobiography, that I be oblique and indirect in my narrations and revelations—“Tell all the truth, but tell it slant,” as Dickinson (one of his touchstones) wrote. For him as for Stevens, the imagination was the supreme good, and poetry was a language of a different order than the language of ordinary life, the closest we could come to that Adamic speech in which the world was named: “I spoke: *may-fly*, / *wood-weasel*, *sting-ray*, *cormorant*, *mole*— / choosing the syllables, holding a leaf to the torrent, / unharmed and infallible.” Ben encouraged those aspects of my poetry based on

the logic of metaphor rather than the logic of linear discourse, steering me toward the high and exhilarating waves of a poetics of uncertainty.

I have written elsewhere of Alvin Feinman's crucial role in my development as a poet. While Alvin shared Ben's insistence on obliquity and indirection, on the necessity of transforming personal experience into metaphor and symbol, of turning emotion into trope, his was a much more austere, even severe, conception of poetry. He had lofty and demanding standards for poetry, to which most poetry didn't even try to live up. He insisted that a poem have an element of necessity, and quite accurately discerned in many of my poems little more than a desire to write a poem, or to demonstrate fluency for its own sake. For him, formal skill and mastery of technique, while utterly necessary (and all too rarely encountered) conditions for a poem, were also utterly insufficient in themselves. Alvin made me less willing to settle for the beautiful word, the lovely phrase, for its own sake, to ask not just whether every line, every word, had a reason for being there, but whether the poem itself really needed to exist. For Alvin, poetry was a species of redemption of self and world, an enterprise not to be entered upon lightly or without the utmost commitment, a commitment that required that one shed one's own petty desires and ambitions (for praise, for fame, or even to write "a good poem") in favor of what the poem wanted and needed: "Learn to be No-one in the voice of none. . . . / Your living syllable."

In reaction to Bennington's somewhat formless and often whimsical curriculum, which offered classes on Kleist and Kafka but not on Plato or Shakespeare, I set myself the project of reading all the major poetry in the English canon. I'm always reacting to something or another. I stopped halfway through *Paradise Lost* and got bogged down in Keats's interminable youthful epics (a far cry from his odes or his sonnets, which I adored for the way they made death sing, made waiting for death beautiful), but I made serious headway. Ezra Pound's *The ABC of Reading*, which set out the ideal curriculum for the aspiring poet, led me toward the English Renaissance poets. Marlowe's lavish language and lush imagery, embodying intensities of sensual and sexual passion (including homosexual passion), seduced me from my first

encounter with his work; Donne's alchemical meldings of intellect and emotion held out the possibility of a unified subjectivity while simultaneously playing out all the contradictions of such a multivalent self, and his associative leaps always led to graceful and unexpected landings. Sir Thomas Wyatt sang in a shockingly modern, haltingly beautiful voice of sexual obsession and betrayal and bitterness, while Thomas Campion, Thomas Nashe, and George Peele sang for the sake of song, as if song could encompass all pains and lay them to rest, brightness falling from the air like sunlight or light summer rain. Though some of Shakespeare's sonnets struck me as repetitive and even formulaic, others embodied and enacted suffering almost too viscerally to bear. I was all too familiar with lust's expense of spirit in a waste of shame, had felt too often the force of they that have power to hurt, and too frequently felt myself to be in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, all alone beweeeping my outcast state. Such weeping was one of my major occupations.

VI

I dropped out of college in 1983, at the end of my junior year, a desperate act arising from a desperate need to escape the suffocating, neurotic isolation of Bennington College's deformed and deforming hothouse environment. I moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, largely because it was close, having no job, knowing no one, but having been assured by college friends from the area that people there were smart and friendly. For weeks I walked down the street practicing an open, welcoming expression, until I realized that it just made me look slightly retarded, and a target for Moonies and their ilk.

My great fear was that once outside of school I wouldn't write anymore, that I had become too accustomed to the praise and approval of teachers and of peers to whom such things at least momentarily mattered, before they went on to become bankers or dentists or whatever such people did—the lives of the privileged remained utterly opaque to me, no matter how long I went to school with them. With no context to support or even acknowledge my writing, could I still be a poet? I discovered that I

could. Indeed, reading and writing helped maintain some sense of my self as mine while I scooped ice cream (at worst) or did data entry in the Boston Public Library's automated cataloguing unit (the best of my numerous and mostly short-lived jobs: I made over a hundred dollars a week, and got sick leave, paid holidays, and two weeks' paid vacation every year). My boss at the library, an army reservist whose choice of career I never understood (shouldn't one have at least a passing interest in books to work in a library?), chided me constantly for my posture, my wardrobe, and my general demeanor, but never seemed to notice that I was almost the only competent person in the department. (One's attitude and deportment have counted for much more than one's actual work in any job I've ever had, including those in academia.) Reading and writing could remind me that I was a little bit more than just "one of his workers," or at least that a part of me was beyond his reach despite spending the better parts of my days staring at green letters and numerals on a computer screen in a windowless fluorescent-lit box.

I'd been told that Cambridge and Boston had a strong literary community, but if there was any such thing, it was one to which I, with no institutional affiliation (not even a bachelor's degree), no social connections, and nothing more than fantasies of being published, had no access at all. What I did have access to was the place's pervasive racism and snobbery, as well as its general social coldness. Boston is one of the most racist places I've ever lived, and the racism merely got more polite as one moved up the social and educational ladder. The coldness and unfriendliness never changed. In these circumstances, my carefully cultivated interiority, my "self" as an "artist," as an "intellectual," was utterly irrelevant to the life (the "real world" about which I had so often been admonished) that, if it was not mine, certainly had me firmly in its grasp, and to whose demands and requests I found myself inexorably surrendering, if only in the interest of continuing to eat and pay rent. I read poems and wrote poems by myself, to myself, and for myself, occasionally showing them to close friends who responded in much the way that one responds when a friend shares his journal—it was a gesture that had everything to do with trust and self-revelation and nothing to do with art. In the world in which

I found myself, liking poetry was similar to collecting *Star Wars* action figures: everyone has his thing. For my more serious friends, mostly gay boys from small towns and suburbs who had run away to Boston to become the gay men they'd always hoped to be, my writing and reading poetry was a passion analogous to their collecting Kate Bush or Culture Club albums, import singles and B-sides like "December Will Be Magic Again," objects which encapsulated their emotions and experiences (loneliness and longing, mostly), the feelings they had and wanted to have, and gave them back to them as music. I collected those things too, and they're in my poetry to this day.

I felt that I had failed myself and failed my mother. I had been a prodigy, and now I was just another poor person again, though at least no longer in the ghetto. Keats was dead at twenty-six; Rimbaud had stopped writing poetry by the time he was twenty-one. At the rate that I was going, or rather not going, how could I hope even to approach their accomplishments? For that matter, how could I hope to survive the real world I so feared? Was there some key that would open the door to life outside the reassuring though constricting confines of being in school, one that didn't involve going back to the tenements and the rats?

I began reading what is called "theory" while living in Boston, spending too many nights dancing in gay clubs, longing after well-dressed, mumbling white demigods (they were often drunk, after all), doing various customer service jobs at which I usually didn't last long (I tended to have the wrong attitude, not being much inclined to serve), and making certain that I read for at least an hour or two each day, to keep my brain from atrophying, although my brain was a great impediment to my social life. As a very trendy friend with the best intentions and an excellent sense of style put it a few years later, "You're always trying to make sure that everyone knows you're smart, but no one cares."

Unlike many poets, I have never been afraid of theory: far from being a threat to my creativity, it has been both a challenge and an incitement. Encountering critical theorists like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno (at first through the medium of summaries by Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, Xeroxed

during breaks in my workday at the Boston Public Library) helped me make sense of my situation as an artist who was also a wage laborer (or, rather, as a wage laborer who hoped that writing and reading made him an artist), helped me negotiate the disjunction between my inner life and the constraints of my material life, even the pleasures of which were unconnected with the things that I valued most, but valued in a vacuum filled only by my own thoughts. From writers like Adorno and Benjamin I came to understand that the alienation I felt was not my personal burden or treasure (it felt like both), as a black gay intellectual / artist misfit college dropout with a shitty job and no boyfriend, but rather an integral part of the social-political world I was at once within and outside of, a general condition of life under capitalism. I was not so special as I'd imagined myself to be, but I was also not so strange. Though my life was unavoidably conditioned by my social circumstances, to be conditioned by such circumstances is not to be completely determined by them: the social-material world I too often took as fixed and given was a made thing, and thus contingent and subject to change. Art could be a mode not of escaping alienation (an impossibility) but of transforming it.

The sense of art as a social practice helped me come at least to a tentative understanding that poetry could be not simply an escape from the world but also a challenge to that world, could propose an alternative that was not merely a dream, though it was a long time before I could make use of that understanding in my work. For many years my work remained a series of attempts to escape my life for and by means of the world of art: to flee anywhere out of this world, in Baudelaire's words. I wanted to make beautiful poems about things that everyone agreed were beautiful (my amulets against the world), because I couldn't imagine any other kind of beauty than the tautological.

Saussurean semiology proposed that the inadequacy of my words to correspond to the world, the unbridgeable gap between a word and its sense, could be a creative space where terms were not set and outcomes were not predetermined. It suggested that the negation on which language is based contained within it a larger affirmation: all those small "No's" could flower into a larger "Yes."

Traveling around inside my own head made ever more apparent the space between my all-too-limited self and life and the world that art offered and simultaneously snatched away. Adorno writes that art presents the image of paradise, but in negation. In a graduate course I took years later at Brown University, the literary theorist Robert Scholes described this effect as like that of a menu in which all the items have been crossed out: they exist but they're not available, you can't have any of them. One day much more recently, I saw a banner in the music section of the Pensacola Barnes and Noble that featured a remarkably and apparently utterly accidentally Adornian quote from someone of whom I've never heard, one Edward H. Howe: "When people hear good music, it makes them homesick for something they never had, and never will have." I think that "something" is freedom, what Kant called the kingdom of ends, in which people and things exist for their own sakes and not for the sake of profit or power. Music hints at that, even promises it, but never gives it for more than a few moments. The song remains the same, but the song always ends.

The consciousness of the gap between that potential existence and our actual lives was forced upon me during my three years of menial labor and menial attempts at escape from the awareness of that labor. It's a gap that many who have spent their entire lives in academia, many who have spent their entire lives in a cocoon of comfort and economic safety (including those who think of themselves as "radicals"), have, at best, no more than a theoretical knowledge of. Reading theory helped me make use of that experience and that awareness in my work, to write poems that grappled (however indirectly) with the world and "my" life in that world (and my position as its subject, in both senses of the word) as they were rather than as they might be made to appear in my compensatory fantasies: poems that investigated rather than merely illustrated the desire to escape from that world and that life, that interrogated rather than simply longed for the beautiful. My friend the wonderful poet Jenny Mueller once told me that much of my work constitutes an argument between beauty and justice, and it has become increasingly important to me that beauty not always be allowed the last, consoling but sometimes disabling word.

I decided to go back to college because doing data entry at the Boston Public Library every day made me miserable (I had nightmares about my job, only to wake and find them true). I saw various people of my acquaintance who were not as smart or talented as I was going to graduate school and getting jobs that had nothing to do with inputting numbers and definitely paid more than \$150 a week; and here I was, a college dropout in a dead-end job with a boss who harassed me about the way I sat in my chair. Having exchanged the status of a prodigy for that of a prodigal, I did eventually return to Bennington, receiving my BA in 1988, four years after I should have. An entire class had come and gone in my absence, though someone from my entering class graduated with me, which made me feel a bit less alone. I went on to become something of an academic nomad, collecting two MFA degrees in the course of my wanderings, the first at Brown University, because it was close to Boston, where my friends were, and because it offered me money, and the second at the University of Iowa, because it was the place to go if one wanted to succeed as a poet, and I wanted very much to succeed. And, of course, because it offered me money.

I got two MFA degrees because I had a bad experience at Brown's writing program (the poetry I wrote at the time didn't fit into the reigning orthodoxy there, and I was reminded of that constantly), though I read a lot of theory and went to a lot of parties with good music and good-looking people I didn't know whose lives I couldn't afford, and because I wasn't sure what else I could do. I knew that I didn't want to go back to doing data entry or some similar menial job, and from what I could tell I also didn't want to teach composition as an adjunct instructor at some community college or three. I had never had anything like a career, and the possibilities of such for someone who'd spent his whole life reading books and listening to music didn't appear numerous.

When I was first considering going to the Iowa Writers Workshop, I looked at a map of the United States with a friend and said "Iowa? That's not near *anything*." Nor was it. And the smugly comfortable and very white Midwestern college town insularity of Iowa City was frequently stifling, however many cafes opened there. My experience in the program was neither smooth nor

easy. But it was at Iowa that my isolation as a writer was ameliorated, that I met poets like Jocelyn Emerson, Malinda Markham, Jenny Mueller, Geoffrey Nutter, and Lawrence L. White who became both friends and poetic companions. So I suppose that it was worth the cold and the loneliness among the cornfields and pig farms (there was even a stand of corn at a local gas station). I'm very glad that I went to Iowa, and I'm very glad that I'm not there now.

My development as a writer hardly ended after my graduation from Iowa, but for the most part my formal education, and whatever sense of apprenticeship I had, did. In my last year at Iowa I won a "Discovery"/*The Nation* Award, and my first book, *Some Are Drowning*, was selected by Carolyn Forché for the Associated Writing Programs' Award in Poetry just before my graduation. I moved into another stage of my life as a writer, one that I might be bold enough to call my poetic adulthood. So 1993 seems as convenient a place as any to stop recounting a tale that is, after all, still ongoing: I'm not yet dead, so the story hasn't reached its end. But though my life goes on, this essay needn't.

Envoi

Having passed my fortieth birthday (and been grateful to have made it so far), I am now no longer a "younger poet," and though I have a publishing career, some highly contingent place in the literary world (though one that still feels as if it could be snatched away at any time), my material life is quite precarious. I certainly don't have the financial security and stability I had hoped and expected to achieve by this age and this point in my career. I haven't done the things that one should do to be successful. I haven't networked, haven't schmoozed. I've been no one's sycophant, and though I would have liked to have had patronage, to have been someone's protégé (something I had naively hoped to get out of attending Iowa), that hasn't happened. Nor have I ever been part of any clique or club.

Though I've been clumsy and sometimes insensitive, I've never intentionally wronged anyone and I've rarely been deliberately unkind. I've been honest to a fault, and stubborn too.

Sometimes it's been integrity and perseverance; sometimes it's just been obstinacy.

Unlike the vast majority of those in academia or the literary world, I have nothing to fall back on. Since leaving Georgia at seventeen, I have been on my own. It's vanishingly rare for someone from my background, having nothing (no family, no independent resources, no "home"), to have achieved anything in the literary world, which often seems the preserve of those born with trust funds. (English in particular seems to be largely populated by those who aspire to an Edith Wharton-esque, prissy, propriety-obsessed hyper-WASPiness: something that as I recall from *The House of Mirth* made all concerned quite miserable.) Several years ago I read a profile in the *New Yorker* of Jorie Graham, who as my teacher at Iowa once told me that I had had everything handed to me, to my ex-lover Chris Cutrone, a video-maker and critical theorist who grew up in a working-class neighborhood on Long Island. He and I had bonded, among other grounds, as intellectuals and artists from poor backgrounds, people who as kids knew lots of words we couldn't pronounce correctly, because we'd only read them in books. Hearing about Graham's childhood in an Italian villa, the lavish parties her mother (a prominent sculptor once featured in a Gap ad) threw attended by Roman Catholic cardinals and Italian nobility, her marriage to the son of the owner of the *Washington Post*, Chris turned to me and said, "It reminds you that people like us weren't meant to be artists, doesn't it?" The art that saved me has so often belonged to the wealthy and privileged that it's hard to remember that it's not merely an ornament of power. Part of my project as a writer has necessarily (in order for me to be a writer at all) been to attempt to disentangle art's liberatory from its oppressive aspects, to remember that those who so often own art don't define it, that (as Adorno pointed out) art is the enemy of culture and culture is the enemy of art.

I had a dream that perfectly encapsulated my relationship to academia. I was in graduate school, walking with two professors, one an older white man and one a young hipster (swarthy, indeterminately ethnic, shoulder length hair, snazzy green blazer). The older professor was musing over some rhetorical

question whose answer he didn't really care about (something faux-political, as I recall), but I tried to respond anyway, and the hip young professor put his hand over my mouth and said, "We don't need to hear from you about this."

But I will be heard from. I'm determined not to leave the field to those born with spoons of various precious metals in their mouths (who nowadays include the children of the black bourgeoisie, however much they whine about "the rage of a privileged class"). The culture I've acquired with so much work may be their birthright, but I appreciate it in a way that those who take it for granted rarely do. It *means* something to me—it means everything to me. Sometimes I stand in the poetry section of Barnes and Noble and wonder how many authors there come from backgrounds like mine. They can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

My oldest friend's mother once asked me why, coming from what I came from, I thought that the world would or should be fair. I didn't have an answer then, but now I realize that it's because I believed that the world outside the prison house in which I was born and raised would be different. It was that hope, that faith, really, that kept me going, that keeps me going. Every "A" I got, every prize I won, was a punch in my ticket to that elsewhere. I wanted to escape the ghetto, but I also wanted to go somewhere better, which meant believing that there *was* somewhere better: my version of optimism, or simply blind faith. I have gone from place to place, from circumstance to circumstance, and still haven't found that fair, just place, but I continue to search, hoping and believing that there's a place for me.

I know that there are many smart and talented young people in the ghettos who haven't have the luck I had, the opportunities, or just a mother determined that they would become something more than a statistic, but I also know that sometimes the system that puts one in one's place and keeps one there with an iron-toed boot pressed down on one's throat can be circumvented, though hardly defeated. Indeed, if one doesn't come from privilege, one has no choice but to circumvent that system if one wants to breathe at all, and I have always insisted on drawing on my own breath. I am living proof of both the possibility and the precariousness of such an escape.

I was not meant to survive this world. Many people have tried to crush me, sometimes with the best of intentions, as I know they have crushed others who have refused to know their place. I consider my survival a form of victory, however tenuous and conditional.

Manifestos of a Sort

The Other's Other

Against Identity Poetry, for Possibility

My title invokes a dual otherness. As a black person, as a gay person, I am other to the social norm of heterosexual whiteness. Poetry, a stereotypically exalted and also, or therefore, marginalized realm, is often seen as other to the abjection, social and psychic, that blackness and gayness too frequently represent in our society, a debasement too often acted out on black and gay bodies. Poetry is also other to the utilitarian, means-end rationality of capitalist society. Poetry's otherness enacts an escape from or a transformation of racial and sexual otherness: it embodies an otherness of inclusion rather than exclusion, of possibility rather than constraint. Poetry presents the possibility of an otherness that is liberating rather than constricting: it offers the prospect of an alienation from alienation. Theodor Adorno proposed that poetry presents the alienation of language from its alienation in everyday use: by turning language away from its use as a mere medium of exchange, poetry returns language to itself. Poetry's otherness to my own multiple socially defined othernesses is a space of freedom, where lack becomes pure potential.

For this reason, I have always intensely disliked what I call identity poetics, the use of poetry as a means to assert or claim social identity. The impulse to explain poetry as a symptom of its author is pervasive these days, including among authors themselves. But that has always seemed to me a form of self-imprisonment, neglecting or even negating the possibilities poetry offers not just of being someone else, anyone and/or everyone else, but of being no one at all, of existing, however contingently, outside the shackles of identity and definition. Poetry is, among other things, a way of opening up worlds and

possibilities of worlds. It offers a combination of otherness and brotherhood, the opportunity to find the otherness in the familiar, to find the familiar in the other. The various (though not various enough) constructions of identity poetics shut down the multifarious possibilities poetry offers in favor of mere self-reflection, and at that, reflection of a reified, simplified self much less complex and interesting than the several selves we each are at any given moment and through the course of the various lives we live simultaneously. As the poet Thomas Sayers Ellis has urged, “Admit that there’s more than one of you, and surprise and embarrass all of yourselves.”

Ideally, one writes poetry as an act of exploration, as a venture into the unknown. (As Yeats wrote, out of what one knows, one makes rhetoric; out of what one doesn’t know, one makes poetry.) Too often today, though, writers want simply to “express” the selves they have decided that they are or have, and readers demand to see themselves (or what they imagine as themselves) reflected back to them. As Ann Lauterbach writes, “The idea that the act of reading expands and extends knowledge to orders of unfamiliar experience has been replaced by acts of reading in order to substantiate and authorize claims and positions which often mirror the identity bearings of the reader.” Identity poetics is *boring*, giving back the already known in an endless and endlessly self-righteous confirmation of things as they are. It is also constraining, limiting the imaginative options of the very people it seeks to liberate or speak for. If one follows the assumptions of identity poetics through, saying “Here are the gay poets, here are the black poets, here are the straight white male poets, and everyone just reads the poets who match their demographic classification,” not only could a white person have nothing to say to a black person, or a straight person to a gay person, but a black person could have nothing to say to a white person, or a woman to a man. So there would be no reason for a white person to read anything written by a black person.

I have never looked to literature merely to mirror myself back to me, to confirm my identity to myself or to others. I already have a self, even if one often at odds with itself, and if anything I have felt burdened, even trapped, by that self and its de-

mands, by the demands made upon it by the world. Many minority writers have spoken of feeling invisible: I have always felt entirely too visible, the object of scrutiny, labeling, and categorization. Literature offered a way out of being a social problem or statistic, a way not to be what everyone had decided I was, not to be subject to what that meant about me and for me. But even if one has a more sanguine relation to selfhood, Picasso's admonition should always be kept in mind: art is called art because it is not life. Otherwise, why would art exist? Life already *is*, and hardly needs confirmation.

I seek from literature an image of who or what I could be, of what the world itself could be, an image of the "as if" rather than of the "as is." The greatest literature has always engaged in the generation of new realities, not the reiteration of the same old given reality. I think most literary-minded people, if asked, would agree with such a statement: and yet black writers are held (and many hold themselves) to a different, double standard. "Write what you know" becomes a trap, as if there were a fixed terrain of what one can or should know, and as if the possibility of writing what one does *not* know might not be the most exciting of all. As Stephen Owen writes, "We have been informed that we are radically 'of' our age, or culture, or gender, or class, [or race,] and not of another; we can go elsewhere only as tourists, cultural voyeurs. If we believe such a story, we will accept our assigned places, submit to our limitations, and repress the hope that we can go back to where we were, or stay where we choose, or even change and become other, except as we are driven hopelessly forward by history's inertial machine."

The poems I love both seduce and baffle: their surfaces (aural, imagistic) invite while refusing to be assimilated. They frustrate the will to master the poem and instead demand that one surrender to the poem as an experience in itself. Growing up in the tenements and housing projects of the Bronx, I looked not for a reflection of my life but for an alternative to it, an affirmation of the possibility of otherness, the freedom *not* to be shackled by my self or my surroundings. For me, literature has been not an agent of oppression (as so many simple-minded critics of art as a "bourgeois mystification" characterize it), but an escape from

or transcendence of oppression: it held out the possibility that life could be otherwise, that *I* could be otherwise. A poem has never oppressed anyone, though I was once on a panel at a gay writers' conference with a black lesbian performance poet who implied that literacy was oppressive to black people, which certainly would have been news to the slave-owners who tried to keep their property from learning to read. There are certainly very real questions of access, but these are social questions of literacy and educational opportunity, not literary questions: there is nothing inherent in literature that excludes any person or group of persons.

I've never shared or supported the much-trumpeted desire to subvert or overthrow the "canon." Rather, I want to create a space of possibility within that language, those languages, a space to make me possible as a writer. In my work I wish to make Sappho and the South Bronx, the myth of Hyacinth and the homeless black men ubiquitous in the cities of the decaying American empire, AIDS and all the beautiful, dead cultures, speak to and acknowledge one another. Of course, there is no such monolithic edifice as "the canon." Such a unitary yet ungainly monster is as fictional as Hamlet or Leopold Bloom. To the extent that it exists, the canon is various and self-contradictory: like matter and antimatter, Milton the religious propagandist and Joyce the iconoclast cannot occupy the same space at the same time.

In my adolescence, the world that literature and that poetry in particular presented to me (poetry being much less bound by social circumstance than, say, the novel) was much more welcoming than my Bronx neighborhood of black kids throwing rocks at me, Puerto Rican kids slapping me in my tenement lobby, and Italian kids throwing vegetable crates on my head as I walked under their apartment windows. It was a realm in which ordinary pointless misery could be given shape and meaning, a world in which suffering could be alchemically transmuted into grief. But there wasn't a premade space for me in the world of literature, a space labeled "black gay poet who grew up in the projects but is obsessed with Greek mythology's engagements with power, beauty, and desire," let alone a space labeled "Reserved for Reginald Shepherd." I would have to

make that space for myself, and that necessity made me a poet. That desire to write the language one needs to read is a common one among writers.

My experience has rarely provided me with the sense that I could make a space for myself in the quotidian world, that genuine agency was available to me. But the world that literature made available to me offered the possibility of making my own space in my own way, of naming myself in meaningful terms, terms beyond mere social categories. As poet and critic J. D. McClatchy puts it, "Poetry's work of knowledge and its access to power lie in the poet's instinct, as well as in the reader's capacity, to take *poesis* itself—its repertory of song, choice, play, pattern, logic, trope—and see it as a model of experience, and use it as the means to fathom those same sources of authority and transformation in our lives." In the act of writing the poem, the self is not affirmed or even "found," but rather it is created: the self is a process, not an object.

There is, of course, no premade, prelabeled space reserved for anyone who wants to seriously engage language. If you're a straight white man who wants to write, you can perhaps believe that there's a space waiting for you in language that you only need claim as your own. But language, which is simultaneously an intimate possession and a social imposition, is much more elusive and ambiguous than that for anyone. Deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man emphasize the way that literature foregrounds the contradictory, riven nature of writing and of language, of identity itself. (Here I should make clear the distinction between language as such, which is a neutral signifying system, and discourse, which is always socially and culturally situated. Social discourses operate through language as one of their several modes, but they are not identical with language, nor is language reducible to social discourse.)

Every writer is alienated from his or her own language. Language, simultaneously interior and impersonal, belongs to no one, and writing is always a process of finding or constructing a place within this internally defined system of differences. Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out that language is based on negation, on "bat" not being "cat" and "b" not being "p." (Between its elements, he wrote, is only difference, difference that makes

meaning: I often think that applies to people as well.) French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan pointed out that the psyche itself is built on negation. The self is always other and always unattainable, an asymptote toward which one strives, at which one never arrives. Identity is the attempt toward identity. Sometime earlier than Lacan, the French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud noted that “I” is always an other. But just as a straight white male social individual can more easily rest in the illusion of a fixed, stable identity, similarly a straight white male writer can have a more settled, though still illusory, sense that language belongs to him. He can have a sense of security, however false, that I have never had: the *problem* of language is foregrounded for me in ways it need not be for him. Although that illusion of mastery, of possession, may be socially sanctioned, it’s still an illusion. That sense of security can easily become a sense of complacency, and complacency is the enemy of art. In our society, the artistic productions of straight white men are more socially validated and affirmed than the productions of members of more marginalized social groups. But the assumed “universality” of straight white men’s writing and the policing and self-policing, the marginalization and self-marginalization, of othered groups’ writings are two sides of the same racially and sexually stamped coin.

From a very early age, literature was a world to which I aspired, something preferable to the circumstances in which I grew up. I believed that language would save me from the Bronx, would save me from myself even, if only I could get to it. There was a paradox in that I looked to this language both to make me exist in the world and at the same time to make me into something else, someone else. Insofar as I was a black person, insofar as I was a gay person, the language of literature (by which I mean predominantly high modernism) didn’t speak of me, and that was both an attraction (because the world that literature proposed and offered wasn’t part of the trap in which I was living) and a problem. My own writing is one way of working through that problem, in which the process is itself the solution.

Pablo Neruda began a poem with the line “It so happens that I’m tired of being a man” (these words translation puts in his mouth), and I adopt his words here: It so happens that I’m tired

of being a “black writer.” A black writer in the Black Arts or even the Harlem Renaissance mode is expected to protest solemnly or antically, or (more contemporarily) to celebrate her or his nappy-headed, Afrodiziak, freaky deaky and very much *other* culture and self (and there is little distinction made in this mode between culture and self). Above all, he or she is expected to make “blackness” the meaning, the alpha and omega, of his or her work. I exaggerate for effect, but only a little bit. She or he is expected to open the eyes of the world to what it “means” to be black, to speak “for” or “as” a black person, as if that were a settled, stable, already known thing to be, as if any person were one single, given thing. As Gene Andrew Jarrett has written, “Since slave narratives were published in the first half of the 19th century, literature written by black people—or, more precisely, by people who are identified or who identify themselves as black—must be ‘the real thing,’ a window into the black experience, in order to have any aesthetic, cultural, social, political, or commercial value.”

Whatever the claims of pseudo-black-nationalist cultural theory (which sometimes bears a remarkable resemblance to the assumptions of white racism—I have even heard “black nationalist” “educators” say that black people are no good at math because we don’t think as abstractly as do white people), there is no essence of “blackness,” nor is there any singular and unitary “black experience.” Superficial physical difference is a biological fact, but blackness as an identity, assumed or imposed, is a social construct, just as whiteness is. But blackness is the marked construct, while whiteness is the default: it fades to a privileged invisibility.

I am the product of a nation defined by racial difference, and so, unsurprisingly, difference has always obsessed me, possessed me (the difference I possess possesses me). And that difference itself is not unitary; it incorporates many different differences: the multiple differences between myself and other people, both black and white, gay and straight, poor and better off, the myriad differences among my selves. How could I lay claim to any one self and say, “This is mine,” “This is me”? All my life I have been aware of what I was not, and of the lack that my not-being represented. This discontent is also a source of my work: a contented

life would not, for me, require a supplement, would not demand that excess of the already-given which we call art. Social circumstance (let's call it the presence of history) has made the distance between self and imago, between the self one is given and the self to which one aspires and which one can never attain, an abyss by which we are all burdened (it is in and by means of that impossible aspiration that "self" is formed), inescapably conscious for me. At an early age I was struck by the distance between a word and its sense, the chasm between names and things, signs and their objects: the difference between being and meaning haunted me, taunted me. The connections between this experience of difference as lack and the more obviously social differences are clear, and clearly tangled.

My introduction to Saussurean semiology opened the possibility that the space between word and sense, word and world, could be a space of potential, rather than just a site of absence and inadequacy, a postlapsarian stigma forever preventing me or my language from touching the objects of my discourse and thus of my desire. The difference between signifier and signified could be a space in which I could *create* those objects, in which things could be said (and said into being) that I had *not* previously imagined. (As I often tell my students, many interesting things can happen in the space between intention and the page.) This concomitantly meant that the gap between who I was and who I could be or wished to be could also be something other than lack or failure, could become a space in which identity could be produced and transformed rather than merely assumed or acquiesced to.

I don't believe that writing can be defined by extraliterary terms or demands, nor do I believe that such terms are a viable basis for a poetics. It's not, obviously, that poetry by gay men and lesbians does not and should not exist, that poetry by black men and women does not and should not exist, that the varied experiences of black people, of gay people, are not a legitimate topic for literature (though I have at times been accused of holding such a ridiculous position). If that were the case, much of my own poetry would not exist. And one can be drawn to or engaged by a poem about, say, gay cruising because its subject matter resonates with one's own experience without that per-

sonal interest meaning (or even without one thinking) that it's a good poem because of that, just as one can be repelled by a poem's subject matter or viewpoint while still acknowledging that it's a successful aesthetic object. Subject matter and aesthetic value are two distinct things, to which we respond differently. The interest in subject matter is a legitimate interest, but it's not necessarily a *poetic* interest.

A writer's socially defined identity has no relation to his or her literary merits or demerits, nor can that identity account for or explain his or her writing. As Yeats put it, the person who sits down to breakfast is not the same person who sits down to write a poem. Proust, arguing against the biographical approach to literature, wrote that "a book is the product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices." Octavio Paz has pointed out that the poet is only a poet because of the poem: it creates him as much as he creates it. So "poet," like "self," is a process, not a thing. While my "blackness" and my "gayness" are certainly involved (in complex and overdetermined ways) in my poetry, my poetry is not defined or limited by these questions of identity. And they are exactly that, *questions* to be explored and investigated, not givens to be taken for granted or flags to be waved. Nor do these questions determine the worth or interest (as *poetry*, not as personal or social document) of my poetry. As Robert Hughes notes, "an artist's merits are not a function of his or her gender, ideology, sexual preference, skin color, or medical condition, and to address an issue is not necessarily to address a public."

Part of the expressive material given me to work through is sociopolitical (my experience as a black gay man raised in poverty in a racist, homophobic, class society), but that in no way gives my work any kind of political efficacy or allows that work to make any special claims. It's just an aspect of my material, no different in kind from any other artist's expressive material, though different in specific content from many. Nor is my experience or understanding of these materials identical to that of someone else formed in ostensibly the "same" circumstances. I am not a black writer, I am not a gay writer, though I am a writer who is gay and a writer who is black, and a writer who is many other things besides (obsessed with music and with classical myth, for

two examples). I would like to think that I am primarily a writer who, in Auden's terms, wants to hear what words have to say to one another. I am a writer, and since I am a human being, certain attributes attach themselves to me and produce me as an individual: I don't write in or out of a vacuum, any more than I live in one. An engine of my writing is my experience of blackness, my experience of gayness, of marginality and exclusion on those bases and on other bases more individually specific yet intertwined with those. But the writing arising from that experience isn't wholly determined by it, may engage that experience in only the most oblique terms, or not at all (disengagement is also a form of engagement). In Aristotelian terms, the circumstances of my identity comprise a necessary but not sufficient cause of my writing.

I often think that I would not be a writer had I not been born black in the circumstances in which I was born and raised, if I had not been or become gay, or if my mother had not died when I was just short of fifteen. If I had been born into the black middle class, I might be comfortably ensconced in a corporate career by now, perhaps doing some writing on the side as a hobby, like stamp collecting or rock climbing. (It's often forgotten that all black people don't share the same or even similar backgrounds and experiences. I don't know what life is like for the black bourgeoisie, but I know that it's easier than mine has been.) I certainly don't believe that poetry would have become the necessity it has been for me if some of these facts had been different, if I had been presented with a different *donnée*. If I'd been able to feel more of a sense of fit with my given circumstances, with the self I was offered and expected to become, I wouldn't have been impelled to seek out a secondary world in which I could recreate myself. In that sense constraint made possible a kind of freedom: it made me a poet, and impelled me toward a more self-conscious, self-questioning mode of poetry than most on offer during my formative years as a writer. But none of those constraints or determinants decided the kind of poet I would become, or has any relevance to the quality of my work. As Poe both asserts and demonstrates by example, poetic sentiment does not equal or entail poetic power. And the expe-

rience of outsiderhood or marginality, of not belonging, is hardly limited to racial or sexual minorities. If it were, much of the great literature of at least the past two hundred years wouldn't exist, since so much of this literature has been written from margins of all sorts. Certainly the American canon is composed of the proverbial and paradoxical band of outsiders; as McClatchy notes, "The best poets in our tradition have been outsiders, excluded by temperament or sex or fashion: Whitman, Dickinson, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens."

The identity card school of poetry is very popular in our current era, when rhetorical fantasies of democracy and equality in cultural life have become tin-pot substitutes for the real things in social, political, and economic life. But literature is one of the few areas of life in which I do *not* feel oppressed, in which I have experienced true freedom. In the literary realm one is not bound by social constructions of identity, or required to flash one's assigned identity card: one can be anyone, everyone, or no one at all. This is one of literature's most precious qualities, the access it allows us to otherness (including our otherness to ourselves), and it is one of the things that I cherish most about poetry.

Black writers are too often expected to embody and deliver a predictable and familiarly packaged commodity of what used to be called Negritude. One is expected or even obligated to write in a certain mode or address a particular subject matter in order to be considered a legitimate writer, or even in order to be considered at all. As Gene Andrew Jarrett acutely notes, readers "prejudge the content of a book based on the author's skin color. And if that book defies their expectations or presumptions, they ignore or devalue it." If one writes about a range of subjects in a range of modes, one's work is reduced to that portion of it which is recognizably "black," and the rest is just ignored, if not actively disqualified. Even if, like me, you don't usually engage such subject matter, many readers both black and white will see only that part of one's work that fits into the box marked "black." I have written poems that directly address identifiably "black" subject matters, and it is disproportionately those poems that tend to be reprinted and to be discussed, those poems for which audiences

perk up at readings. But I am just as much a black person when I write about spring snow or narcissus blossoms as when I write about the South Bronx or the slave trade, and I am just as much not. (Though the same black lesbian performance poet who implied that literacy was oppressive also asserted that poems about spring or snow had no relevance to black people or to poor people or to HIV positive people. Presumably in this view black people, poor people, HIV positive people have no experiences other than being black, being poor, being HIV positive, are nothing but their social labels, and thus they don't experience spring or snow. I hardly need point out what a reductive and even dehumanizing perspective this represents.)

Contrary to the beliefs of many current critics, literature is not a symptom of social position. It is exactly that racial mountain (in Langston Hughes's phrase), the reduction of all that one is to "blackness," which threatened to smother me as an individual, that poetry allowed me to get over and around. Gay writers are subject to similar expectations and constraints in the perception and reception of their work, and I am as much a gay writer when I write about the Chicago lakefront or red-tailed hawks in upstate New York as I am when writing about living with HIV or cruising gay nightclubs. The only way to avoid such pigeonholing is never to engage such material at all, and that is simply another way of being determined by the strictures and restrictions of identity politics. Then one simply becomes "the black writer who refuses to write about being black" or "the gay writer who refuses to write about being gay."

The Marxist critic Fredric Jameson values art instrumentally, as a critique of or counterideology to bourgeois ideology. For him, art is useful as a mode of oppositionality, social struggle conducted by other means. But art's critique is precisely the critique of usefulness, of means-end rationality. For Kant, freedom was the kingdom of ends, in which all entities, including people, existed for their own sakes and not as the means to some other end. Octavio Paz writes that "The poetic experience . . . does not teach us or tell us anything about freedom: it is freedom itself unfurling itself." The poem presents a world in which every word, every phrase, exists both as an integral and indispensable

part of a larger whole and as something significant (in both senses of the word) in itself and for itself.

The independent existence of art is the result of the rise of what Adorno calls instrumental reason and what Jean-François Lyotard calls performativity: if everything has to be good for something, then art is good for itself. Art's importance is that it has no place in our culture. As Paz acutely puts it, "poems have no value: they are not products susceptible to commercial exchange. . . . Commercial circulation is the most active and total form of exchange our society knows and the only one that produces value. As poetry is not a thing that can enter into the exchange of mercantile goods, it is not really a value. And if it is not a value, it has no real existence in our world."

Poetry is potentially liberating because its uselessness marks out a space not colonized by or valued by capital. Its "obsolescence" is also its resistance to being easily consumable; its loss of "relevance" is also a freedom to keep alive certain human possibilities. In this sense, the drive to make poetry "relevant" is a concession or a surrender to instrumental values, to the imperative of use and functionality: poetry had better be good for *something*. And poetry simply isn't politically efficacious; as Auden so perceptively noted, "Poetry makes nothing happen." The conflation of the existence of social, political, and economic elites with muddled notions of intellectual or aesthetic "elitism" is sheer obfuscation. The power elite in this country care nothing for art or culture; they care about money and power and the means to acquire and retain them. Art is not among those means.

Those who wish to change society might better turn their energies toward society itself, to the real areas of oppression and suffering, economic, political, racial, and sexual. (Identity politics can be a useful organizing tool of social activism, though it can also lend itself to a kind of group solipsism that blinds people to structural, systemic issues.) To blame literature, or culture as a whole, for social, economic, and political woes (or even to see it as central to their perpetuation) is evasive at best, dishonest at worst, a kind of posing as politics, in social commentator Adolph Reed's trenchant phrase. But such posturing is much easier than doing the hard work of trying to change the

world. “Cultural activism” is a poor substitute for real political activity, although we live in an era in which cultural matters are up for debate while fundamental economic and political questions are not, except on the often loud but frequently incoherent and usually ignored fringes.

George Oppen gave up writing poetry for several years in favor of political activism, because he believed neither that poetry could change society nor that it should be subordinated to an agenda. In Oppen’s words, “If you decide to do something politically, you do something with political efficacy. And if you write poetry, you write poetry, not something you hope, or deceive yourself into believing, can save people who are suffering.” Several years ago, I was asked by someone I had just met whether my poetry was Afrocentric. I told him that I didn’t know what he meant by that term, and he said, “You know, dedicated to the liberation of black people everywhere.” My only reply was, “I don’t think poems can do that.”

Poetry’s preservation of mystery is its preservation of a space not colonized by capitalism’s totalizing impulse. This is also the preservation of a space not colonized by instrumental reason. The poem embodies this space in its specificity as an event in language: a good poem is not simply a recounting or reenactment of an extralinguistic event, but an occasion of its own. The poem is a new thing in the world (or better: it is a new event), not simply a copy or an account of an already existing thing: it cannot be reduced to its “meaning” or its “content.” Part of what poetry does is remind us that things and events, including language, including ourselves, aren’t as accessible or as apprehensible as we think they are. The Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky described art as a mode of defamiliarization, making the familiar strange, or perhaps revealing it to have been strange all along when not seen through the smudged and blurred lens of habit and routine.

The encounter that poetry can provide with a realm of experience not defined by or limited to the social (however much it may engage and interrogate that realm) is the most valuable and liberatory thing poetry has to offer in our overdetermined world. I wouldn’t want to surrender that freedom to an agenda or a program, however well-intentioned.

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Toward an Urban Pastoral

In his *Life of Johnson*, James Boswell famously quotes Samuel Johnson as telling him, “Why, Sir, you find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave London. No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford.” As early as the eighteenth century, Johnson couldn’t imagine life outside the metropolis. Yet his poem “London” is “in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal,” railing against the decadence and misery of the capital city (Rome for Juvenal, London for Johnson): “Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire, / And now a rabble rages, now a fire.” To be fair, the poem is not just about London, but about the sorry state of Great Britain as a whole. Still, it is London that it calls “the needy villain’s general home.”



The vast majority of the U.S. population, some 75 percent, lives in what are statistically defined as urban areas; as Boswell writes of London, the city is “the great scene of ambition, instruction, and amusement.” With the seemingly inexorable expansion of suburbia and exurbia, and the saturation of the country by communications media new and old, truly rural life is almost extinct. Yet as urban historian Eric H. Monkkonen notes, “the United States has become one of the world’s most urban nations, but . . . it has a rural sense of its own history . . . it continues to conceal its urbanness from itself.”

Much of our poetry participates in that concealment, ignoring our contemporary urban reality, and much of what does engage the urban (or the suburban) does so in a sadly prosaic and mundane manner, untouched by what Hart Crane called the silken skilled transmemberment of song. (As Monkkonen notes,

“The United States is urban but not urbane.”) Even today, one can read book after book of contemporary American poetry and get no clue that cities even exist, let alone that most people live in one, that the poet him- or herself might well do so. Once when I assigned Elizabeth Macklin’s *A Woman Kneeling in the Big City*, a book in which lyric and urban life confront and speak to one another and are both transformed, to my poetry writing class, a student expressed his relief that we were finally reading a book about the city, instead of more poems about flowers and fields, which were as alien to him as nymphs and satyrs.

Often we write about nature because there is a readily available, thoroughly worked-out language with which to do so, because that language provides the assurance that one will indeed come up with a recognizable *poem*. Of course, often what the language of nature produces is a simulacrum of nature, a reiteration of the *vocabulary* of nature that refers not to nature but to nature *poetry*. This readily available language is much more problematic precisely in and due to its ready availability than most who avail themselves of it are willing to recognize or acknowledge.



Charles Baudelaire, the father of the modern, is the inventor of the city in modern poetry, above all in the prose poems of *Paris Spleen*. As Eliot (with his assumption that the life of the metropolis is by definition sordid) writes, “It is not merely in his use of imagery of . . . the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to *first intensity*—presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something beyond itself—that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men.”

Baudelaire invents the figure of the *flâneur*, the archetypal solitary observer wandering the city in search of new sensations, abandoning himself to the crowd from whom he still maintains his psychic distance. As Baudelaire writes, “It is not given to everyone to bathe in the multitude: to enjoy the crowd is an art. . . . The lone and pensive pedestrian derives a singular thrill from this universal communion” with the strangers he passes in the street.

In Walter Benjamin's words, "The crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned to the *flâneur*. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room." The *flâneur* makes a home of the streets, which are no one's home: "The street becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls."

The *flâneur* is in many ways the quintessential figure of the modern poet, the speaker of poems by Eliot, Pound, Williams, and even Frost. The modern poet is the person (usually a man) alone in the urban crowd.



Eliot is the great English-language poet of the city. Prufrock invites us to wander through certain half-deserted streets threatening both in their seediness and in their insidious intent to lead one to precisely the overwhelming question one has attempted to avoid by loitering amid these one-night cheap hotels, streets that promise a brute vitality and sexual energy that the enervated existence of the upper middle class, measuring out their lives in coffee spoons, cannot even imagine: "That is not what I meant at all." Such vitality and such sexual energy is also a threat, enticing yet frightening.

In "Preludes," Eliot tries to imagine the lives of the working-class occupants of those sawdust-trampled streets littered with withered leaves and newspaper scraps, to inhabit the conscience of a blackened street lined by a thousand furnished rooms, only to withdraw into a distanced vision of revolving worlds, the cosmic circle come around again and again.

"Rhapsody on a Windy Night" shows us what Prufrock might have seen during his wanderings, or perhaps what he feared seeing as the streetlamps beat out the times of night (much too late to be about): a woman in a stained and torn dress who may be a beggar or a prostitute or both, a feral cat licking a pat of rancid butter, a child with blank eyes pocketing a wharf rat as a toy, and finally the return to a room that is as much a prison as anything he has seen on the wrong side of town.

The Waste Land is all about the city, though not about American cities (Eliot was not necessarily the great *American* poet of the city), and in it the city is a desert of lost souls wandering in circles,

not realizing that they're dead: "I had not thought death had undone so many." The city is, mostly, London, where rats drag along the banks of the Thames and women are seduced in rowboats and rooming houses and nothing connects with nothing. Sordid by definition, full of foreigners and homosexuals, full of sex in general, the city is rootless, cosmopolitan, depthless, substanceless, the antithesis of true culture and settled values:

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal.

In capitalist modernity, as Marx wrote, "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions [exactly those relations to which Eliot aspired, though such an aspiration arose from their unattainability], are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face . . . the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men."

Modernity is ancient history by now, modernism only slightly less agèd, yet we have come up with nothing to replace or succeed either one, just variants of the "post." We are still struggling toward a poetic language of the city as neither exotic wonderland nor demonic nightmare, a language that embraces those real conditions and relations, those profane cityscapes stripped of what Benjamin calls aura. The challenge is to find a vocabulary and a syntax for the city that isn't simply a reiteration or ventriloquization of the language of prose, but a specifically *poetic* language that can encompass, embody, and enact the chiming and clashing textures of the city. The city's resistance to our reified, ossified poetic dialects also provides some resistance to the rhetorical "cheating" that often goes on when people write about "nature." As Baudelaire wrote almost a hundred and fifty years ago, modern life demands a new language. And more recently, Theodor Adorno has pointed out that "Nature poetry is *passé* not only because it is losing its subject matter, but also because its truth content is vanishing."

In one of his most famous essays, Benjamin wrote that some

of Baudelaire's motifs render the possibility of lyric poetry questionable. It is our duty as poets to respond to that question without presuming to answer it.



I don't mean to imply that there is no American poetry of the city or that American poets have not addressed the American city in their work. Carl Sandburg celebrated Chicago, "Hog Butcher to the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation." In his lyrical epic *The Bridge*, Hart Crane attempted to incorporate Brooklyn Bridge and the New York subway into his myth of America and into the vatic, visionary Romantic mode he had half inherited and half invented. William Carlos Williams's American epic *Paterson*, his riposte to *The Waste Land*, uses modernist techniques of quotation, collage, and radical juxtaposition to produce a portrait of the past and present of a typical American city—not a cultural capital like Paris or London, but an ordinary place in New Jersey. Williams said that *Paterson's* overall theme was "the resemblance between the mind of modern man and the city." The "I do this, I do that" poems of Frank O'Hara (the quintessential "city poet," to cite the title of Brad Gooch's biography) are saturated with the textures of New York City: the city moves through them, on foot, by taxi, by bus, or by train. Echoing Samuel Johnson, though somewhat off-key, O'Hara wrote that "One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes—I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life."

Most relevantly to my own project of poetically limning the Chicago cityscape, though her Chicago was very much not mine, Gwendolyn Brooks, in such works as *A Street in Bronzeville* (laconically and often ironically chronicling the everyday lives of the residents of Chicago's Bronzeville black ghetto), and *In the Mecca* (set in a tenement that was once an elegant apartment complex), portrayed life on Chicago's black South Side with a broad range of diction and formal techniques, and a rich musicality drawing on both the poetic canon and the rhythms of jazz, blues, and working-class black urban speech. As distinct from

Baudelaire and Eliot's alienated *flâneur*; Brooks writes from within the community she annotates, as both (sometimes distanced) member and (personally invested) observer.

Also relevant to my desire to construct a linguistic analogue to the built environment of the city, George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* examines the city as humanity's greatest accomplishment and expression, but also reveals the alienation and oppression distorting that accomplishment. The book's title poem, originally called "Another Language of New York," kaleidoscopically explores both the city as physical structure and the structures of class oppression of which the city is built as much as it is built of bricks and glass and girders. To misquote Lacan, the city is structured like a language of social relations, and the poem is a city of words. For Adrienne Rich, the city is both opportunity and threat to a woman, a lesbian, a writer, who wants to find a new way to live and a new language with which to speak. The city, New York in particular ("this island of Manhattan [is] island enough for me"), is at once the physical manifestation of the history of exploitation and an arena of new and unpredicted possibilities, the embodiment of tradition and the enactment of the shattering of traditions: "We want to live like . . . / sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air, dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding, / our animal passion rooted in the city" ("Twenty-One Love Poems").

As this brief list indicates, these have been highly individual, even idiosyncratic projects. There is still no commonly available, shared poetic language by which and within which to address and account for the city in all its multiplicity, as there has been for so long for the natural world.



Much of my own work has been engaged in trying to develop such a language in and for my own poems. For all the long, miserable years that I have spent in small towns, cities are in my blood: I grew up in New York City until I was almost fifteen, lived in Boston for four years, and spent six years in Chicago, the longest I'd lived in any one place since I was a child. (There have also been stops in such lower-tier cities as Buffalo and Milwaukee.) The urban textures of Chicago are a dominant presence in

much of my work, particularly in that of my second, third, and fourth books, all of which were written in Chicago and under the influence of Chicago. The stuff of Chicago pervades those books. It's only recently that I've realized the extent to which I'm a landscape poet, and the cityscape of Chicago was fertile imaginative terrain.

Despite its ongoing efforts to remake itself as a postmodern information hub, Chicago is still an industrial city in a way that New York, the American city its physical presence most closely resembles, has not been for a long time. Chicago is a city with an exposed exoskeleton: its workings are visible on the surface, the gears and pistons apparent to the naked eye. Even downtown in the Loop, the aging 'L' (whose circuit defines the downtown rectangle within which nest so many corporate skyscrapers, its tracks and platforms hastily thrown up out of surprisingly durable sheet metal and wood) reminds one of the rusting mechanics underlying all the virtual numbers traded on the various exchanges, of what Nelson Algren called the city's "rusty iron heart." It seems appropriate that Chicago has retained its elevated trains while New York and Boston have torn theirs down: the machinery is all out in the open.

Walking along Fullerton Avenue (one of the North Side's major east-west thoroughfares) from the yuppie neighborhood of Lincoln Park to the once-depressed and now gentrifying neighborhood of Bucktown, one passes condos and factories directly abutting one another. Some of the condos used to be factories and some of the factories will be condos soon, but the sense of the material underpinning of the city, of the physical embodiment of social relations (and even of means of production), is palpable. You can even smell it.

As photographer David Plowden writes in his book *Industrial Landscape*, Chicago "is built on an absolutely level plain, which spreads away from the lake surely to the edge of the western horizon. Because of its flatness everything that Chicago has built stands in bold relief against the sky. . . . Everything is laid bare. The relationship of man and mechanization is dramatically played out. No other city that I know of reveals the industrial world on such a stage."

Chicago presents a topographical paradox, a city of towering

landmarks built on a featureless and seemingly endless plain, yet it is uniquely defined by the massive presence of Lake Michigan, an utterly other kind of plain, a shimmer of fresh water stretching far past the limits of sight. Chicago presents a social paradox as well: forgetful to the point of amnesia of social history (indeed, such social history feels as if it's been repressed, as is the ever-present but almost never-mentioned social, economic, and racial tension), it is replete with physical memory, despite the myriad of notable buildings that have been carelessly demolished over the years.



In its radical juxtapositions and abrupt transitions, its densities and overdeterminations, Chicago is structured like a modernist poem; in its physical embodiment of social relations, Chicago is an objective correlative of modern capitalism. To use the semiotician Charles Peirce's typology of the sign, Chicago is at once the symbol, the icon, and the index of modernity.

The poems of my Chicago period work toward a mode I call urban pastoral, an exploration of the splendor and misery of cities in which the cityscape is an active character, a presence that conditions and shapes the poems as much as it is appropriated and shaped by them.

Historically, pastoral has been a literary genre or mode celebrating the idealized innocent pleasures and joys of country life, with all traces of what Marx called the idiocy of rural life effaced, the squalor and brute labor erased. As such, it is always an implicit critique of the corruptions and sorrows of city life. (As John Kinsella notes, "The pastoral isn't really about nature, except insofar as it's about landscape, the mediation of nature through human interference and control.") The pastoral is by definition the product of city-dwellers, looking back with a wistful nostalgia at a life they have never led, a world they have never inhabited. It is a mode of alienation and exile.

In this light, *The Waste Land* may be seen as a dystopian counterpastoral, in which moments of pastoral innocence (the hyacinth girl passage, for example) are highlighted both in their beauty and in their unattainability by being juxtaposed to the

overall portrait of an urbanity that has condemned itself to a kind of living death.

Conversely, Susan Stewart has noted pastoral's link with a democratizing speech that extends from Wordsworth through Whitman to William Carlos Williams, as well as the attempts of pastoral since the eighteenth century to heal over the split between the agricultural and the industrial worlds by means of song. Stewart makes clear that there is in pastoral both an ethos of conservation and an ethos of innovation: as the dual sense of the word *original* reminds us, these two are not always separate.

I have attempted to develop a mode of pastoral that takes the city as it is, in all its glory and horror: a mode in which, as Adorno puts it, everything is both itself and wholly other, in which the textures of the cityscape and the textures of the poem's verbal landscape echo and mirror one another.

My fourth book, *Otherhood*, brings together the materials of language and the materials of the urban environment that together constitute the poem. It plays with the two senses of the word *material*—subject matter and building matter, the stuff of which the physical world is built and the stuff of which the poem is built. The words and lines correspond to the bricks and walls of buildings; the poems are constructions like the Monadnock Building or the Sears Tower. Rather than recounting "experience," *Otherhood* explores the structures—historical, architectural, botanical, mythological, meteorological, and topographical—that condition and implicate such experience, to produce what the Situationists would have called a psycho-geography of Chicago.

Benjamin wrote of shock as the mode of modern experience, a mode of distraction and inattention in response to the sensory overload of the modern (which is by definition the urban, as perhaps the postmodern is the suburban, turning its face away from that from which it derives its identity). William Carlos Williams practiced poetry as a mode of attention, and it is significant that two of his poems limning the contours of urban space are titled "Pastoral." In its attention to and homology with the textures of urban life, to and with the feel of the city, the (potential) poetry of urban pastoral can restore the experience of the city to us, as if for the first time.

Notes toward Beauty

“I don’t trust beauty anymore,” I once wrote, “when will I stop believing it?” And elsewhere, “because beauty (fixed, triumphant) isn’t my friend, is it?” That is part of the truth. The other part of the truth is that without a notion of beauty, an embodiment of the possible beyond the abjections of the mundane, I would not have become a poet, would not, perhaps, have left behind the Bronx housing projects and tenements at all. It is very fashionable, indeed almost *de rigueur*, to condemn beauty as oppressive: at worst an ideological mystification, at best a distraction from the real work. (Lenin couldn’t listen to music for this reason: he distrusted the power it had over him, fearing it would enervate him and make him too soft to do the hard things that had to be done). As poet Jay Hopler writes, “It is hard to believe beauty is the new ugliness. / But it must be, why else would so many of my contemporaries mock it so?” And simplified, distorted notions of beauty have too often been deployed for vicious ends: the Nazi cult of Aryan beauty is the most egregious example. (Though I am also reminded that the sculptures of Arno Breker, Hitler’s court artist, are actually *ugly*. But Leni Riefenstahl’s straining, triumphant Olympians are not.) Adorno’s point remains: “Beauty of any kind has to face the question of whether it is in fact beautiful or whether it is just a fake claim resting on static affirmation.”

It is common to confuse the beautiful with the pretty, an ornamental irrelevance, to oppose the pleasing to some more exigent or severe realm above and beyond the merely beautiful. This perspective situates beauty at the midpoint of a continuum from the pretty to the beautiful to the sublime: beauty is thus a form of mediocrity or compromise. It was Edmund Burke who first distinguished between the beautiful and the

sublime as that which submits to us versus that which overwhelms us, that which could destroy us but does not. Immanuel Kant and (more recently) Jean-François Lyotard have elaborated on this distinction. In this view, beauty reassures and comforts: it supplies us with the already known, while the sublime crashes over us like the storm surge of an out-of-season hurricane. As Susan Sontag has observed, “Beauty is part of the history of idealizing, which is itself part of the history of consolation. But beauty may not always console. The beauty of face and figure torments, subjugates; that beauty is imperious. The beauty that is human, and the beauty that is made (art)—both raise the fantasy of possession. Our model of the disinterested comes from the beauty of nature—a nature that is distant, over-arching, unpossessable.”

Beauty is insistent; it makes demands. It demands that we see it and acknowledge it, that we acknowledge our seeing, that we be changed by the experience. As Rilke wrote, beauty is the beginning of a terror that we are barely able to endure. And as Francis Bacon wrote, there is no beauty that hath not some proportion of strangeness in it. To quote Thomas Nashe’s “A Litany in Time of Plague,” a poem that celebrates and embodies the beauty of annihilation, a poem whose speaker is, in part, dying of beauty,

Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closèd Helen’s eye.
I am sick, I must die.

The terror that Kant equated with the sublime is synonymous with Rilke’s beauty: the sublime is beauty’s true face, like Zeus revealing himself to Semele in all his glory, like Yahweh whose back alone can be glimpsed by the mortal eye. Beauty is not kind or benign; it is a natural force, amoral, beyond good and evil. Like the pleasure/pain of orgasm, like Roland Barthes’s *jouissance*, it is shattering, ecstatic: we are beside ourselves, outside ourselves. Beauty burns and devours: we die to our old selves and rise reborn.

I have quoted and cited, referred and alluded, but I am still

no prophet. What do *I* believe—and which *I*, and at what time? Perhaps this near-chrestomathy is evidence, however circumstantial, that beauty is not merely personal or idiosyncratic. I have felt haunted by the beauty of men that I did not possess and could not make mine (beauty calls to beauty, after all, though beauty also demands an audience, an audience that is presumably not beautiful: otherwise it would contemplate itself), and felt crushed by the distance between myself and what I wished to have, wished to become. I have felt both enraptured by and utterly alienated from the beauty of nature, which was other to me so fundamentally that there was no feeling of exclusion, but simply pure alterity. There was no wish, no possibility, that I could be a waterfall plunging into a gorge, though I have felt that vertiginous urge to plummet into white water and shale. But there was, there is, a wish to preserve that moment of apprehension. This is one of the things poetry means to me: the possibility of mediating between being and desire, of bridging alterity by articulating it. “To articulate” also means “to connect.” One way a poem begins for me is with the question, “How do these things relate to one another?” Language itself is articulation in two senses: it speaks and it connects. Liminal, nothing in itself but everything in relation, a bridge between the material and the immaterial, between image and idea, signifier and signified, all language is conjunction, copula, commingling. The real waits in a corner, never to be spoken, but only spoken of . . . Only connect, as E. M. Forster wrote.

I decided I wanted to be a poet (an asymptote, approached but never truly reached: in that regard like beauty itself) because I was overwhelmed by the ambivalent, contradictory beauty of Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which seemed not simply to speak to and of my life but to replace it, if only fleetingly, with something more meaningful. Amorphous misery had been made form, suffering had been transformed to shape. I hated the poem for eluding me, for not surrendering itself immediately to my understanding; I loved it for its power of fascination. I sought by becoming a poet a share in that power, to be, if not a thing of beauty in myself (that would have been too much to ask for), then at least a source of beauty. As Frank O’Hara writes in his “Autobiographia Literaria,” “And

here I am, the / center of all beauty! / writing these poems! / Imagine!" So much for the unkind animals and the fleeing birds . . .

I wrote once that many of my poems constitute an argument between beauty and justice, and it has long been the fashion to oppose the two, as if the falsehoods of beauty were unmasked by the unsparing eye of justice. But I believe, with Elaine Scarry and many others, that ultimately, and perhaps paradoxically, beauty and justice are one, that beauty presents us with the possibility of things as they should be. As Susan Sontag writes, "the various definitions of beauty come at least as close to a plausible characterization of virtue, and of a fuller humanity, as the attempts to define goodness as such."

Beauty is outside the bounds of good and evil, and yet it enacts a rightness of relation that has an ethical dimension. (Stendhal wrote that beauty is the promise of happiness, though that promise is often broken.) In that sense beauty does embody virtue, as Plato believed, and demands of us that we embody that virtue: for who doesn't want to be beautiful, who wouldn't be beautiful if he could? The presence of beauty reminds us of its all too frequent absence, and demands that we remedy that absence to the best of our ability, if only to salve the pain of lack. Again in Rilke's words, there is no part that does not see you: you must change your life. The rightness of beauty is a form of justice: just proportion, just harmony (even in seeming discord), the just relation of parts to the whole and the whole to the parts. In this sense beauty, in its form rather than its content, offers an imago of the just society. Friedrich Schlegel makes this analogy explicit when he writes that "Poetry is republican speech: a speech which is its own law and end unto itself, and in which all the parts are free citizens and have the right to vote." The pain that beauty often induces (beauty is something we undergo, a passion) is the pain of the awareness of the absence of such a thing in or as our lives, beauty's reminder of our own inadequacy. Rilke's archaic torso is after all a fragment of a god: beauty shines out in what remains, reminding us of a wholeness just out of reach. It reminds us of the possible that does not exist.

Beauty isn't particularly good for anything, except perhaps

helping one get laid, if one happens to *be* beautiful, and I like the idea of its uselessness. In a society so over-ruled by instrumental reason, to be good for nothing is perhaps simply to be good: in its inutility, beauty manifests what Kant called the kingdom of ends, in which people and things exist in and for themselves and not as the means to other ends (profit, power). In Sartre's terms, beauty is the domain of the for-itself and the in-itself. Beauty is gauche and inconvenient and often embarrassing (or at least our responses to beauty are, making us lose composure, lose our cool) and altogether in excess of what is required, what is asked for, what is appropriate. I dwell among these visions of excess, altogether inadequate to their demands, and hope that my failure even to attempt a definition of the beautiful might be taken as an instantiation of my title—beauty can only be approached, but never actually reached—and thus as an assent to beauty's refusal to be mastered by the understanding.

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One State of the Art

What I value most in poetry is passion, a passion that manifests itself most immediately in the words that are the poem's body *and* its soul. I find this passionate intensity in the verbal argosies of Hart Crane's "Voyages," in the sly obliquity and exuberant surprise of Dickinson's "I would not paint a picture," or in the chilly intimacies of Stevens's "The Snow Man." It was the passion that I found there, including very prominently the passion in, for, and of language, which first drew me to poetry, which made poetry essential to me, and which made me want to become a poet myself.

Dominated by the twin poles of earnestly mundane anecdote and blank-eyed, knee-jerk irony, much contemporary American poetry is embarrassed by passion, by large gestures, and by major aspirations, as if they were immodest at best, dishonest at worst. As Jorie Graham has said in an interview with critic Thomas Gardner, "we have been handed down by much of the generation after the modernists—by their strictly secular sense of reality (domestic, confessional), as well as by their unquestioned relationship to the act of representation—an almost untenably narrow notion of what [poetry] is capable of." This inheritance still dominates the poetic mainstream, despite the many and diverse openings of the field since then. American poetry still tends to dismiss or ignore those possibilities which cannot be neatly packaged and contained. Among poets who reject the mainstream mode, including those who see themselves as experimental or even "oppositional," too many retreat into easy, evasive sarcasm and tidy, self-congratulatory ironies (what poet Joshua Corey calls "phrases meeting cute").

T. S. Eliot wrote that the poet must be as intelligent as possible; Wallace Stevens wrote that the poem must resist the intel-

ligence almost successfully. Poetry occurs in the play between the intelligence of language and language's resistance to intelligence. What matters is not what a poem can *say* but what a poem can *do*. As W. H. Auden wrote, poetry is "a way of happening." I look to poetry for what only poems can do, or what poems can do best, to treat language as an end rather than a means: to communication, expression, or even truth. This moment of apprehension of language as an in-itself and a for-itself is both a model of the possibility and a palpable instance, however fleeting, of nonalienated existence. Poetry's resistance to facile communication (which is not to say that poetry does not and cannot communicate) is the promise of happiness it embodies, a promise continually broken by society, but kept alive by art, which thus becomes a standing reproach to society. To imagine language as something that one simply "uses," either well or badly, is to imagine a world that is merely a collection of objects of use. It is away from this instrumental reason that poetry leads us. I treasure such lines as these by Alvin Feinstein not because of any statement they make, however interesting, about the problematics of knowledge and perception, but because something is *happening* in them that happens nowhere else:

. . . More bold,
The discrepant mind will break
The centrum of its loss, now
Sudden and again,
Mistake its signature, as though
Snow were its poem out of snow.

As Adorno reminds us, art is the enemy of culture, and culture tries constantly to kill art by mummifying it, whether in terms of "taste" or in terms of "political" responsibility. To quote Jean-François Lyotard in a different context, poetry is "that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable."

When I began writing poetry in the late 1970s and early

1980s, I felt very alone in my aims and ambitions; much of the modernist poetry that inspired me to become a poet was either dismissed or actively rejected by the prevailing aesthetic of transparency and unrectified feeling, what Charles Altieri has called the scenic style. In the early and mid-1980s, I was inspired and encouraged by the work of such poets as Kathleen Fraser, Jorie Graham, Robert Hass, Ann Lauterbach, Jane Miller, Michael Palmer, John Peck, and Donald Revell, as well as by the work of my undergraduate teachers Ben Belitt and Alvin Feinman, two true inheritors of Hart Crane, and by the work of Marilyn Hacker, an unashamedly “flashy” amalgam of traditional lyric topoi and formal fluency with the varied languages and matter of the contemporary urban world. These poets took up some of the lapsed projects of modernism, unafraid to confront the larger questions of word and world and their intricate interrelationships with which modernism grappled. Even in their critiques of modernism, these poets still recognized the possibilities modernism offered the contemporary poet. Such possibilities are often foreclosed or simply ignored by both the poetic mainstream and the self-appointed experimental opposition, both of which in their different ways tend to shrug off the heritage of the lyric, its passions, its hungers, and its glories.

Michael Palmer has said in an interview that though he is sympathetic to and even inspired by much of the work of Language poetry, he himself could never be a Language poet, due to his commitment to the lyric. A commitment to the lyric means, for one thing, that the self (and its much-mystified, much-maligned literary hypostasis, poetic voice), however problematized and decentered, is not discarded; it also means that beauty is not cast aside as obsolete or dishonest. Such a commitment rejects a purely negative or critical role for poetry, for art in general (what Joshua Corey has described as the corrosive postmodern “No,” these days too often reduced to an even more corrosive postmodern “Whatever”), in favor of one that, while incorporating critique and interrogation, emphasizes poetry’s creative potential, the capacity not only to critique the actually existing world, but to propose alternative possibilities, the other-than of utopia. It’s too often forgotten that the German critical theorist Theodor Adorno’s relentless negativity, his re-

fusal of things as they are, was in the service of a great hope, the possibility, however often deferred, of a just society and an unalienated life, a world to which one could freely assent.

Now that Language poetry, a term that has become so broad as to be almost meaningless except as an all-purpose pejorative or honorific (depending on one's position), has become institutionalized, turning into an academicism of its own (many of its original practitioners and propagandists now teach at various universities, after years of having condemned the academy as irredeemably reactionary and oppressive at worst, compromised at best), the opposition of experimental poetry and mainstream poetry has become more ritualized than ever. Both worlds, of the mainstream and the avant-garde, are remarkably insular, willfully ignoring anything outside of their closed-in worlds, or acknowledging it only to disdain it, as in experimental poets' pat dismissals of the imaginary and imaginarily monolithic "School of Quietude," which they define more in terms of social and institutional affiliations (and proclaimed or assumed authorial intent) than by any attention to the actual work. Indeed, sometimes work from the two "camps" is distinguishable only by the author's name and publisher: the reception of the text is completely subsumed by its context. As Oren Izenberg has written, "the poet's felt need to find a tradition has hardened into the demand to pick a side; and style is taken as a sort of a declaration of allegiance. . . . As a general rule, critical and poetic partisans, bent on consolidating, celebrating, claiming or extending one tradition, take note of the other (if they take note of it) just long enough to deride—and such derision is a reflexive reaction rather than an analytic one."

I am particularly disturbed by the self-righteous complacency of what poet Ron Slate calls the avant-gardeners, so smugly convinced that the grass on their side of the fence is not only greener but more virtuous. Their willful blindness to work by anyone who isn't a member of their club is especially problematic in light of their project's justification by its spirit of exploration and openness to the unknown. When it comes to the work of anyone they label a member of the "School of Quietude," all is already known, and there is never any doubt as to who is a member of this so-called school. If you're not one of us,

you're one of them, and it is you who (by definition) are guilty of complacency and self-satisfaction. Such unnuanced either/or thinking is the opposite of openness and exploration, though it could be termed "oppositional" in a pejorative sense.

What gets lost in all this territorialization and fence-building is *poetry*, and more specifically, actual *poems*, as readerly experiences and aesthetic artifacts. It's hard to see how one can care about poems when one has always already read any poem (or rather, any poet) one comes across, which too many on both sides of the divide seem to have done. As Ann Lauterbach acutely observes,

The aspiring young poet begins to write in such a way as to invite a certain critical attention, to "fit" her work into one or another critical category. This is the main function of being identified with a group or school, to draw critical attention that individual poets, not affiliated with a movement or group, cannot easily attract. "New York School" or "Language Poetry" are given brand-name status, commodifying and homogenizing, so that critics (and poets) can make general identifications and totalizing critiques without having to actually contend with the specific differences among and between so-called members of the group. Those not so identified are left out, often understandably embittered or confused, as the idea of an individual iconoclastic poet gives way to collaborative and tribal identities.

The possibility that different poets and different kinds of poetry may be doing different but equally worthwhile sorts of things (one that is taken for granted in the world of contemporary visual art) is also rarely considered, or is dismissed as mere liberal pluralism and co-optation.

The opposition of mainstream and avant-garde poetry has become almost as ritualized as the opposition of poetry and criticism, in which poets demonize criticism as the death of literature and the imagination and critics condescend to poets at best and utterly ignore them at worst. This is part of what the brilliant poet and critic Susan Stewart has called the "general climate of anti-intellectualism and refusal of speculation by many American poets" (and that very much includes many experimentalist poets, who too often neglect the intellectual underpinnings of

their practice). In this context, the prose of poet-critics such as Stewart and Allen Grossman has also been important in proposing the largest possibilities for poetry in its specificity as poetry.

Many more recent poets, following and extending the paths pointed out by the poets mentioned above, along with others whose work I encountered later, such as Michael Anania, Meimei Berssenbrugge, Lucie Brock-Broido, Alice Fulton, Allen Grossman, Susan Mitchell, Bin Ramke, Peter Sacks, Aaron Shurin, Susan Stewart, and Cole Swensen, have unembarrassedly embraced the rhetorical and verbal splendors shunned by both camps. The mainstream rejects such resources because they are not “genuine” or “authentic”; experimental poets reject them because of their ideological baggage as part of an oppressive bourgeois culture, what I have heard referred to in all seriousness as the “hegemonic capitalist institution of literature.” In her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1990*, Jorie Graham commented on “a renewed fascination with very high diction, surfaces that call attention to themselves” in recent poetry, while Marjorie Perloff has similarly noted an “enormous care for the materiality of words,” as well as “a new interest in Beauty, the aesthetic, the pleasure of the text.” While availing themselves of all the resources of the lyric tradition, such poets remain alert to the seductions of such splendors: they neither stop their ears to the sirens nor are lured onto the rocks by them. They sing, and see, and say, and refuse the temptation or the demand that they choose one or the other.

American poetry has been dominated by the opposition of sincerity and artifice, what might be called, to borrow a phrase from the French structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the raw and the cooked. Susan Stewart has called this binary a conflict between subjective and objective forms of poetic practice. In a perfect example of what T. S. Eliot lamented as the modern dissociation of sensibility, and forgetting the much-maligned New Critic Cleanth Brooks’s assertion that the union of the intellectual with the emotional is a symptom of imaginative power, emotional engagement is pitted against intellectual distance, the consolations of pathos are pitted against the fetishization of technique, reified subject matter is pitted against equally reified formal exploration. What Barthes called the pleasure of

the text is too often rejected by so-called experimental poets as a mystification, while mainstream poets frequently neglect it in the interest of allowing (or requiring) the reader to look through their words to their intentions. In both cases, pleasure and truth are pitted against one another in assumed antagonism; Charles Altieri has called this opposition the struggle between lyricism and lucidity.

Much of the work of the self-identified avant-garde feels like aimless noodling—there is little sense of urgency or necessity. Nothing is at stake, except the demonstration of how clever and “oppositional” the poet is, or how familiar he or she is with watered down versions of not quite *au courant* theory. (As Susan Stewart notes, “art practice that proceeds under the shadow of theory is doomed to be mere allegory [or illustration]; and . . . theories of art bound to particular historical practices are doomed to [be] apologetics.”) Rote gestures of rebellion are rehearsed, fueled more by a smugly self-righteous sense of superiority than by a will to change either the self or the world. The reader gets a mild frisson of harmless transgression and the satisfaction of knowing that he or she is a member of an exclusive club, disdaining the unenlightened *hoi polloi* who are still taken in by things. But who or what, anymore, is being rebelled against or subverted? The work’s minor dislocations and fragmentations have come to be expected and even demanded by its core audience. What is the effect of striking such pseudo-political postures in a vacuum of the like-minded? Given the inflated claims it makes for itself, as opposed to the affected (and disingenuous) modesty of the mainstream, the avant-garde’s failures and blindnesses are particularly glaring.

On the other hand, much mainstream American poetry (and there is indeed a mainstream, broad, sluggish, and muddy) seems never to have heard of modernism (or even, in too many cases, of Keats), retailing equally aimless examples of therapeutic self-exploration or convenient epiphanies in prosaic anecdotes not interesting or shapely enough to be short stories: what has been called the “I look out the window and I am important (or sensitive)” school. Whatever their claims to rawness or immediacy, the emotions, like the language in which they are conveyed, are precooked, processed, and individually packaged,

and inevitably mild. The postures and gestures of both camps have become equally habitual and mechanical, as Eavan Boland points out when she writes that in contemporary America “the lyric has become associated with muted ambitions and a predictable symmetry.”

Susan Stewart’s description of the prevailing situation at the beginning of the 1990s is still all too accurate with regard to much contemporary American poetry:

To write poetry at the present time is to be vividly caught between the surpluses of Romantic subjectivism and the depletions of modernist form. The rewards of a weak Romanticism in lyric—sentiment and empathy—seem both paltry and anachronistic, if not downright immoral, given their complicity with the reified and stylish forms of subjectivity that flourish in contemporary culture. . . . Yet those poets who continue a formulaic set of modernist conventions necessarily suffer from an equally disabling anachronism. First, there is the irony of traditionalizing the modernist project, a project which had sought a radical break with the continuity of lyric tradition. Second, approaching the modernist legacy as primarily a matter of *merely* formal experiments promotes an aesthetic of novelty and gimmickry—among those aspects of bourgeois commercial culture modernism took as its target in the first place.

Many highly polished poems from both ends of the contemporary spectrum (which is as much ideological as aesthetic) can be a bit empty, exercises in skill or virtuosity for its own sake: the reader feels that there is nothing at stake. (As Joshua Corey notes, vigor of form is essential to good poetry, but in some “experimental” work there is nothing *but* vigor of form—which is not the same as formal rigor.) Conversely, many emotionally raw poems can be too formally ragged, the art overwhelmed by its occasion. Reversing Pound’s dictum that technique is the test of a poet’s sincerity, many contemporary American poets seem to believe that technique is instead a sign of insincerity, that something too apparently shapely cannot be deeply felt, or that the urgencies of feeling are necessarily at odds with the imperatives of form. Even self-proclaimed avant-garde poets will often let

down their formal and experimental guard when they write a poem or a section of a poem that is overtly, even insistently, *About Something Important*.

The best American poets (among whom in the last century I would number both Eliot and Williams, Bogan and Oppen, Berryman and Duncan) explore the myriad potentials of the word as such while still holding fast to the protean demon of content, grappling fiercely with its ballasts and its resistances; they engage in what Pound calls “sensuous thought.” For them, artifice refines and intensifies passion, and passion checks and channels artifice—their poems are deeply felt *and* deeply formed. Their poetry matters and has matter.

The most exciting and valuable contemporary American poets (some of whom I have named above) fulfill the terms of what Allen Grossman has called the four tasks that the significant poet must be expected to perform: to point out what is significant in the world of common experience; to defeat given expectations with respect to how things are assembled (and poems themselves are very much in the category of “things”); to make clear how difficult it is to make meaning; and to make clear how interesting the world is. They are restless and searching, unafraid to be radical and ambitious in their engagements with both word and world. They don’t accept easy answers (including the easy answers of negation), but they refuse to dismiss the possibility of answers. Their work is not simply (or complexly) reactive and critical; instead, while understanding that creation often implies and entails critique, they chart new territories of lyrical exploration, producing new possibilities for poetry and for our lives.

Unlike so many members of the so-called avant-garde, they do not disdain communication; unlike most practitioners of the mainstream aesthetic of transparency, they realize that communication is as difficult and complex as it is urgent and necessary: they understand intellectually and viscerally the need to break through the crusts of habit and routine, of the already said that says nothing over and over. They are poets for whom the self is neither cynosure nor mystification, but rather an open question, something to be constructed (or construed). For them, experience is not prior to the poem but something we undergo with and within the poem: the poem itself is an experience.

While our best poets enact and embody emotions and ideas in their work, they also question and even erase the dichotomy between the emotional and the intellectual. Such poets have passion—their poems are not cold, though in some the fires may be banked, thus burning more intensely—yet their hearts are not on their sleeves but in their words. As Adorno writes, “The paradox specific to the lyric work, a subjectivity that turns into objectivity, is tied to the priority of linguistic form in the lyric. . . . Hence, the highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice.” This is the impossible, necessary reconciliation of subject and object that poetry proposes and enacts.

Such poets bring the word back to itself, and thus bring us as readers back to ourselves, though changed by our experience. They do not disdain or dismiss beauty, though they know that all true beauty has some proportion of strangeness and that, as H.D. wrote, beauty must have strength, and they will not settle for the easy and easily repeated beauties of the already-known. Finally but not last, recalling lyric’s origins in the lyre, none of them forgets to bring the music.

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Readings

On Alvin Feinman's "True Night"

I

Both one of the most talented and one of the most underappreciated poets of his generation, Alvin Feinman was born in 1929 and raised in New York City. Though always committed to poetry (including, in his words, "even doggerel narratives in early childhood"), he had originally decided on philosophy as a career, and did graduate work at Yale to that end, until he realized that the dominant analytical school excluded all the important philosophical questions. It was in poetry that those unanswerable questions, questions of knowledge, perception, and the relation between being and appearance, could properly be addressed. As Feinman has somewhat jocularly said, "I was, even philosophically, convinced that, as I liked to put it, if according to Aristotle, 'Poetry is more philosophical than history,' so is it more philosophical than philosophy. The work I'd have had to do in philosophy would be to lay out the grounds for privileging poetry—which indeed our era has been more or less doing—vide Heidegger, Rorty, Derrida, etc."

Though he has been named by Harold Bloom as part of the essential canon of Western literature—Bloom has written that "The best of his poems stand with the most achieved work of his generation, with the best of Ashbery, Merrill, Ammons, Hollander, and only a few others"—Feinman's work has only been anthologized six times (in volumes published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, most now out of print). He is not included in any of the standard anthologies of modern or modern American poetry, not even Cary Nelson's recent Oxford *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, which explicitly aims at recovering and redis-

covering neglected writers. Nor is he listed in the purportedly comprehensive *Contemporary Authors*.

Feinman's first book, *Preambles and Other Poems*, was published by Oxford University Press in 1964 to much praise from such figures as Allen Tate, Conrad Aiken, Geoffrey Hartman, and Bloom. (Bloom's discussion of this volume in his book *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* is the only extended treatment of Feinman's work of which I am aware.) Now out of print, it was reissued with a handful of additional poems by Princeton University Press as *Poems* in 1990; that volume is also out of print. Feinman's lack of a wider reputation is partly due to the unabashed difficulty of his poems, though as Harold Bloom writes, "their difficulty is their necessity" (*The Ringers in the Tower*, 315). In larger part, this neglect is due to his distaste for the rituals of literary self-promotion.

Alvin Feinman is a true visionary poet, heir to Stevens and Crane in the modern line and, further back, to Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley, poets who invented human consciousness as a subject matter for poetry. In Harold Bloom's description, "the central vision in [*Preambles*] is of the mind, ceaselessly an *activity*, engaged in the suffering process of working apart all things that are joined by it" (315). Bloom calls this "a tragedy of the mind, victim to its own intent, which is to make by separations" (316).

Feinman's poems demand much of the reader (at times resisting the intelligence almost successfully, as Stevens said that the poem should), but they offer many rewards in return, among them dazzling imagery (light and the work light does is omnipresent) and dense, rich verbal music. They can be experienced and enjoyed before they are understood.

John Hollander has written that Feinman's poetry explores the indefinable boundary between the visual and the visionary. In one of the blurbs for *Preambles*, Conrad Aiken wrote that Feinman's work was "true metaphysical poetry," and Feinman's philosophical background is evident in his work. The poems constitute an epistemological and phenomenological investigation of the world, a probing of the surfaces of things that moves from seeing to seeing-into to seeing-through to the other side of appearances, the luminous interior of the material world. As Bloom has written, the "opposition between the imaginative self

and reality seems as central to these poems as it was to Stevens' and as grandly articulated."

II

Alvin Feinman is also the only person in my life whom I could truly call a mentor. I have had professors from whom I've learned, who have taught me valuable things about my work (sometimes intentionally, sometimes inadvertently or even against their will). But few were truly formative, and fewer still were both consistent and constructive in their attention.

Alvin, with whom I did my undergraduate creative writing thesis at Bennington College, never "did anything" for me but help me write better poems. He never did anything *to* me but make me see that however pleased I was with something I'd just written, it could always be better, *had* to be better if I were to call myself a poet. For Alvin, to be a poet was always an aspiration, not something one could claim to *be*. I think if I'd have asked him he would have said, "I would *like* to be a poet."

Alvin expected everything of poetry, his own and others'. As he once said to me, "Poetry is always close kin to the impossible, isn't it?" There was no point in reading a poem unless it was great, and no point in writing a poem unless it (not you: *it*) aspired to greatness. As a teacher, he was especially alert to the occasions when a poem failed to live up to its own possibilities, when it fell away into the mundane from the finer revelations it proposed. Usually the poem failed by settling for the merely personal. For Alvin, one's interest in oneself had no place in poetry, and in his poems one will find not face but mask. But it's a mask more alive than the great mass of mere faces.

For Alvin, you were always the least important thing in your poem, and a story was only as good as the metaphors it could give rise to, could become. Anything can tell a story: only a poem can raise story into metaphor. "Too unmetaphorizable" was one of Alvin's most damning phrases. "This achieves true metaphor" was one of his highest praises. Alvin helped me learn the difference between whether something was done well and whether it need be done at all. He warned against the dangers of what he

called “fluency über alles,” of writing something because you can or because you want to. What you want has no place in poetry: only what the poem wants matters. He once said of a poem of mine that he saw little in it but my desire to write a poem, and he saw accurately. But Alvin also taught me to listen more carefully, to look more closely, to be more aware of the *poem*’s intentions. His is an example I am constantly trying to live up to.

III

True Night

So it is midnight, and all
The angels of ordinary day gone,
The abiding absence between day and day
Come like true and only rain
Comes instant, eternal, again:

As though an air had opened without sound
In which all things are sanctified,
In which they are at prayer—
The drunken man in his stupor,
The madman’s lucid shrinking circle;

As though all things shone perfectly,
Perfected in self-discrepancy:
The widow wedded to her grief,
The hangman haloed in remorse—
I should not rearrange a leaf,

No more than wish to lighten stones
Or still the sea where it still roars—
Here every grief requires its grief,
Here every longing thing is lit
Like darkness at an altar.

As long as truest night is long,
Let no discordant wing
Corrupt these sorrows into song.

“True Night” is a lovely example of what Bloom calls “a central sensibility seeking imaginative truth without resorting to any of the available evasions of consciousness,” whose tempta-

tions are both acknowledged and refused. The poem opens at midnight, “The abiding absence between day and day,” a present absence that is both instant (and an instant) and eternal, because it is no given day and no single time, but rather the moment between dates. This no-time is all times, both everlasting and utterly ephemeral. It is (or rather, it is “As though”—what we know is not the thing itself, but only its appearance, our own knowing of it) an air that has opened soundlessly, an air that we take into ourselves with every breath. Particularly within the precincts of a poem, the phrase “an air” in conjunction with the evocation of sound calls up a pun on the Renaissance sense of an “air” as a song. Here, it is a song without sound; it was Keats who wrote that unheard melodies are sweetest, and this soundless air is sweeter than any song one could ever hear.

Here in this time that is no time, the polarity of identity and difference is suspended, and opposites meet. Things are beside themselves, at peace with their own restlessness and discontent, their own failure to be identical with themselves: they are “Perfect in self-discrepancy,” like the off-rhyme of the words “perfectly” and “discrepancy.” All wrongs are posed in the perfection of a still life, no less wrong but now transfigured into necessity and equipoise: “Here every grief requires its grief.” The poet’s task is both to capture this momentless moment and to leave it undisturbed, to touch its untouchability into art without marring or altering it. The line “I should not rearrange a leaf” can be read either as “I wouldn’t rearrange a leaf even if I could, all is perfect as it is” or as “I should abandon any desire to rearrange a leaf, to insert my own will into the seen/scene.” For this poem, paradise is paradox, where longing (the source of suffering, according to the Buddha) is illumination, and to be lit is to be like darkness “at an altar,” at prayer, prayed to, or both.

The poem’s last stanza insists that no discordant wing (shattering the harmony of the soundless air) should be allowed to corrupt the sorrows the poem presents into song, at least “As long as truest night is long.” That is to say, this admonition holds both forever and only for the most fleeting of (non)moments. And yet the poem itself, unavoidably, is a song (“lyric,” after all, comes from “lyre”), voiced and heard. The poem both

“mystically” asserts a paradoxical concord (echoing and amplifying Stevens’s avowal that “The imperfect is our paradise”) and takes a potentially ironic stance toward it: the poem is both entranced and undeluded.

The inescapable paradox of “True Night,” the truth that it both embodies and struggles against in the name of truth, is that the poem’s discordant wing *has* corrupted the scene into song: it is helpless not to do so, for otherwise there would be no poem. But the poem has also acknowledged and honored the difference between scene and song: it has reminded us that *is* remains *is* however much mind and music might wish it otherwise, however much metaphor and song might wish to translate being into seeming.

On Jorie Graham's *Erosion* *Poetry, Perception, Politics*

I

Jorie Graham is widely acknowledged as one of the most significant contemporary American poets, a poet who eschews straightforward autobiographical narrative or social commentary in favor of poetic investigations explicitly continuing and extending those of the great twentieth-century high modernists. As Bonnie Costello very accurately notes, Graham “emerged in the 1980s as a major poet, distinguished for her philosophical depth, her sensuous vision, the grandeur of her style and themes. In a decade of poetry stigmatized for its shrunken ambition, or sidetracked by politics and ideology, she celebrated the spiritual and metaphysical reach of art” (373). For all the transformations and self-interrogations that Graham’s work has undergone since the publication in 1980 of her first collection, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, this statement of the largeness of her ambitions and aspirations still holds true.

Graham is a poet fascinated by the traversal of boundaries, by the myriad reciprocal definitions of self and world, subject and object, idea and thing. In her fascination with the relationship of the many and the one, of the tangible and intangible worlds, she may fairly be called a metaphysical poet, one whose reach seeks to extend through and beyond the phenomenal world. In her penetrating gaze into things in order to see what lies inside and past them, she is a clear and acknowledged inheritor of such poets as Hopkins and Stevens. As Joanna Klink has noted, “Graham’s project . . . involves two motions of spirit: on the one hand, coaxing ideas—in their pre-entanglement with things—

out of the visible world, that they might be apprehended and recognized; on the other hand, translating ideas into physical realities, bringing them down into the body so that they are particular, concrete, visceral, known" (188). This essay will explore a few of the ways (some more successful than others) in which Graham deploys the entanglement of ideas and things.

My discussion centers around Graham's second collection, *Erosion*, a book that can be read as both the culmination and the close of her early period, a period based on contemplation and meditation (of the natural emblem in her first book, of the artistic emblem's refraction of the interplay of mind and nature in her second book). Since the publication of *Erosion*, her attention has turned from object to process, from artifact to narrative (and its myriad fractures and fractiousnesses), from noun to verb. But, particularly with regard to the often problematic approach to the relation of aesthetics and history, much of this later work has its roots in this book.

In Graham's third collection, *The End of Beauty*, the pivot between her earlier and her later periods, she both interrogates the methods and aims of her first two books and introduces the radically different modes and poetic intentions that her subsequent books have explored. The work of the period that *The End of Beauty* inaugurates abandons the commitment to the poem as an integral unity, calling such an artifactual conception into question as a false and potentially dangerous totality that evades or denies the fragmented, riven nature of the world and of our perceptions.

In contrast, the poems of *Erosion*, while fully acknowledging the mystery of the world, also maintain a faith in the mind's and the poem's capacity to make that mystery shapely, a faith in mystery's willingness to be seen clearly—what Costello calls pursuing the invisible in the visible (373). In Jean-François Lyotard's dichotomy, Graham's first two books are modern in their use of artistic technique and expertise "to present the fact that the un-presentable exists" (78). *Erosion* acknowledges fracture and blindness while incorporating them into a coherent whole, engaging in what Lyotard calls "the increase of being and the jubilation which result from the invention of new rules of the game" (80). Graham's work since *The End of Beauty* is postmodern in Lyotard's

sense, putting forth the unpresentable in presentation itself (Lyotard 81), undertaking what Helen Vendler has characterized as the breaking of style. Costello concurs in different terms with this assessment: “In [its] celebration of beauty over knowledge, and art over history, *Erosion* is essentially a modernist text, whereas Graham’s later work may be characterized as postmodern” (374). Later portions of this essay will explore the question of art’s relation to history, what Vendler calls “the counter-pulls of aspiration, material perception, and historical accountability” (*Given*, 93), in greater detail.

While Graham addresses and explores these questions of art and history, mind and accountability, in her later books, especially in several poems in *Regions of Unlikeness* and *Materialism*, I am interested in tracing out the incipience of trends and tendencies, particularly the slippage between the violence of aesthetic form and political-historical violence, which will become increasingly conspicuous in the books succeeding *Erosion*. *Erosion* is a crucial book in this regard, and this essay will maintain a concentrated focus on that volume. In *Erosion* Graham also began to display an inclination toward oracular utterance and philosophical pontification, a tendency that has strengthened in the collections following *The End of Beauty*, a book in which the poise between the poem as aesthetic object and the poem as field of action (the balance between thing and process, noun and verb) is maintained almost perfectly.

At times, and more frequently as her work has progressed, Graham’s nearly-free-association meditations descend from recognitions or revelations that the phenomenal world and the world that mind makes ultimately comprise a single world to implicit denials of the discrete existence of the two worlds as such. Her tropism toward the absolute or the transcendent sometimes entails an erasure, both procedural and substantive, of the resistant reality of the contingent that is her necessary ground. We “need to lean and rub against what isn’t thought” (*Erosion*, 71), but that unthought reality too easily and frequently gives way to the demands of mind in Graham’s poems. Helen Vendler describes this tendency in more positive terms: “Against writers who press against the opacity and resistance of the material world, [Graham] suggests its profundity and penetrability—though

there seems to be no stopping place for that penetration" (*Music*, 455). But as the final clause of this sentence implies, there is the danger that the resistance of the real to being reduced or inflated to an occasion for meditation can be ignored or erased, that rather than rooting the spiritual in the physical (as Vendler asserts they do), the poems simply take the physical as the occasion for their spiritual ramblings.

"For John Keats" asserts that "We live up here / by blurring boundaries, calling it *love*, *the present moment*, or *the beautiful*" (*Erosion*, 51). That the antecedent of "it" is left unspecified is telling, as is the equation of three quite different things (indeed, three different *kinds* of things) by simple juxtaposition. In Graham's consistent and constant discovery of the transcendent in the phenomenal, the particulars of any given poem sometimes seem like a pretext, as if she had first arrived at her destination and then contrived to undertake the journey. The conclusion of "For John Keats" admits this tendency, but attributes it to an inherent quality of the human mind, to a "We" that includes the reader and, presumably, all people, and thus seeks in advance to disarm such criticisms:

We live a harsh fecundity, it seems
to me, the symbol tripping much too freely
over everything
it signifies.

(*Erosion*, 51)

In her essay "Some Notes on Silence," published in 1984, the year after *Erosion* appeared, Graham describes this tendency to place the arrival before the undertaking in more positive terms:

Abstract diction, for instance, feels especially powerful to me because of its poignancy, the sense of desperation that informs it, the sense of a last avenue being resorted to, a last, bluntest tool. One feels that imagery has been relinquished, that naming—the word as amulet—is all we have left. . . . It's the urgency (not what teachers often tell us is the *laziness*) of abstraction that moves me. The sense that it is very late, and we must think fast and hard. Of course the language of image can do this, but it still believes in the physical world, in time

enough, in the storyline and its properties, beauties, while the notion of *resorting to* the colder stuff, the drier quicker tools, moves me often precisely because of its implied failures. (409)

It's notable that Graham writes of abstract *diction*, not of abstract thought, and significant also that it is the *notion* of such thought, or rather of the *resort* to such thought, and not the thought itself, that so moves her. One feels often that she is more interested in claiming the authoritative voice embodied in the forms of argument than in actually making arguments. Graham is a poet who will never resist the ravishments of "the word as amulet."

The Graham of *Erosion* is a Platonist: for her, the glue of experience, action, and perception is Idea: "Platonic dualism is both Graham's *donnée* and her demon" (Vendler, *Given*, 92). The world is infinitely suggestive, and what it suggests are ideas, notions, questions, further suggestions. The realm of general ideas that normally we abstract from the commotion of the particular is for Graham that by which she is moved to notate particulars at all. Graham is interested in things because they remind her of notions; each object suggests its idea, each idea suggests its object, reciprocally and interminably: "for Graham, what used to be called spirituality is a fact of life as self-evident as materiality" (Vendler, *Given*, 92). As Graham writes in "Reading Plato," this continual finding of idea in fact, this constant unfolding, is something

Past death, past sight,
this is
his good idea, what drives
the silly days
together. Better than memory. Better
than love.

(*Erosion*, 6–7)

This good idea, the making of meaning out of world, redeems the time that otherwise is mere sequence and succession (and since we are speaking of redemption, we should not forget that "silly" originally meant "innocent" or even "holy"). "How I would like to catch the world / at pure idea," Graham writes in "The

Nature of Evidence,” from her first book, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*: she always does, with the caveat that “I, /turning to it, find / only myself again” (*Hybrids*, 60). Clues to mind and spirit leap up at her out of everything, a transfiguring radiance, a nimbus of significances: everything is an instance of idea. And yet this love for the idea (Graham’s desire and pursuit of the whole) requires the closest, “strictest” (the word is Graham’s) attention to the particulars of the world. The numinous can blossom out of anything, can potentially be discovered anywhere, but only if we are looking, taking notice of what is.

In his sonnet “Correspondences” Baudelaire wrote that nature is a temple of living pillars from which issue forth confused words (“La Nature est un temple ou de vivants piliers / Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles”). But the confusion of those words does not disturb Graham: she is concerned not so much that they be read as that they are written, that pattern manifests itself, whether or not it can be understood. For Graham, the world is always and already textual: material things are always *inscribed* things. Like the flight of starlings across the sky whose pattern comprises “a regular syntax on wings” in her poem “Syntax” (*Hybrids*, 21), the world is structured like a language, always legible if not always translatable. At times Graham takes delight in that very confusion, which is also a profusion, a verdancy of word and sign, icon and symbol: her garden, her daylight. The voice of Graham’s poems is not that of someone thinking through or by means of language but that of someone musing in language: the language is as much the world she inhabits as is the other world of which it speaks. The infinite suggestiveness of the world is her enterprise, through which she seeks to dream herself back to silence. As she writes,

I think I am probably in love with silence, that other world.
And that I write, in some way, to negotiate seriously with it. . . .
Because there is, of course, always the desire, the hope, that
they are not two separate worlds, sound and silence, but they
become each other, only our hearing fails. (“Silence,” 409)

Graham intends for the blur between object and idea I have noted to stand in for a blur in the being of the world, demon-

strating by example that the boundaries between the many and the one are, if not artificial, then fluid and porous.

The paradox of Graham's meditative poetry, the mode Jonathan Holden calls the abstract lyric, is that it attempts to superimpose an armature of discursive thought on an imagist-derived technique of visualized presentation and a surrealist-derived technique of progression by juxtaposition. What is missing are the articulations of point to point, the structure of informed reasoning that justifies the choice and placement of each point. (Plato, after all, equated the realm of Ideas with the realm of perfect Reason.) Rhetoric (in the classical sense of the devices of persuasion) is emptied of content: one sometimes feels that any or all of the terms could be substituted without damaging or substantially altering the conclusions. The illustrations, at times, seem both arbitrary and more to the point than the arguments. Neither the general nor the particular stands as itself in Graham's poems: they correspond to one another to such a degree that the ground of distinctions on which the reader could assent to or dissent from any given statement, or even (at times) ascertain precisely what has been stated, vanishes. Too often, both the argument and the evidence are allowed no appeal except to the language and images (emblems on amulets) in which they are couched. But yet the poems do claim to make arguments.

The lack of a system of relations (such as that represented by the categories of logic and abstract reasoning, as opposed to the verbal gestures of abstract diction) beyond those established in the poem, in combination with the poem's implicit or explicit claim to taking recourse in such "objective" systems of relation (one of the poems in *Erosion* is entitled "The Age of Reason"), often makes the images and the ideas they represent or embody resist the intelligence all too successfully. The poem sounds as if it has made a statement, but after reading it one can't recall what it is that was said, or to what it applies: one cannot say whether Graham has revealed relationships in and through the poem or merely concocted them for the sake of the poem. The articulation occurs in a closed system that presents itself as our common realm of thought, while withholding from the reader the means by which the validity of the articulations could be measured. In his *Articulate Energy*, Donald Davie calls this emptying-out of

logical and rhetorical forms “pseudo-syntax.” Davie considers this phenomenon endemic to and even definitive of twentieth-century poetry: Graham’s practice foregrounds both the strengths and the weaknesses of such a procedure.

At its best, Graham’s method of argument by illumination, association, and juxtaposition allows the reader not so much to follow a line of reasoning as feel it enacted, to experience its unfolding. When the method fails, the poet, by assuming the trappings (and the claims, eventual though they may be) of the discourse of reason, leaves herself open to the charge of intellectual dishonesty. In her essay “Pleasure,” Graham takes note of this danger, and appeals to the authority of fact as a guarantor of honesty, which she here equates with truth:

if it is not *there*, finally, and *knowable*, finally, how can we be responsible for it, to it, split atom or pool of blood? And so I try to bring fact into a poem for my own good, in order to experience the limits of the imagination, if you will, in order to feel (in the act of writing the poem) what it is that escapes me, what judges me, keeping me true. (91–92)

The question remains of just how distant that final appeal remains, of how resistant “facts” are to evacuation or inflation. As Vendler notes, “Modernity, because of the importance it ascribes to empirical knowledge, demands that art be true as well as beautiful” (*Given*, 102). But the notion of truth is often too yielding in Graham’s poems, insufficiently resistant to and distinct from her imaginative operations.

As Emmanuel Levinas (whom Graham cites in the notes to her 1997 volume *The Errancy*) reminds us, too strong a desire for oneness can pose a grave threat to the particular: the one may overwhelm the many. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas distinguishes between two kinds of philosophy, one that seeks to bring the world into a unified whole bounded by concepts and erases the remainder, and one that seeks relations with distinct and infinitely alien others, that recognizes the limits that alterity places on and demands of the self and its projection into and onto the world. While Graham couches her poetics in terms of a dialogue with the unknowable, acknowledging and even cele-

brating her inability to bring the world under her conceptual command, her appeal to the authority of fact falls short of Levinas's sense of ethical compulsion. She neglects the degree to which responsibility to and for the Other delimits the possibilities of self-definition, the way that the Other's existence acts as a challenge to and an interrogation of the self. Rather than serving resistant facts out of a sense of reverence toward their irreducible otherness, she seeks them as sources of stimulation, as a tool for her own self-definition. They draw the limits of her kingdom.

Her kingdom is opulent indeed, a lush garden of lures and delights. One of the many rewards of Graham's poetry is a unique and rich verbal texture: she is a very musical poet, using Susanne Langer's definition of music as the art that articulates without asserting, and presents us not with thoughts and feelings but with the shape of thinking and of feeling. As Graham writes in her essay "Pleasure," "this is what Stevens meant when he said the poem is the *act* of the mind in the process of finding what will suffice. Not having found what will . . ." (93; ellipses in the original). One feels that Graham would assent to John Ashbery's statement that "What I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of this argument remain unknown quantities" (cited in McClatchy 45–46). Indeed, in a 1987 interview with Thomas Gardner, she has spoken of the "intoxicating and scary" (and also comforting) "*musical illusion*" of coherence that Ashbery's poems generate (Gardner 220); this musical illusion is an effect that her own poems often produce. At times, Graham is so ravished by her own felicities, so caught and mastered by the flow of aural and visual suggestion, that she loses or willingly lets go of the thread (that is, the shape) of her argument (which always, as she writes in "Two Paintings by Gustav Klimt," "has something to do / with pleasure") beneath or among the bright come-and-go of the poem's glittering finish. Mary Kinzie has noted Graham's tendency to equate abstract nouns by sheer proximity and juxtaposition, the sometimes too-facile yoking of opposites (19). One could say that Graham is a poet of brilliant surfaces, a rider on the surface tension of the

phenomenal, conceptual, and verbal worlds, gliding over depths of which she takes note but into which she does not delve. Emerson wrote that “We live amid surfaces and the true art of life is to skate well on them” (cited in Melnyczuk 599), and the Graham of *Erosion* would most likely agree with him. As she writes in “In What Manner the Body Is United With the Soule,” it is

Not that I heard
very deep,
but heard there was a depth.
(*Erosion*, 12)

“Music is the Symbolist art because its relation to the empirical element is weak; it finds no difficulty in releasing itself to a condition of pure form. But words drag the ball and chain behind, the burden of [meaning]” (Donoghue 63). Approaching the Paterian condition of music, sheer expressive form, Graham’s poems present us not so much with thoughts themselves as with how thought feels, suggestions and impressions of thought, the processes of thought: as Susanne Langer puts it, “Articulation is [music’s] life, but not assertion; expressiveness but not expression” (cited in Davie 17). Graham makes her arguments by musical and associative rather than logical persuasion. Discussing Graham’s poem “Reading Plato,” Eavan Boland calls attention to the music of imagery as an analogous poetic feature to the music of sound, describing it as “a sequence of images whose structure and effect are prompted more by the laws of instinct than the dictates of logic, by melodic allusion rather than clear thinking” (Boland 13). In her best work, Graham marries instinct and logic, giving the reader both the way of saying and the something said, the two-in-one of which she is so enamored, the (verbal) “self-portrait as both parties” put into the mouth of the world.

II

Graham is struck by so much, and each particular strikes her with the force of a universal: or rather, *as* the force of a univer-

sal. In “Kimono,” Graham splits herself in two in order to examine her own process of knowing, identifying herself simultaneously with the “flat archaic fabric” that “means the world” to us, mimicking the world, or rather “the style / of the world,” and the perceiver of that fabric, who is explicitly characterized as a voyeur, though innocent because free of intent other than his own observation. He has no motive but to know, and in his innocence he mistakes his knowledge for reality (Costello 383). Graham assumes a complicity between the two (the poem can be considered another self-portrait as both parties), indicating a partnership (as in a dance) between the human agent of knowledge and the natural world of his knowledge (which indifferently may or may not *be* the world), as though the world cooperated in being caught “at pure idea,” playing at being caught or captured.

Graham characterizes the relation between the two as one of a male knower and a female known, a male agent of subjectivity and a female object of this male subjectivity’s operations, but undermines both the characterization and its possible critique of gender roles (and the rottenness of both) by making the male subject “a small boy” and making herself both the object and the organizing voice and intelligence of the poem, a subject to whom the boy-voyeur is object: though his knowledge makes hers possible, her knowledge encloses his. Perhaps this very gesture of reversal and inclusion embodies a subversion of patriarchal modes of knowledge: in this poem’s world, the ultimate and defining gaze, the gaze of gazes, is female. The woman watches the boy watching her, and while she knows that she is watched he does not know that he is: “He thinks / I don’t see him.” While she pretends she is alone, he believes he is: this ignorance is both an indicator of and an apologia for his innocence, “late” as it is in the history of human experience to mistake perception for knowledge. By making such a mistake, the little boy makes his knowledge possible; through his belief in what he sees, he makes “the green scrim to be / such an open door” to “something / most whole.” She wears a work of art he mistakes for the world (he looks at a painting, which is a variety of mirror, thinking he is looking through a window), a mimic of

valleys, clear skies,
thawing banks
narcissus and hollow reeds
break through.

(*Erosion*, 38)

The “tiny / eternal // delay which is our knowing” that enchants her enchants him because he does not recognize it; to him it is simply “our flesh,” “the world.” As Graham writes in the poem “Erosion,” “it is our slowness I love, growing slower, / tapping the paintbrush, tapping the mind,” in which the “tapping” is both the rousing of the mind from its solipsistic reverie by the objects of the natural world and the drawing upon the power of the mind to remake the world in its own image.

I am fascinated by the mediations of this poem, what Graham elsewhere calls “all description all delay this roundabout the eye must love.” The woman sees the boy see the “flat archaic fabric,” a boy who thinks he is seeing the world (and seeing the world in seeing *her*), who does not see that he is seen but who by his presence makes possible both what he sees (as seen) and his own being seen: “It means the world to him.” The “flat archaic fabric” of the kimono mediates between the speaker’s body and the world. It enacts in the two-dimensionality of its secondary body a perceptual mediation; in its age, a temporal mediation; in its being man-made, a mediation and meeting of the natural and the artificial, the natural and the human; and in its being made by dead men and women of another country and culture, a mediation between one period and place of human experience and another. We descend into a kind of infinite regress of perception and conception: as the speaker says, it is late “in this world we have mis- / taken.” The poem is a picture of a boy watching the world that is a picture of a boy watching an image of the world that is a picture of a boy watching a woman that is a picture of a woman watching herself be so seen. In which case the innocence (that word again) of all watchers and all watched, all victims and victimizers, is guaranteed because the world co-operates, it bends and loosens its stays for us, releasing itself into our knowledge, pretending to be whole, “so believable / [it’s] true.”

Just as the kimono and its wearer abstract the world for the little boy, a small yet also an accurate spirit, so the world abstracts itself for us “eternally beyond // the casual crumbling forms / of boughs.” We are absolved of the voyeurism that is the inevitable nature of perception because the world is subject as well as object; we are watched reciprocally. As Hopkins wrote in his journals, “What you look hard at seems to look hard at you, hence the true and the false instress of nature” (210). The world performs for us its “style,” and it is only that style that we know, the signatures of things rather than the things themselves. Graham’s poem does not acknowledge the necessity or even the possibility of distinguishing between what Hopkins calls the “the true and the false instress of nature”: it is “the enchanted gap” between ourselves and the world, this paradoxically “tiny / eternal delay which is our knowing” that gives itself to us. The world, beyond its “crumbling forms of boughs,” “just past / the abstract branches,” holds itself apart, remaining “something / most whole” (*Erosion*, 39).

III

“Reading Plato” (who else, in this world of correspondences and ideas, would one be reading?) announces itself in its first lines: “This is the story of a beautiful / lie, what slips / through my fingers, / your fingers.” The artist fashions her poems much as the speaker’s friend fashions his flies (both creations the work of the hands), “so believable / they’re true.” For Plato, art is mendacious not simply because it is not real or not true but because it *imitates* the real, a lure that catches us in and with a copy of the realm of material particulars, which is itself only a copy of the realm of general Ideas. Art is thus at two removes from the true. In the *Apology*, Plato establishes a fundamental dichotomy between the true, the realm of philosophy, and the believable, the realm of sophistry. From this viewpoint, the believability of the work of art is exactly the measure of its lack of truth. Graham elides the two terms easily: truth is in the mind, belief is in the mind, what matters is that something come of it—in the mind. The result is its own justification, so long as it

is beautiful. In Bonnie Costello's formulation of the poem's argument, "the dismemberment of reality is redeemed by the construction of forms that permit a glimpse of numinous wholeness" (377).

For Graham, the work of putting together the world is love, is "Better than love": this is the truest desire and pursuit of the whole, this making of wholes in the mind. What Plato hated about the mimetic work of art, Graham loves; for her, it links the two worlds, air and the water in which air-breathers drown, deer and our knowledge of deer, men and the natural world, hunters and their prey. This "far in the lifespan of man," Graham knows that what we have to love about the world is our "starched, intelligent love," that what we have to know of the world is our knowledge of the world, our "good idea" of it. For her, this "quick and frantic" mimesis (with its pun on the sense of "quick" as "living") leads into the world, not away from it. Because it's hollow, the lure floats—Graham admires everything that maintains itself just above things, that hovers on the surfaces. It is blinding, this intricate and detailed work of mimicking the living, but only because it is "past sight," better than sight: vision rather than mere seeing.

In this allegory of the artist's task, his working of his tiny garden in which the larger garden subsists in microcosm (one of Graham's poems is entitled "My Garden My Daylight") is forgiven and forgivable because, in its attempt "to slip in / and pass // for the natural world," the work of art becomes another world, a new whole: the image and not just the memory of "the body / they were all once /a part of." Plato taught that learning is recollection, anamnesis; Graham shows in this poem that the objects of the natural world must be committed to thought and to knowledge in order to achieve the essential weightlessness, must be forgotten and "dismembered" in order to be remembered: they must be re-created in order to be remembered. One dis-members in order to re-member as pure form; only in and by means of this re-creation, this re-remembering, is the object "finally alive." Graham's is a vastly mediated relation with the phenomenal world, and it is that mediation which allows her to love the world: in Graham's vocabulary, love is always a species of knowledge.

The "beautiful lie" becomes true because it is believable and

believed-in. On one level this is what any work of art sets out to do (because Plato saw the mimetic artwork as performing no other function, he would have banished it from his ideal republic), but the truth of the work of art is of a special type, held in suspension not of disbelief but of the boundaries between truth and lie, boundaries that the “true” work of art acknowledges while holding them in abeyance. In “Reading Plato” one sees the shaping joy divorced from a sense of responsibility for what it shapes, so long as it is beautiful; here, in fact, the shaping joy is moved by a murderous intent. As Eavan Boland notes, when the speaker’s friend is done “abstracting and distorting the protective coat of one creature to catch another . . . when the men go out at dawn under the stars, when they cast their flies, it is not a mere abstraction of the deer that floats on the surface” (12).

One begins to understand what Rilke meant when he wrote in the First Duino Elegy that “beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure” (151). On a similar note, Askold Melnyczuk asks, “How far (into ourselves, into others, into the objects around us) can we gaze before matter and identity dissolve and we find ourselves peering into the empty spaces between molecules? How long before a glimpse of the abyss changes love into terror?” (600). The speaker’s friend, after all, is fashioning lures, constructed objects that mimic an animal’s dying in order to bring about the actual death of another animal, the believable prey luring the true predator to become the actual prey. There is “a hook / under each pair / of wings”: what makes these false insects fly makes them kill. The flies are made from deer hair, and one recalls that fishermen are often hunters. The traces and detritus of the deer killed by “these men along the lush / green banks” are fashioned into lures for yet other hungry animals, the fish fooled by this beautiful lie into becoming someone else’s food. The deer whose hair goes to make the lures are the earthly images or reflections of the celestial “hungry animals” projected upon the random stars by man: Boland points out that “The animals the stars connect-up are also imitations and constructs” (14), stellar configurations conjured up by the mind. But the constellations are easily satisfied (or is it consumed?) by the

encroaching dawn and depart without bloodshed, unlike their earthly counterparts, who will not go so easily to their deaths, unassured as they are of nightly resurrection, that they too will be perpetually connected-up, shining night after night.

Not only is knowledge dismembered to enable creation: so too are the objects of knowledge. In her essay "Pleasure" Graham writes that "the act of writing the poem in and of itself made me . . . the accomplice of all victimizers by implication, not just the victims" (93). In this view, to create is always in some way to kill: "the desire to transform makes us all, by extension, and potentially, murderers" (93). Only when it has been dismembered and re-created in inanimate mimesis (that mimics, among other things, animation) is the living entity "finally alive" on the terms useful and necessary to art and to human knowledge. As Paul de Man reminds us, the aesthetic always has an intimate link with knowledge: it is a means of grasping the world. Our knowledge is brought "to life" through being given a body and a form, but it is a body purchased at the cost of the original body of the life: the believable, replicated life supplants the true, original life. Boland notes the irony that "The idea, whose source is in death and dismemberment, is 'finally / alive'" (14). At this point we are reminded that the central problem of Plato's philosophy is the problem of the impermanence of the natural world, that is to say the problem of death, to which knowledge is the solution he proposes: not perceptual knowledge of the ephemera of the material world, but the intellectual knowledge of the imperishable realm of eternal Ideas.

Graham implies that the body of the world is only actual when it becomes knowledge by being made form, that the world must be destroyed in order to be (re)created as the world for us, *our* world. More problematically, she seems further to imply that the two statements "To create is to kill" and "To kill is to create" can be read as equivalents, as if nothing in this life or this world had a cost, or as if every thing had an equivalent cost. The fine arts considered as a species of murder is, after all, quite a distinct proposition from murder considered as one of the fine arts, and not least in the disparity between the consequences of the two. Graham asserts that "one discovers [in the act of creation] that they are not separate, the love and the violence, that

they are the same,” seeing this condition as a positive state of reconciliation and atonement (at-one-ment, in Geoffrey Hill’s phrase) revealed and enacted by the poet, as if the journey from animation through inanimation to animation’s simulacrum or parody were somehow a return.

We see this viewpoint in a poem like “Updraft,” in which a knife blade, explicitly presented as an image of historical violence, is redeemed into an object of beauty by the late light it catches. It is transformed from a vehicle of violence into an object of contemplation, whose “wrongest beauty” we somehow need. We are not told why we need this particular beauty, or in what way it equals or amounts to “coherent refusals.” Nor, for that matter, are we told just what those refusals are, just what it is that this wrong—immoral?—beauty refuses, coherently or otherwise. This is an especially problematic passage, as the blade is the embodiment of “All the statistics, the century’s burned and gang-raped,” all redeemed by a passing beautiful moment. History is dissolved into and superseded by a visual image (*Erosion*, 70). What is refused in this poem is history itself, history and historical consequence, invoked only to be dismissed. Like so many of Graham’s later poems, this poem embodies but fails to come to grips with what Cleanth Brooks, writing about Archibald MacLeish, calls “the difficulty of combining poetry that is lyrical in impulse and imagistic-symbolic in technique with a poetry of overt public statement” (xxii).

Though both are acts of change, death and transfiguration are not identical either immediately or ultimately. Though the aesthetic object is always produced by means of a violence done to life, the distinction between virtual violence and real violence is, in practice, absolute. It is the distinction that Frank Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending*, makes between fiction and myth in its pernicious sense. The aesthetic cannot be made innocent, but neither are all varieties of guilt one, equivalent, or even interchangeable.

The question is that of the precise difference between the transformation of life into aesthetic tableaux or objects and the transformation of living bodies into more (or perhaps, more “literally,” less) literal objects and tableaux. Such a transformation, as Walter Benjamin (and more recently, Susan Sontag) has

argued, is one definition of fascism: the aestheticization of politics, the vicious mode of the union of art and the praxis of life. Even within the course of a single poem, Graham's work is ambivalent about the distinction between these two antithetical, yet simultaneously identical modes of transformation: her poem "History" asserts that

history
is the opposite of the eye
for whom, for instance, six million bodies in portions
of hundreds and
the flowerpots broken by a sudden wind stand as
equivalent.

(*Erosion*, 64)

But the poem also informs us that the tortured, murdered man in a photograph from World War II, whose genitalia have been stuffed into his own mouth and whose face has been pierced repeatedly by a pitchfork, "grows beautiful." The absence of even the suggestion of an agent of this mutilation, of a wielder of this disfiguring pitchfork that itself is known only by the marks it leaves behind, is striking. It is as if the pitchfork were a natural force, like lightning, that has simply happened to strike this victim, or as if his genitalia had detached themselves and found their own way into his mouth. As for the viewer of such an image, while it is the eye that makes abstract pattern out of the evidence of atrocity, it is the mind that assigns value to such pattern, that calls it "beautiful." The poem may be self-conscious about this slippage between appearance and being upon which art depends, but which is potentially murderous when enacted in life, but it does not confront its own participation in such slippage, its own role in transfiguring horror into beauty, human meaning into sheer form, treating human suffering as an aesthetic phenomenon. Nor does the poem acknowledge that these are human acts, that history is not nature but the product of individual and collective human will and human choices. History just happens: as Mary Kinzie notes, with more outrage than I can muster, "all blame is withheld; responsibility for actions is never demanded; malice is treated as if it were accident" (20).

Kinzie describes *Erosion* as “a profane gnostic text, devoted to the cult of victims who have suffered violence and to the painters and poets who have rendered violence, and to the religious and historical forces [which] have performed [such violence]. But sometimes rendering involves complicity in the deed” (19). It is not sufficient for the poem simply to nod toward that complicity and move on.

Helen Vendler notes that “Graham’s grand metaphysical theme is the tension between existence and death,” which Vendler also rephrases as, among other things, the polarity of experience and art (*Soul Says*, 223). One of the questions that a poem like “Reading Plato” raises is, What is the meaning of a process that kills in order to deny death, that seeks to penetrate to the heart of Being by means of destruction? Both *King Lear* and the Thousand Year Reich were confrontations with the fact and idea of death. But while *King Lear* confronts each member of its audience with the inescapable fact of his or her own human frailty and mortality, fascism evasively and murderously projects the fact of death (literally) onto the body of the Other. In “Reading Plato,” the Other is the nonhuman, physical world, where and by means of which violence is (literally) naturalized. Is aesthetic dominion, with which Stevens’s jar, like a European colonist in the New World, took over and ordered (in both senses) the slovenly wilderness, always complicit with less mediate forms of domination? Is form a mode of domination? In his *Minima Moralia*, the great German critical theorist Theodor Adorno claimed that every work of art is an uncommitted crime. It is the dual, and antithetical, interpretations of such an assertion—a crime, yes, but one uncommitted: where is the emphasis to be placed, in this world made up of myriad *committed* crimes?—that interest me here.

Stated in its largest terms, the question is that of the relation of the aesthetic to the political, and is a question I cannot claim to answer. But whatever their complicities, it is vital, in all senses of the word, to recognize that the dismemberment of the living deer is not the same act as the dual dismemberment and reconstitution that makes up our knowledge of the deer, that while knowledge and power are concomitant they are not identical. Indeed, the possibility of the two being at least held

in suspension is the possibility of art itself, and our only bulwark against despair.

In "Reading Plato," and in her essay "Pleasure," Graham hypostatizes the modes and means of art into the social and historical realm, reminding us that the erasure of boundaries is not always salutary; as Kinzie notes, at many moments "the categories of ethical judgment seem to have eroded" (18). Bonnie Costello describes this more neutrally as the way in which the "tension between the moral and the aesthetic and the aesthetizing of the moral" is resolved in *Erosion* in favor of the aesthetic (393). The journey from nightmare to form is much more difficult than that from form to nightmare: the ease and the consequences of the latter are, indeed, nightmarish, what Joyce called the nightmare of history, from which we all wish desperately to wake.

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What Remained of a Genet

On the Topic of Querelle

To begin where Derrida begins: that is, to begin belatedly. What remains today, for me, here, now, of a Genet?¹ What is it I have read, as whom, for whom, and why? And to conclude where Derrida concludes: Today, here, now, the debris of (Derrida 1, 262). The debris, for one, of what we have come to call heterosexuality (always already in ruins), rubble and edifice that provides the setting for this most homosocial novel's "homosexual goings-on," this text known as *Querelle*. To begin, that is, where Genet begins: what remains of a Rembrandt but these remains, the ruins known as a Rembrandt, a Genet? And what am I to do with these remains? Let us go then, you and I . . . *Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère.*

Desire and Duality

"He is above all not virgin enough to say that he occupies the place of the other" (Derrida 216). Yet the desire to so speak, to occupy that place (the other alone has *a place*, to which—selfhood—the "self" can only aspire asymptotically), is the source of all that he does say. The other is that empty place from which he perceives himself as other, as neither in that place nor in his own.

"As he watched [the cop and hoodlum] Mario approach their meeting place, Dédé [the cop's young informer and companion] sometimes told him, with a grin: 'I like what I see, and I'd like to be it,' but at other times his pride rebelled against such identification. That, then, was when he would attempt some timid kind of revolt, but a smile or a concise order would put

him right back where he belonged, in Mario's shadow" (Genet, *Querelle*, 54). Mario's smile, the reflection of his own, (re)places Dédé not in Mario's presence but in its trace, its echo, as Dédé is Mario's echo, unfinished as of yet. Dédé is returned to his place as the other gazing in the mirror at the imagined plenitude of self that gazes back as if it were whole, as if it were himself.

"Mario found he could take every one of Querelle's traits and effortlessly recombine them into a mental image of Robert's face. Slowly this image filled out and took the place of the face Mario was looking at. . . . He was torn between the actual face he saw and the superimposed image. . . . Querelle's face, present and impassive, interfered with Robert's image. The two mugs fused, became muddled, fought, became identical again. That evening there was nothing to differentiate them, not even the smile that turned Querelle into his brother's shadow" (242). There is an explicitly specular, and spectacular, relation between the brothers Querelle and Robert (the brothers Querelle, that is, Georges and Robert): "They themselves tending to deny it, the strangely close resemblance between the two brothers Querelle appeared attractive only to others" (11). This relationship is, in turn, reflected in that between Querelle and Mario, the murderer and the cop, who have between them a special understanding, like that of brothers, lovers, or reflections. The first time the two men kiss, the first time Querelle ever kisses a man on the mouth (Gil is the second man he ever kisses), "It seemed to him he was pressing his face against a mirror reflecting his own image" (206).

Querelle's is a world of doublings, of the two becoming one and the one becoming two: its *mise en scène* is the register of duality and repetition which is Lacan's Imaginary, the realm of sensuous immediacy and primary narcissism. Here, all entities are objects of desire or objects of disgust; subject-libido and object-libido are one, in "that quicker-than-the-eye trick by which two beings were turned into one (a trick that is called love, when it involves two disparate beings), or, by the magic of a single love, divided a single being into two" (184–85). Here, the self drinks everywhere its own (misrecognized) selfhood as, in Hopkins's phrase, at a single tankard.

“[Querelle] closed his eyes. He regained that region in himself where his brother was there with him. He let himself sink into a state where neither could be distinguished from the other” (16). Here is the descent into the Imaginary, always already accompanied by the passage back from that wordlessness to the language-world of the Symbolic. “From this state he was able to extract, first, some words, and then, by a fairly elementary process, little by little, a thought—which, as it rose from those depths, again differentiated him from Robert and proposed singular acts . . . quite gently these became his own, completely his” (17). Or, as we see, not so completely, the self being other, all it possesses the other’s. “Vic was here with him, taking part” (17).² Querelle’s twin Robert has simply been replaced by a more specular twin: Vic, Querelle’s fellow sailor, his accomplice in smuggling his cache of opium and jewels into Brest, and his victim (as Querelle’s accomplices in his crimes all become, concluding with Lieutenant Seblon). Vic becomes both object and vehicle of the violence of the expulsion from the Imaginary, a violence made literal in his murder by Querelle, his throat slashed by one of the ever-phallic switchblades that are ubiquitous in this book.

In a kind of return of the repressed (*Querelle* is rife with repressions and returns), the Semiotic, the maternal, undifferentiated realm, irrupts into and irradiates the Symbolic’s paternal regime of law, which thereby transformed becomes a dual region one may call the fraternal. To advert to an earlier formulation: just as the other is that empty place from which I perceive myself as other (that place to which I will later glancingly refer as “the conscience,” also known as the imago or the ego ideal: unreachable whatever the terms), an unoccupiable promontory, so is the self a vacant and uninhabitable space, from which vantage I gaze upon the other as myself, my semblance.

In this realm, difference is the origin of identity, and identity is only a dream that difference has, the infant dreaming that this trick of light on silver-backed glass or in the mother’s eye is himself, that he could be that sheer luminosity. Querelle is himself because he is not Robert, and, consequently (being, like the signified, nothing in himself, but only, in Genet’s lovely phrase, “a sign charged with signs,” a relation between two signifiers: be-

tween, that is, two absences), he is Robert because he is himself. That is, he is other, he is fissured, he is not himself as the condition of being anyone at all, including himself. *Je est*, as Rimbaud reminded us some time ago, *un autre*, the Other. “Binarisms are what construct the plot, as well as its characters, so that frequently with Genet one will encounter the ‘split doubles’: a resembling pair of initially opposite natures . . . which end up identical to one another, each one possessing the split within [himself] (Querelle and his brother . . .)” (Haynes 78).

This fissured self is also what gay cultural critic Richard Delamora (196) calls a fissured masculinity; Querelle is both the split and the healing over of that split, male subject and object of male desire in one. Both Nono, the brothel owner, and Mario, the corrupt cop, achieve their desire for Robert, this novel’s hostage given over to heterosexuality, through the medium of Querelle: they fuck the unfuckable Robert transitively, by fucking Querelle. Querelle can perform this function only because, while *almost* being his brother, he is not. Lysiane, madam of La Féria (“least elegant of the brothels in Brest”), Nono’s wife, lover of both brothers, takes comfort in the fact that Querelle’s penis, “heavy, thick, rather massive . . . , not elegant but potentially vigorous,” is different from Robert’s: “There, at least, one could tell one from the other” (268). For of course if Querelle *were* his brother, he would be unavailable to Nono and Mario as an object even of recathected desire. Nor, in possessing him, would either attain the *frisson* of possessing precisely that which they do *not* possess: Robert’s heterosexuality, asserted, averted to, but never enacted during the course of the novel’s diegesis. In order that there be one (the monstrosity of the two brothers who are the same, brought together in the same place), there must first be two.

“A composite face with an unchanging expression: hard eyes, mouth severe and calm, the chin solid and over all that, a peculiar air of innocence in regard to the unceasing confusion” (217). In the most literal sense, that of the patronymic (Name of the Father indeed), both brothers are Querelle: it is, after all, their family name, their shared bond to the Symbolic order. Yet Georges can be Querelle only if Robert is not: Robert is Querelle, thus Georges cannot be. But Robert is not Querelle.

As Madame Lysiane, Nono's wife and one of only two characters ever allowed to speak in her "own" voice, however briefly, muses, in thrall, enthralled, "You are alone in the world, at night, in the solitude of an endless esplanade. Your double statue reflects itself in each one of its halves. You are solitaires, and live in that double solitude of yours" (182).

Mourning and Masculinity

In the specular region called the Imaginary, wherein I have placed *Querelle*, each desired object is an image of the self: the self is doubled in all that it sees and touches. One function that Freud assigns the figure of the double in his essay "The 'Uncanny'" is that of the projection of death outside the self, of both denying the possibility of and insuring against the self's destruction. "For the 'double' was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death,' as [Otto] Rank says; and probably the 'immortal' soul was the first 'double' of the body" (Freud 235). It is this function that his victims serve for *Querelle*, who identifies with each to the extent of feeling himself to be, at the moment of the murder, dead (67). Freud notes that once the stage of primary narcissism (that stage with which I, following Lacan, identify the Imaginary) is passed through, "the 'double' reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death" (235). For *Querelle* the double is death and resurrection at once, at one. At the moment of each of his murders he dies and a new *Querelle* is born: he is thus not merely *Querelle*, but a host of *Querelles*.

In the passage cited several pages earlier of *Querelle's* meditative descent into and expulsion from the Imaginary, Vic joins *Querelle* in the singularity from which Robert has been banished, and thus *Querelle*, "whose thoughts had overcome his personal autonomy in order to reach Vic" (17), can in the act of murder project onto Vic his, *Querelle's*, own death, which *Querelle* then reintroduces as his interior trial and death sentence. (His execution is his sexual submission to Nono.) The narrator, obligingly, refers to the "secret and obscene desires in-

habiting the one going to his death. Vic or Querelle, take your pick" (67). We shall later see how Querelle offers up for execution, as in expiation or propitiation, his heterosexual manhood, as measured by the performance of the penetrative sexual role: a role for which Vic, who just before his death energetically denies the possibility of his own homosexual desires in the face of Querelle's (joking?) seduction attempt, may be read as a figure (66, 73). In the instantiation of the double in the other, the death the double presages (of the self as other) is thus also made the other's.

Murder is the mother (paradoxically barren) of love, and specifically of that love which has no aim but itself: that love sterile (except in the fevered eyes of Madame Lysiane, who imagines young Roger as Querelle and Robert's offspring, their "boy," "the personification of that brotherly love her anguish labored over" [267]), gratuitous, and thus free, called the love of men for men. "The notion of love or lust appears as a natural corollary to the notion of . . . Murder—and it is, moreover, the notion of love against nature" (4). For Querelle, love, symmetrically enough, is the mother of murder. Gilbert Turko, the young mason who impulsively murders his homosexual foreman and tormentor; Gil who is Querelle manqué, a fetal Querelle (236: "He was a small Querelle, but one that would not be allowed to develop, who would not go any further"); Gil, *in* but not *over* whom Querelle has power (212), must, because of Querelle's love for him, therefore be sacrificed. Querelle, after befriending Gil and initiating him into the criminal world, after planting a seed of Querelle in him he will not allow to spring up (212, 236), betrays him to the cop Mario. Gil will be punished not just for his foreman Theo's murder but for Vic's ("the double murder of Brest"), though Mario knows he did not commit both. He is, however, certainly a pederast, as all his fellow masons agree: he's too pretty not to be, he sings too well, and besides, he wears sailor's pants. This "certainty" is reason enough for his punishment.

Gil, the only man with whom Querelle has ever fallen in love, with whom he identifies even before he meets him as "another criminal, a brother" (164), is thereby the man who will make of Querelle not just a man who gets fucked by men but a man who loves men, a homosexual. There is a reciprocity at work here:

Querelle, having murdered Vic, must execute himself (the Querelle who has killed Vic: each time he kills, a new Querelle is born) by allowing himself to be fucked by Nono (whom he has sold the opium Vic helped him smuggle into the city). Having loved Gil, made him over into himself, a murderer, a thief, a sailor (Gil is wearing a sailor's uniform when Querelle sends him to rob Lieutenant Seblon with Seblon's own revolver, stolen by his steward Querelle), Querelle must then execute the object of his love.³ The pain Querelle feels when he reads of his double's arrest and imprisonment (239), his pain at the (imminent) death of a part of himself, is the guarantee of the efficacy of this warding-off ritual.

Querelle vicariously sacrifices himself (that part which loves men) in order to preserve himself (that part which gets fucked by men). This warding-off must be enacted and guaranteed by a sacrifice, the scapegoat who carries the (homosexual) sins of the (homosocial) community into the wilderness. At the end of the novel Lieutenant Seblon voluntarily takes on this burden on Querelle's behalf, refusing to identify Gil and being arrested himself for having stolen the missing navy funds (no doubt incriminated by his own gun). In this novel the death of masculinity is the only effective prophylactic against masculinity's death: like the Norse god Odin, masculinity sacrifices itself on its own altar to its own greater power and glory, to its very survival as such.

What Remained of Masculinity

"Querelle appears so beautiful and so pure—but this appearance is real and sufficient—that I enjoy attributing all manner of crimes to him. Then again, I worry, not knowing whether I want to degrade and soil him, or if it is my desire to destroy what is evil, render it vain and inefficient, and in so doing compromise the human appearance by the very symbol of purity?" (264).⁴ These are the words of Lieutenant Seblon, Querelle's commanding officer (who is under Querelle's command by virtue of his adoration of this sailor, of the Sailor, of whom Querelle is the perfect avatar), the only homosexual in this

novel of “homosexual goings-on,” who is, like the author, not quite *in* the book (79), who does not *participate*. Seblon, the only character who narrates, is the author *en abyme*, in abjection as well. “While the other characters are incapable of [the] lyricism which we are using in order to recreate them more vividly within you, Lieutenant Seblon himself is solely responsible for what flows from his pen” (23).

It is Seblon who comes closest to “writing homosexual,” even if in the well-worn guise of “writing woman” (Hélène Cixous singles out Genet as a singular exemplar of the capacity to “write woman”). In his discussion of Fassbinder’s cinematic version of *Querelle*, filmmaker Todd Haynes aligns Seblon and Lysiane as excluded “feminine voyeurs” of the narrative, which is reserved for the novel’s “men” (91). We *see Querelle* through Seblon’s eyes, through Lysiane’s: indeed, the novel may be said to be written by Seblon’s obsession with *Querelle*, fragments of a lover’s discourse, “Illustrating my own desire” (262). Insofar as this is so, the gaze in this novel is thereby not quite male: the gaze is female, the gaze is gay. Lysiane is a woman, explicitly “not-male”: as opposed to the book’s rectilinear masculinity, she is all curves and soft flesh into which a man may sink and lose himself, be lost. Seblon is a man who is a woman, a woman trapped in the body of a man: he caresses the voluptuous curves of his imaginary hips. Lysiane is the apparent woman: Seblon, the woman invisible unless one knows what to look or listen for (a lingering glance, a tone of voice). Seblon is not a man, not a woman, but a male homosexual (which is not quite a homosexual male).

Seblon thus occupies the proper place from which to initiate an excursus on the role of “those sensations and semblances we have learned to call ‘homosexuality’” (Koestenbaum 3), what Genet in *The Thief’s Journal* calls his “dearest treasure,” in this novel of presumptively heterosexual men fucking and getting fucked by other men: if, that is, homosexuality can be said ever to have a “proper” place. Homosexuality is, after all, a matter of people refusing their “proper” places, in the senses of both prescription and proprietorship. It is this novel’s task to put those people back into their proper places, however improperly. To quote, with the obvious modifications, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s

words on *Billy Budd*, “There is a *homosexual* in this text—a homosexual person, presented as different in his essential nature from the normal men around him. That person is [Lieutenant Seblon]. At the same time, *every* impulse of *every* [man] in this book that could at all be called desire could also be called homosexual desire, being directed by men exclusively toward men. The intimate strangleholds of interrepresentation between that exemplar of a new species, the homosexual man, and his thereby radically reorganized surround of male erotic relations seem to make it irresistible to bring to [*Querelle*] all *our* intimate, paralyzing questions about the essential truths of ‘homosexuality’” (*Epistemology*, 92).

In an essay that has been much concerned with doublings and mirror-images, *Querelle* may be seen as a distorted reflection of *Billy Budd*. Here, the blonde angel is actually Lucifer, fallen all of a summer’s day onto the deck of the despatch boat *Le Vengeur*; and this ship’s Master-at-Arms John Claggart, Lieutenant Seblon (who “has turned the sailor into an angel” [11]), is not his tormentor accidentally but rightfully killed (that would be Theo for Gil) but his willing victim. He is willing because it is in his (homosexual) nature to be the sailor’s (that is, murder’s) helpless, hopeless worshipper, shot with and then incriminated by his own gun. What does a worshipper owe his deity but sacrifice? Seblon climbs up on the cross reserved for Billy Budd, so that his god should go free. “Seblon’s diary bears witness to the fact that rather than denounce *Querelle* he would have taken the blame on himself. It is true that in one entry the Lieutenant expressed a desire to point out *Querelle* as the murderer, but we shall see what sublime use he then made of this desire” (251). This novel may be said to be such a sublime use, pitilessly betraying all its characters and their crimes to the reader’s unblinking gaze, which is also the wide-eyed stare of adoration.

Querelle may be read as both an instantiation of and a response to “the coming to visibility of the normally implicit terms of a coercive double bind” (Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 89). Negotiating between an inherently unstable homosocial economy and the *homosexual* acts both logically implied and interdicted by that libidinal economy, it seeks to span what Teresa de Lauretis, adapting French feminist Luce Irigaray’s (male) homophobic

formulation to other ends, calls the incommensurable distance between homosexuality and hommo-sexuality (142). *Querelle* attempts imaginarily (that is, ideologically) to resolve what Dellamora, in another context, calls a crisis of masculinity (196), by maintaining in equilibrium both heterosexual identity (here, explicitly connoted as *manhood*, masculinity “itself”) and homosexual acts: “disavowal in *Querelle*, far from disabling desire, seems rather to facilitate it” (Haynes 87). The regime of male bonding allows these men their sexual intimacies without their acts ever connoting intimacy. Intimacy, also called ownership, is reserved for Lysiane: it keeps her in her place, her lavish boudoir upstairs in La Féria, outside the novel “proper.” Genet’s “It was fun and games, but it sure made a man feel like a man” (219) may be read as a proleptic response to Sedgwick’s “For a man to be a man’s man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being ‘interested in men’” (*Between Men*, 89). In *Querelle*, the men’s men have sex with each other without ‘interest’ (in all senses of the word),⁵ while the man interested in other men pays the price: the predatory, vicious homosexual Theo (mirror image of Seblon’s ineffectuality) is impulsively killed by Gil (with no less phallic a weapon than a broken wine bottle); Lieutenant Seblon takes the fall for *Querelle*’s thefts (of the money, of his gun—that is, his shaky claim to “manhood,” conclusively stripped away by his helpless enthrallment to his steward).

The disquisition on the place of the homosexual in *Querelle* hinted at in the two preceding paragraphs might further invoke the Freudian concept of the double mentioned earlier. The following passage enumerating the “themes of uncanniness” most prominent in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s novel *The Devil’s Elixir* can be applied to *Querelle*, in much the same way that I have applied Sedgwick’s passage on *Billy Budd*:

“These themes are all concerned with the phenomenon of the ‘double,’ which appears in every shape and in every degree of development. Thus we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another . . . so that the one possesses knowledge,

feelings and experience in common with the other. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names” (Freud 234).⁶

It can be said of almost every character in *Querelle* that he (or in Lysiane’s case, she, doubling a character whose claim to the masculine pronoun is questionable and questioned: Lieutenant Seblon) doubles another character, and often more than one. Most (Gil, Robert, Mario, Vic, even Seblon) are doubles of Querelle himself, carrying for him parts of himself he must keep safe from himself or must keep himself safe from (in the case of Robert, his heterosexuality is kept safe *by* being kept away; Seblon reciprocally keeps him safe from homosexuality), pieces of self *taboo* in both senses of the word, sacred and forbidden: abject as well, abjection being a matter of expulsion from the self.

Freud identifies two stages in the development of the double. The first, which has occupied a large portion of this essay, is that of primary narcissism, in which the sensible world comprises a collocation of doublings of the undifferentiated infantile self: in his words, “a time when the ego [has] not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people” (236). In the translation from the Imaginary to the Symbolic (from murmuring to language, wish to law) as enacted in *Querelle*, this doubling of the id develops a tripartite ego form: a function of phantasy fulfillment, a function of self-observation and self-criticism Freud calls the “conscience,” and a function of defensive projection and abjection of dangerous psychic material (the already-cited role of the double as uncanny harbinger of death) outside the self, as otherness.

I have already discussed Querelle’s identification with his victims as an instance of this last function of abjection and projection of the death of the (heterosexual) self onto a figure outside the self, for instance, Vic. In this novel’s homosocial economy, Lieutenant Seblon conflates this defensive, warding-off function with that of phantasy fulfillment: or rather, with this

phantasy fulfillment's inversion, a phantasy deprivation that compensates for and as it were erases from the criminal record Querelle's physical fulfillments with other men. Seblon, the only character who avows a desire for men, whose desire is perpetually and at times laughably unfulfilled, is Querelle's double as homosexual, the repository of the homosexuality that would otherwise attach to Querelle's homosexual acts and to the homosexual acts of all this novel's men who are "not homosexuals."

Analogously, Querelle as object of male homosexual desire, as opposed to Seblon as subject of such desire, makes such acts, and the desire of which they, here, now, refrain from speaking, possible for Nono and Mario. Indeed, that Seblon is not, as we are given him, capable of such acts, but only of the desire that would make them "homosexual," is the condition by means of which the other male characters are allowed to participate in and enjoy such acts: Seblon holds the homosexuality of those acts in the safekeeping of his unfulfilled desire. Were Seblon's body to circulate in the novel's libidinal economy, then so would his homosexuality (that economy's medium of exchange, as it were), a homosexuality that is inscribed upon his body and in his voice.⁷ As Seblon is coded as utterly other to the "men" in the novel, so too is homosexuality rendered something *other* than their "fun and games."

Robert, with whom Querelle is "identical because they look alike," is the only man in the novel who neither has sex with nor desires to have sex with another man. Robert is characterized as Querelle's conscience: enraged by the knowledge that his brother has allowed himself to be fucked by a brothel boss. Thus Robert holds Querelle's heterosexuality, and transitively the heterosexuality of the other male characters, in safekeeping. That is, he holds identification safe from behavior, identity safe from action: their queer acts do not make them queers. Logically following from this, it is Robert who attempts to protect at least Querelle's name (and thus, as I have noted, his own) from "what he, Robert, regarded as his brother's vice" (184): a view Mario (who knows nothing about "pederasts") and Nono assiduously refrain from taking of Querelle's activities, or of their own. The good name of (heterosexual) masculinity is in Robert's charge and keeping, *is* his name.

Lysiane, Nono's wife, "the lady of La Féria" (27), the woman with whom both brothers have sex (Querelle decides to sleep with her in revenge for his brother's humiliation of him for having allowed himself to be fucked by Nono), is the otherwise forbidden physical link between the brothers, and as such may be read as a phantasy fulfillment of the brothers' return to a primal state of indifferent union (or of their arrival at a sexual union the novel nominates as difference itself); that she is older than and acts as a sexualized mother to the couple only confirms this reading. She cannot, as she complains, get between them; and yet it is by means of her, by interposing her between themselves, that the two brothers are sexually joined (185). Sedgwick points out that the patriarchal economy and the homophobia that underwrites it require that male homosocial desire be mediated through a woman: the relation of the two brothers and Lysiane is almost a textbook example of such triangular desire.

To return to Freud's essay on the uncanny, Robert is the double in the form of Rank's "energetic denial," not of death but of that death—both of masculinity and of the homosociality upon which it depends—which we call homosexuality. His defense of his brother's good name, of the name they share, is his defense of heterosexual masculinity and homosociality against the homosexuality it both implies and interdicts. Lysiane is that third term, the excluded middle, by which Robert is able to participate in while abstaining from the novel's (homosexual) libidinal economy. By means of her Robert preserves both his own (and thus his brother's) heterosexuality and transitively (through her body as means of transmission) touches the bodies of the novel's other men, including his brother's, whose body he must always touch, yet is not permitted to touch directly, except when the two fight.⁸ "Now she was sure the brothers loved each other so greatly that they had deemed it necessary to find a third person to disengage them and to provide a diversion" (185). Lysiane, the third person, is the material manifestation of "the woman" whom two sexually complicit men must invent out of themselves, "the woman who joins them together by her very absence" (126).

Inconclusion

“He was moved, but he could not permit himself to be moved. His sensitivity, carefully hidden and not really aware of formal and definitive beauty, but very much so of flashes of what we know only by the name ‘poetry,’ sometimes overtook and stunned him for a few seconds . . . but once Mario became aware of the working of that charm, it was then obviously out of sheer hatred for the thief’s beauty that he finally arrested him” (55). Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey argues that narrative is male and (presumptively) heterosexual; as such it is, for those others who are its objects and its subject matter, a species of sadism. Problematically, she conceives of no space for gay men as audience *or* subjects of narrative. “Sadism,” Mulvey writes, “demands a story” (368). In the passage from *Querelle* I have just quoted, the “story” demanded by sadism, which in turn demands a sadism of its own, is precisely that of male heterosexuality, in which a man’s desire for another man can only be coded as a crime, one for which the “victim” is punished, arrested for inciting a riot in the prison yard of patriarchy. This sadism, also known as homophobia, is the reaction formation of a homosociality to its proximity to a *homosexuality* its own premises simultaneously lead to and forbid. As Sedgwick argues and as this novel makes spectacularly clear by its quarantine of homosexuality from homosexual acts, homophobia is aimed not only at homosexual men but at (presumptively) heterosexual men, a Damoclean perpetual threat of the violence that both assures and sunders (*cleaves* would, perhaps, be the word here) the proximity of men’s relations with other men (that is, patriarchy) to men’s relations with other men (that is, homosexuality). It “just so happens” that the threat is carried out on the body of the homosexual.

Haynes, following Mulvey, classifies narrative, with which the Russian formalist Roman Jakobson aligns metonymy, as masculine, and spectacle, which, identified here with poetry, would thus be aligned by Jakobson with metaphor, as feminine (Haynes 81). In *Querelle*, the spectacle is that of the male body on display; the narrative is that of the male body’s revenge on the not-male

gaze usurping the masculine privilege: to reduce to an object of punishment that subaltern subjectivity which dares accept the covertly proffered invitation to delectate in the male spectacle. In these terms, it makes perfect sense that *Querelle*, tedious, pompous, inflated, singularly unlikable, should be Genet's only "true" novel, the only one that can strictly be called a "narrative fiction."⁹ (It should also come as no surprise that in *Funeral Rites* Genet identifies his literary mode with the repetitions and resemblances of poetry.)¹⁰ Where then is the position in this narrative of "homosexual goings-on," this spectacle (in several senses) of the feminine (though not the female) aspiring to the masculine rigors of narrative, for the homosexual, let alone for the black homosexual: that is, for myself?¹¹ Is his fate only to be, like Seblon, the victim arrested in the place of his attacker, turned in to the police for someone else's crime? The late cultural theorist Craig Owens points out that "in Derrida's de-Oepidalized homosexuality, Genet remains outside the Law" (218), but to be "outside" is not to be "beyond the reach of." Is he, the homosexual (am I), always to be victimized by that insidious conflation of male supremacy (hommo-sexuality, or what Irigaray calls the "homosexual monopoly" [Owens 220]) and male homosexuality which Irigaray performs in her dissection of patriarchy?¹²

In the ideological system called *Querelle* (a model, with the exaggerations and distortions of any model, of the ideological system known as patriarchy), heterosexuality is the lack that must be compensated for, the gap that must be filled in, lest not simply sex between men but homosexuality fill in that empty place of the other who is the self. The desire that is *Querelle's* topic resembles too closely a desire for the heterosexual "manhood" that hovers only nominally over its "homosexual goings-on" for me to feel comfortable with any potential reflection of myself this most specular of novels offers up. Can I only accede, hopelessly (helplessly?), to Dellamora's conclusion that "For gay men, too, the possibility of naming each other as subjects and objects of desire depends on the at times vertiginous uncertainties of existing in the realm of sexual [and racial?] (in)difference" (223)? Homosexuality is, after all, as Freud noted, not a problem but the solution to a problem, "a way out" in Sartre's

phrase. But a solution, and a problem, for whom? And a way out to what?

The questions I ask of Genet's texts (on whose behalf?) are questions Genet has already posed. "Should a work be understood by future generations? But why? And what would that signify? That they could use it? For what? I do not see" ("The Studio of Alberto Giacometti," cited in Derrida 80).

"For whom does one write, who accepts or refuses? For whom is this gift that never becomes present?" asks Derrida on Genet's behalf (80). For whom, likewise, can I read this text, and in whose interest? Dellamora asks (on his own behalf and that of other white gay men, or at least white gay male intellectuals), "What is the subject-position of a gay critique of desire between men in [this text]?" (4, 218). I ask the question on behalf of myself and other black gay men, for whom I do not claim or wish to speak, who have not appointed me to speak for them, who may well have no interest in the question, let alone in any answer I do not have. Can *Querelle* exist for me, here, now, only as a stop on the Occident Express, night train hurtling past the embankment where the murderer and the cop kiss (206), to whose sleeping passengers (the much-vaunted "general population") these two lepers or beggars are a matter of strictest indifference? All aboard, all stops from Leni Riefenstahl to Bruce Weber by way of Jean Genet? And which Jean Genet? The narrator of *Funeral Rites*, enthralled by the brutal beauty of Nazi storm troopers whom he despises, to whom he betrays his lover? (And yet, the sacrifice of the loved object saves it—saves him—from falling into ruin. Jean D. remains forever beautiful in Genet's language that replaces him.) The reporter at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago who, despite his radical sympathies (convictions might be too much to attribute to Genet), could not help but notice the way the muscles of Daley's riot policemen strained against their blue wool uniforms? (This is not to ignore the Genet who championed the Black Panthers and spent six months with Palestinian Liberation Organization activists, however problematic his racialized eroticization of their revolutionary masculinity—"each [fedayeen soldier was] not merely a transfiguration but also a materialization of my fantasies"—but to point out the aporias of his

political and his libidinal investments.) It is this Genet who confirms what Todd Haynes writes, that “desire, in its eternal nostalgia for an original plenitude, will always refer to the phallus” (80), that is, to the Law the homosexual remains outside and under, and to that Law’s compulsion to name and to punish. Today, for me, here, now, are desire and oppression (self-oppression) so intimately entwined, the homosexual a perpetual lawful outlaw, dreaming the shining leather boot he licks clean? Can other negotiations be assayed of these fraught identifications of homosexuality with masculinity (male homosexuality being, after all, the desire of males for males, for maleness), these blocked identifications of masculinity with itself?

“It is said that analyzing . . . beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this essay” (Mulvey 363). If the only subject position the novel makes available for me, here, now, is that of subjection (abjection) to a fatal beauty, a spectator to my death as a homosexual male, my erasure as a black male, then such is also the intention of this attempt (this essay) upon the ruined naval fortress of Brest.¹³ In the words of the black gay British filmmaker Isaac Julien, “You’re walking through the debris of Genet and others. You’ve learned those theories in your absence, that is, they don’t talk about black identity” (Kennedy 120). While I question Julien’s seeming unwillingness or inability to question the “identity” of “blackness” to the same degree that he is willing (compelled, rather) to question the “identity” of a “gayness,” a “homosexuality” even, which precludes the possibility of a subject interpellated as “black,” it is nonetheless my (perhaps merely fond) hope that, in queer theorist Ed Cohen’s words, my “inability ‘to see’ myself in this social and historical ‘mirror’ might help me to cognize my misrecognition [by myself and by others as *the Other*] and thereby attempt to imagine and articulate a more effective (if not more consonant) constellation of self” (166).

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NOTES

1. I allude to Genet's fragmentary essay, "Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petites carrés bien réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes," reprinted in Jean Genet, *Rembrandt* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 41–85. Published in English as *What Remains of a Rembrandt Torn into Four Equal Pieces and Flushed Down the Toilet*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Hanuman Books, 1988).

2. It may be useful to quote the entire relevant passage: "He closed his eyes. He regained that region in himself where his brother was there with him. He let himself sink into a state where neither could be

distinguished from the other. From this state he was able to extract, first, some words, and then, by a fairly elementary process, little by little, a thought—which, as it rose from those depths, again differentiated him from Robert and proposed singular acts, an entire system of solitary operations: quite gently these became his own, completely his, and Vic was there, with him, taking part. And Querelle, whose thoughts had overcome his personal autonomy in order to reach Vic, turned away again, re-entered himself, in the blind search for that inexpressible limbo which is like some inconsistent *paté* of love” (16–17). This “inexpressible limbo” “where neither [can] be distinguished from the other” is, I submit, the Lacanian Imaginary *par excellence*.

3. “It broke Querelle’s heart to see Gil pocket the money [that Querelle has planted in an empty house he leads Gil to believe they have just robbed]. That pang of pain would serve to justify the double-cross he was preparing for Gil” (229).

4. A sentence from film theorist Steven Shaviro’s Deleuzian reading of Fassbinder’s cinematic adaptation of *Querelle* provides an apt if unintentional gloss on Seblon’s words: “*Querelle* mounts a full-fledged assault on our society’s (hetero-)sexual norms; at the same time, it links the expression of ‘transgressive’ sexuality not with liberation and transcendence, but with abjection, denial, and ultimately murder” (160). To link homosexuality and abjection, transgression and death, however, is hardly so radical as Shaviro seems to believe, especially in an era in which AIDS has literalized (and politicized) the sex-death nexus: Pat Robertson and Fred Phelps would hardly disagree with Shaviro’s pronouncement, though they might not mean exactly what he means by “abjection.” Far from assaulting heterosexual norms, the link Shaviro points up reconfirms the notion of gay men as (in Craig Owens’ term) outlaws. Outlaws, of course, depend upon the law for their definition—and for their discipline and punishment.

5. “It was just a game, no problems. Two strapping fellows with smiles on their faces, and one of them—without any drama, no fuss—offered his asshole to the other one” (219).

6. In *Funeral Rites* Genet notes that “the characters of my books all resemble each other. They live, with minor variations, the same moments, the same perils, and when I speak of them, my language, which is inspired by them, repeats the same poems in the same tone” (97). That Genet should proleptically announce my discussion of the double in *Querelle* may be taken as an example of the Freudian uncanny, as the answering voice of the double who, assuming the form of reflexive self-consciousness, presides over all of Genet’s work.

7. “He was a well built man, wide-shouldered, but he felt within him-

self the presence of his own femininity, sometimes contained in a chickadee's egg, the size of a pale blue or pink sugared almond, but sometimes brimming over to flood his entire body with its milk. The Lieutenant knew to his great chagrin that this core of femininity could erupt in an instant and manifest itself in his face, his eyes, his fingertips, and mark every gesture of his by rendering it too gentle. . . . [H]e betrayed himself in the eyes of all men whenever he gave the order to pick up arms, for he pronounced the word 'arms' with such grace that his whole person seemed to kneeling at the grave of some beautiful lover" (24).

8. "These two faces just exactly alike had just finished a heroic and idealistic struggle—of which this brawl was only a vulgar projection visible to human eyes—for their very singularity. Rather than trying to destroy one another they seemed to want to become united, to fuse into what would surely be, given these two specimens, an even rarer animal. Their fight was a lovers' quarrel" (123).

9. One of *Querelle's* claims to true "fictional" status consists in the fact that neither Genet himself nor any obvious stand-in appears in *Querelle*. Genet maintains an almost ostentatious distance from the characters, even from Seblon, who, while the only character who narrates, is also very much *narrated*.

This may be a suitable place for a brief summary of the "plot" of *Querelle*, by which we can see how little "happens" in this meditative, erotically (that is, poetically) luxuriant fiction, how far it really is (despite first appearances) from "the habitual rules of narrative logic" (209). To quote the novel, "Here are the facts" (266), which here are the mere occasion for reverie and fantasy. The sailor Georges Querelle arrives on his ship *Le Vengeur* in Brest, into which he smuggles two kilos of opium, which he sells to the brothel keeper Nono (whom he allows to fuck him, and with whose wife Lysiane his twin brother Robert has been having an affair), and jewels, which he keeps for himself. His smuggling accomplice, Vic, a fellow sailor on *Le Vengeur*, he murders immediately after the deed is done. The young mason Gilbert Turko, harassed by his homosexual (but more masculine than he) boss Theo, impulsively murders him in a bar, and then flees to the abandoned penitentiary to hide. Since he is now a murderer, he seeks contact with the criminal world (that is, with Querelle), via Roger, the fifteen-year-old brother of his girlfriend Paulette (who never appears in the novel). Roger puts Gil in contact with Querelle, who befriends him and eventually betrays him to the cop Mario Daugas, an associate of Nono's by whom Querelle is also fucked and whose cock Querelle sucks. Mario knows that Querelle, not Gil, killed Vic, but cannot betray himself into admitting that knowledge. Querelle's superior officer, Sublieutenant

Seblon, is in love with Querelle, as Querelle realizes and uses to his advantage, culminating in his persuading Gil to rob Seblon of official funds (shooting Seblon with his own revolver, stolen by Querelle, whom the lieutenant has made his steward) while dressed as a sailor: Seblon is arrested for the theft because he refuses to identify the true criminal. Gil likewise never mentions Querelle in any of his interrogations.

10. "I would have liked to say more about the hero Jean D. in a particular tone, to give an account of him, with facts and dates. But such a procedure is quite pointless and deceptive. Song alone can give some notion of what he meant to me, but the register of poets is limited. Although the novelist can speak of any character in precise detail, and even achieve veracity, the poet is subject to the demands of his heart" (*Funeral Rites*, 97). For Roman Jakobson, the novel operates along the axis of contiguity, while poetry operates along that of substitution. In Genet's novels, metaphor, the vertical axis of condensation and equivalence (Querelle for Robert, Gil for Querelle, Roger for Paulette, and even Lysiane for Seblon), replaces metonymy, the horizontal axis of displacement and contiguity, this act leading to this act ad nauseam, all contiguous in time and space. Metonymy, the motor of novelistic form, is banished (thus accounting for the oddly static quality of Genet's work), and this banishment enacts on a formal level the banishment of the loved object that is the novels' content and project.

11. One might also ask another question. Where is the position in Sedgwick's theories of male homosocial desire and male homosexual panic, on which I have relied so heavily in this essay, for the openly gay man? Her paradigms, which have been so fruitful for the nascent field of queer theory, seem also to have locked that theory more or less firmly in the closet. This is a problem Sedgwick herself has recognized. "I've wondered about my ability to keep generating ideas about 'the closet,' compared to a relative inability, so far, to have new ideas about the substantive differences made by post-Stonewall imperatives to rupture or vacate that space" (*Epistemology*, 63). Unfortunately, that individual and extremely self-conscious inability seems to have reproduced itself less self-critically in the work of many of her epigones, including (except parenthetically) the present author's.

12. In his brilliant essay "Outlaws: Gay Men and Feminism," Owens is eloquently scathing on Irigaray's characterization of male homosexuality as the "immediate" version or "open interpretation" of male supremacy—what he rightly calls her conflation of homosexuality with homophobia. "In this view, one supposes, the homosexual subculture would be the utopia of patriarchy" (224). See especially pages 223–25 of this essay.

13. “Brest is a hard, solid city, built out of gray Breton granite” (5). Seat since 1830 of the French Naval Academy and (along with Toulon) one of the two major bases of the French navy, the city was almost completely destroyed during World War II (this novel of course takes place before that cataclysm, as the mention of Chamberlain and Mussolini indicates), though it has since been rebuilt, its port restored and re-equipped. The notorious prison hulks of Brest, in whose abandoned granite labyrinths Gil takes refuge after his killing of Theo, were closed in the nineteenth century when Devil’s Island and the penal colony of French Guiana were established.

Shadows and Light Moving on Water

On Samuel R. Delany

1. Samuel R. Delany has written several experiments with the (non)form of the essay that he calls chrestomathies, “collections of [numbered] textual fragments whose numerous interrelations the reader must actively trace out in order to gather them up into a resonant whole” (as critic Ken James describes them in the introduction to Delany’s collection *Longer Views: Extended Essays*). One of the earlier of these is titled “Shadows.” A later piece, a sequel of sorts to “Shadows,” is titled “Shadow and Ash.” Consider this my formal *hommage* to Delany, a tribute in manner as well as matter.

2. chres.to.ma.thy *n*, *pl* -thies (NL *chrestomathia*, fr. Gk *chrestomatheia*, fr. *chrestos* useful + *mathemein* to learn—more at mathematical) (1832) 1: a selection of passages compiled as an aid to learning a language 2: a volume of selected passages or stories of an author (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*).

This is my attempt, tentative, partial in all senses, at an aid to learning the language of Samuel R. Delany.

3. Two or three things I know about Samuel R. Delany. He is black, though light-skinned enough to pass for white in his youthful wanderings through the Civil Rights era South. He is gay, though once married to the marvelous poet Marilyn Hacker and father with her of an adult daughter. He is a science fiction writer, as well as a memoirist, an “anti-pornographer,” and a critic and theorist both cultural and literary. He is dyslexic, which means that he has had to wrestle with language all his life: language’s otherness has always been quite literal for him.

Delany is one of the best-known neglected writers in America. Within the field of science fiction he is almost a monument. *Dhalgren* has sold millions of copies, though it was never on any mainstream best-seller list. Outside the realms of science fiction and lately of queer studies, he is almost unknown. When I told her that I was writing this essay, a close friend who is a voracious reader of fiction expressed great relief about never having heard of Delany when I explained that he is a science fiction writer. “Sometimes worlds exist under your eyes and you never see” (*Babel-17*).

4. Many “literary” writers and readers don’t consider science fiction to be literature at all, and see no reason why they should read it or even acknowledge its existence. They think it’s for pimply boys who can’t get dates. In fact, most science fiction *isn’t* literature: but then, neither is most literary fiction. And Delany has had many, many dates.

5. A paradox: science fiction critics often dismiss Delany’s work as too “intellectual,” too “difficult” (mainstream critics usually simply ignore it). Yet he is also a very popular writer. *Dhalgren*, one of his most “difficult” novels, is also one of his best selling.

Delany isn’t terribly difficult. But one does have to think to read him, and some people resent that. Delany engages ideas, but he also tells stories, creates characters, and paints landscapes. He is a world maker, and in his work idea-spinning and storytelling are aspects of one another.

6. I am a poet; Delany is a fiction writer. But I have learned as much from him about how to write and how to read as I have from any poet, including a reminder that reading is a form of writing oneself into a text and that writing is a form of reading a potential text. Delany has frequently acknowledged his debts to poetry. He has also written an extended and wide-ranging meditation on Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* (“Atlantis Rose . . .,” in *Longer Views*), as well as “Atlantis: Model 1924” (published in *Atlantis: Three Tales*), a vividly imagined meeting between Delany’s father and the poet on the Brooklyn Bridge, an encounter that revolves around misunderstandings and miscommunications:

the two, occupying the same space at the same time, never meet at all.

There is a convergence between the position of poetry and the position of science fiction in contemporary American culture. Both are highly marginal discourses. Poetry has a great deal of residual cultural cachet (as attested by its use as an all-purpose honorific: a good quarterback is “poetry in motion”), but few people read it (there are many times more would-be poets than readers of poetry); science fiction lacks prestige but is widely read (often somewhat abashedly, as if one shouldn’t admit to such an adolescent habit).

At their best, science fiction and poetry have in common the production and presentation of alternative worlds in which the rules, restrictions, and categories of our world don’t apply; it was this freedom from the tyranny of what is, the domination of the actually existing, that attracted me to both, first science fiction and then poetry.

7. In *Babel-17*, one of the earlier of Delany’s many novels, a kind of linguistic space opera partly inspired by the Worf-Sapir hypothesis, the fate of the Administrative Alliance in their battle against an enemy known only as the Invaders depends upon a poet’s capacity to comprehend what they thought was a code but she discovers is a language—a language, exact, analytical, which does not contain the word *I*. “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” as Ludwig Wittgenstein so famously wrote. Two different words imply two different worlds.

8. I first tried to read *Dhalgren* when I was (twelve? thirteen?). I got about halfway through (it’s a *long* book) and stopped—nothing *happened*, not by the standards of a Robert Heinlein or an Isaac Asimov or a Larry Niven novel. I kept flipping ahead to see if there was more gay sex. After reading *The Jewel Hinged Jaw*’s meditations on language and narrative, I tried again, and stopped after about ten pages, overwhelmed by the vertiginous effort of reading the novel like a poem, word by word. “She whispered something that was all breath and the wind came for the words and dusted away the meaning.” The book’s seventh and final section intercalates fragmented story, diary entries

(whose?), and self-reflexivity on itself as written text, presenting us with cancelled words and phrases, alternative readings. Thick writing, the opposite of Barthes's writing zero degree, this is writing that reminds us that it *is* writing. Eventually, reading Delany's essays taught me how to read this novel. This is the same work the modernists did, producing their readers by means of their writings.

9. The scenes in *Dhalgren* of Kid/Kidd/The Kid writing the poems of *Brass Orchids*, the book that establishes his fame in the postapocalyptic Midwestern city of Bellona, presented for me an ideal of how to write poetry, each word coaxed out of the page's white void, each revision retrospectively transforming the whole. Worlds hang from words.

He sucked a breath through closed teeth, clicked the point out and began to write.

In the middle of the third line, without taking pen off paper, he swept back to cross it all out. Then, carefully, he re-copied two words on the next line. The second was 'I.' Very carefully now, word followed word. He crossed out two more lines, from which he salvaged "you," "spinner," and "pave," dropping them into a new sentence that bore no denotative resemblance to the one from which they had come.

Later in the book, he searches for the words to flesh out the rhythm in his head. Here the struggle is not to wrest words out of silence, but to sing sense out of sheer melody.

But all the vague and loose remains roiled and contended for definition. "Ba-da ba-da ba-da?" he asked. "Ba-da ba-da," he answered, sitting. It listed like oil on turbulence. At last Ba-da ba-da ba-da? formed around the fragments of a question, but Ba-da ba-da fit no worded answer. He flexed his fingers around the pen point till they ached, then went back to struggling with the recalcitrant quantities of sound overlapping their sense. He reread some dozen alternate lines for the beginning of one section: with the delight of resignation, he decided, with the change of a "This" to a "That," on his initial version.

10. As a black gay writer whose work is not defined by his race or his sexuality, Delany has also helped me navigate the treacherous waters of being a writer who is black. I have never been comfortable with the not-various-enough approved modes of how to be a “black writer,” of what counts as “black literature.” Delany reminds us that literature created by black people is by definition black literature, is the definition of black literature. As he puts it in his collection *Silent Interviews*, “I *am* black. I and my work *are* the evidence for and of blackness. It’s *your* job to rearrange the criteria in terms of the evidence I present you with—not mine to fit my work into your . . . scheme of what ‘black enough’ means to you.”

As someone whose blackness has been questioned all my life by others black *and* white, I find that insistence heartening in its rejection of the boxes into which black writers are expected to fit themselves, ourselves. Delany has been luckier than I, though, if, as he asserts, only white critics have attempted to police his blackness. I have too often been, as the song says, shot by both sides, not black enough for blacks or “politically correct” whites, and of course too black for most whites, who are far from “correct,” politically or otherwise.

11. Delany’s futures have black people (and Asian people and Native Americans and people of undetermined race, yet distinctly not white), they have gay people and bisexuals and people of sexualities as yet undefined or even unimagined (the spacers in “Aye, and Gomorrah,” for example). Crucially for me as a young someone whose fondest wish was to *be* someone, in every sense, they also had people unlike any people I knew or previously could have conceived, including people who weren’t people at all. That unlikeness felt true.

I could hardly imagine myself as more different—sometimes I felt that I was nothing but a list of all the things I wasn’t (not white, not straight, not middle class, not normal, not like the other boys at all)—but Delany’s works showed me a way outside of that self. “Here I am and am no I” (*Dhalgren*). Difference became a space of possibility, otherness showed its utopian face. Delany’s multiverse had room for me, for several versions of that “me.”

Delany's fiction simultaneously gave me a point of identification and took me far outside myself. Many of Delany's characters are marginal, outsiders to their society or even to themselves. Was I as much of an outsider as Rat Korga in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*? I was at least a part of my society. Was I as much of an outsider as The Butcher in *Babel-17*? I was at least some version of myself. A potent corrective to self-pity. "It's so easy to get caught in your fragment of the world" (*Babel-17*). But both characters find themselves some version of a place.

12. Science fiction readers and writers tend to be divided into hard science and soft science types. I was always a soft science type, more interested in the people and their world than in their machinery, which I never understood anyway. I wanted to see how they were different from us and how they were the same (and how one could sometimes masquerade as the other), I wanted to see how this alternative world worked. Delany reminds readers just how complex even a piece of a world is, reminding us also that a world isn't a static thing but a myriad of things in motion and relation.

The four-volume series of interlocking tales retrospectively known as *Return to Nevérÿon* (return, that is, to a place we've never been), sword-and-sorcery novels that are also about sword and sorcery as a genre, utilize their "ancient" setting to explore the origins and development of language, the family, sexuality, gender roles, private property, social hierarchy, the intersections of sex and power, and time keeping, among many other directions and digressions. They also investigate the junctures and disjunctions of story and history, nation and narration. (One of my favorite aspects of the books is that the characters themselves speculate on these matters. They investigate their world and themselves along with us as readers, reading and rewriting themselves.)

The *Nevérÿon* books come festooned with epigraphs from Hannah Arendt, Roland Barthes, T. S. Eliot, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Susan Sontag, and many others, alerting readers immediately that we are not simply being told a story, but that part of this story is the story of how stories are told. This despite the spectacularly incongruous cover paintings

Bantam Books slapped on the first three books, quivering with buxom maidens and bulbous-buttèd warriors.

The epigraphs also remind the reader of the great mass of prior writing and reading out of which any piece of writing emerges, that the author is, in Foucault's term, a nexus of various discourses. *Flight from Nevèryon*, the third book in the series, knocks down the fictional fourth wall, investigating the social meanings of disease by interweaving the tale of a plague in Nevèryon that closely resembles AIDS with a journal of the early years of AIDS in 1980s New York City. In the process it questions the means, meanings, and motives of metaphor.

13. A primary question in all Delany's work: does one impose form on experience or does one recognize form in and coax form out of experience? Different characters arrive at different answers. In *Babel-17* the poet Rydra Wong recognizes form in what others had taken to be random noise. Bron Helstrom, the nonhero of *Trouble on Triton*, attempts throughout the book to impose inappropriate forms on a world that refuses to conform to his (mis)understandings. The characters of *The Einstein Intersection* adopt and adapt themselves to the forms, cultural and physical, of now departed human beings. Gorgik the Liberator, in the Nevèryon books, plays with the given forms (one of these games is called sadomasochism), recognizing that they can neither be shrugged off nor taken as transcendent truths.

14. In *The Einstein Intersection* Lo Lobey and Friza, members of an alien race who have settled on Earth after the humans have gone away, play out the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, trying to figure out what it meant to be human by living out the myths the people left behind, wearing them like clothing that doesn't fit properly. This has always resonated with me as an image of my own relation to the corpus, if not the corpse, of Western high culture, which is in my possession but does not belong to me: we are simultaneously wholly part of and utterly other to one another. My language is both my most intimate possession and not mine at all, and that is a space of creation as well as of alienation. "We came, took their bodies, their souls—both husks abandoned here for any wanderer's taking. . . . You may be Orpheus; you

may be someone else, who dares death and succeeds.” Lo Lobey resizes the garments, recognizing that myths can not only be reread but rewritten. It is this task of rewriting the myths (among other tasks) to which Samuel R. Delany has dedicated himself, and the world is richer for the worlds he has created.

Four Gay American Poets

The four poets I write about here have all been formed, at various removes, by the confluence of gay liberation (and the liberatory movements of the 1960s and 1970s in general) and what have been called the new American poetics. Both the new social movements and the new American poetics (neither very new anymore) seek to see and seize the world in a new way, to transform the apparently given, if only (only!) by seeing it as and for itself for the first time. Concomitantly, both movements have conceived of identity, poetic and social, as process rather than product, flux rather than fixity. For these poets, social identity (or rather, social identities) comprises only one element of their complex and polyvalent work, and it is constantly in motion, a work in progress, made not found. Much of the social thrust of Aaron Shurin's poetry, for example, calls into question settled notions of identity, while Donald Britton's work often eschews the presentation or production of individual selfhood at all.

All four poets continue and develop an experimental strain in American poetry, playful and earnest at once, and one that always begins with and returns to the word as the building block of the poem. Their predecessors, many themselves gay, include such diverse poets as Walt Whitman, Robert Duncan, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashbery. In their various ways all four poets investigate, invigorate, and even interrogate language and its relations to the world, not as an academic exercise or a pastime, but as an essential aspect of being in the world and making a world for oneself, and even of remaking the world. For all of them, the poem proposes a world of possibility that adds to and often argues with the world as it presents itself to us.

Aaron Shurin and the Paradise of Forms

Aaron Shurin's poetry has been formed within the dual matrix of gay liberation culture and avant-garde poetry (as he writes, "I was born, as it were, into Projective Verse, theories of 'organic form' and 'composition by field'"), with Robert Duncan as the crucial linking figure. Indeed, he and Duncan were close friends, a relationship, in Shurin's words, "built around mutual poetic concerns: the vitality of lyric writing situated within a framework of postmodern investigations of form and language." Love and language, sexuality and textuality, have been central themes and central modes in Aaron Shurin's poetry since the beginning of his career, and for him these two things have been keys to liberation both personal and social. His has never been a poetry of uncomplicated self-expression, but a poetry that seeks both to embody and to incite transformation; the linguistic transformations of the poetry are the model (and hopefully the catalyst) for the larger transformations it proposes and points toward. (Denise Levertov was an early mentor for many years and, as a deeply lyric poet with strong political commitments, was a model for Shurin's "emerging sense of lyric mission and social activism.") In this way he is very much the inheritor of poets like Shelley, and he has written that his goal has always been "to sustain and remake" the Romantic tradition. As he puts it, he has struggled to articulate a cultural political ethos with "an intuited position" on the Romantic continuum.

In the shape of his poetic career that becomes clear in his selections for his 1999 selected poems volume, *The Paradise of Forms* (a retrospective shape that begins with 1980's *Giving Up the Ghost*, since he excludes selections from his previous books), questions of intersubjectivity, the barriers separating persons (and kinds of persons), and the possibility of overcoming those barriers—of different selves intertwining, interpenetrating, and even merging—have always been central to Shurin's work. In "Raving #25, Vernal Equinox," which even in its title evokes liminality, the equinox being the point at which winter and spring hinge on and melt into one another, he writes of the body lying down with the bicameral mind "in the split field of / darkness & light / half of each over blackland / half over white." Even as

he lays out the divisions, the poet leaps over them, starting with the image of the body reuniting with the split mind (enacting two unions in one, mind with mind and body with reintegrated mind), and continuing into the image of black and white overlapping, which may have not only a temporal and metaphysical but also a social valence, evoking an image of racial harmony and the dissolution of racial boundaries. The poem ends with an invocation to both god (Shiva, who in Hinduism is both destroyer and renewer) and goddess to “Let all things equal their fearful / opposites!,” to “let earth / be where Heaven & Hell give up!” (*Paradise*, 10).

Several pieces in the prose sequence “Multiple Heart” (from *The Graces*, a book that in Shurin’s words “charts a movement from verse, through ever-longer lines, into prose-poems”) enact the intercourse of sexuality and textuality that is so central to Shurin’s poetry, for example “O that river song came through again body beautiful,” which calls up the ghost of Spenser’s epithalamium in an image of song flowing through the body like a river (the poem is literally in the blood here), and of the speaker and his beloved swimming through this river as an analogue of sexual union, fluids flowing and merging: song is sex, the poem is a wedding of writer and reader. Similarly, in “foregone and in conclusion the most,” the page of the poem is the sheet of the bed where the lovers meet: “I leap upon you on the bed right now, pull up the page.” The meeting of minds becomes the meeting of bodies: “How I am lost and how adore the music of your sphere” (*Paradise*, 25).

In the early 1980s, Shurin began working almost exclusively in the prose poem, a mode that by its nature straddles and crosses borders and definitions, of prose and verse, of narrative and lyric, a mode that undermines certainties of literary knowledge (“this is poetry,” “this is prose”). This formal in-betweenness embodies Shurin’s ambition of combining what he calls lyric interjection and narrative tension “in a way that reflects in its complexities and contradictions the tension between individual perception and social control; a poetry simultaneously of praise and dislocation.” Exploring assorted shapes and crossing prescribed boundaries of identity and self-hood have always been integral parts of Aaron Shurin’s poetry, so it is not surprising that,

soon after beginning to work in the prose poem (anti)genre, he took the incorporation of various voices and subject positions in his poetry to one logical extreme of composing poems made up entirely of borrowed or appropriated voices, constructing his texts out of other texts.

As Shurin has written, the collage technique “encouraged me to break away from a centralized lyric voice, and [to] radiate that lyricism through and among the narrative elements.” It breaks down the sense of language as the possession of any individual, foregrounding it as a collective creation, placing the author as a Foucauldian nexus of overlapping, colliding, and competing discourses that find tentative, contingent shape in the text itself, not in the presiding genius of the omnipotent author. Whereas in such modernist predecessors as Eliot and Pound, montage is a way of mastering the fragmented, overwhelming flux of experience and history, for Shurin it is a mode of surrender to the play of discourses, an abandonment of the drive toward mastery. As he writes of the prose poem format, in words that apply equally well to the collage technique, such modes can “better hold the narrative of events . . . essential to depict social relations—the relationships among hierarchies of power, the authoritarian and the dispossessed, the desirer and desired—as well as the interweaving of conflicting perceptions [we understand] as personal or subjective experience.”

The long prose poem “City of Men,” from *A’s Dream* (a poem that the poet refers to as an “erotic rampage”), is one of Shurin’s major accomplishments, and an important addition to and revision of the canon of American poetry. The piece is made up entirely of phrases by Walt Whitman, culled from the Children of Adam and Calamus poems in *Leaves of Grass*, melding and interspersing the two to create a montage of what Whitman called adhesiveness with a more bodily (homo)sexuality. As Shurin writes, “Calamus is his collection of homoerotic love poems, emotional, tender, idealistic, radically political, prophetic, obliquely erotic, but—alas—not sexual. If you want sex, go to the grouping Children of Adam, Whitman’s putative heterosexual songs. They are filled with body and body parts, physical material catalogues, paeans to the sex act—but—alas—no love. The body is electric but it is not affectionate” (*Unbound*, 11). In “City of Men,” Shurin

turns to both sets of poems at once to retrieve a language and a world that unites sex and love, eros and agape, body and soul, intercourse and adhesiveness, to “write my eros out of spirit and body, shamelessly, and perhaps for the first time in history from a completely integrated viewpoint” (*Unbound*, 12). The textual intercourse he sets in motion between these two sets of poems celebrating apparently polar opposite sexualities and eroticisms is an image and model of the sexual/spiritual intercourse the poem proposes as not only possible but realizable, on the page and in the world, sharing subjectivities and mingling subject positions: “all men carry men . . . I glow spontaneous, know what he is dreaming. the same content, airs intimate that fill my place with him” (*A’s Dream*, 40). The end of the poem is at once an injunction and an invocation of the union of man with man the poem both evokes and enacts, asking the reader to participate in this union and simultaneously asserting that (by the act of reading) the reader is already a participant: “full of you and become you. any number could be me. read these and become a comrade. with you I am one” (*A’s Dream*, 43). The lack of a period to close the final phrase can be taken as a gesture of the open-endedness of the poem’s project: it is still in process, no more fixed and finalized than the texts out of which Shurin has rewritten a new world and a new word.

All of the poems in his books *A’s Dream*, *Into Distances*, and *A Door* utilize what Shurin calls “derived language” in the prose poem format, but recently Shurin has shifted modes again, writing once more in lineated verse, while still exploring methods that undermine traditional notions of authorial ownership of the words of the poem, as the very title of his most recent book indicates. As Shurin writes, “After a saturated period of writing poetic prose, and fifteen years of prose poetry, I began to re-imagine the possibilities of the poetic line. In 1996 I began a book-length series of verse poems called *Involuntary Lyrics*. These ‘line-heavy’ poems try to intensely utilize the torque of line-breaks just as those breaks fall across conventional syntax, to create an interruptive but suspended measure that is both notational, like shorthand, and also largely colloquial.” Shurin has written a poem corresponding to each of Shakespeare’s sonnets, although the book *Involuntary Lyrics* does not include all

of them. (Shurin says that he had to choose either to approach it as a project, including all 154 pieces, or as a book, including only these pieces that held up as poems in themselves.) Each numbered, untitled “semi-” or “meta-sonnet” takes its end words from the numerically corresponding sonnet of Shakespeare’s, though the order of the words has been rearranged prior to composition “to test the ear’s ability to hear rhymes across odd distances in the poem and through widely varying line lengths.” Shurin also intends the serial nature of the project to, in his words, “privilege the daily. . . . The right-hand words are fixed by Shakespeare, brought into new contexts by the preceding and following language that comes, as it were, from the left side, which is open to ‘my’ world: personal events, friends, lovers, negotiations of economic reality, social circumstance, restless eros, mortality, and age.” Here again we see the confrontation and overcoming of boundaries—of different times and places, of various discourses and modes of expression, of literary tradition and literary experimentation, of “literature” and daily life, of fixity and contingency—that are so central to Shurin’s work. As he writes in the beautifully self-reflexive and proleptically retrospective Involuntary Lyric CLIV (corresponding to Shakespeare’s sonnet 154, the last of the sequence):

Attention’s the remedy
for what it attends, . . .
thrall
of pure syntax contiguity face to face on fire
to prove
each line warmed
by particulars fore and aft. Love
’s the art imagined by desire.

(*Paradise*, 142)

Tim Dlugos’s Powerful Powelessness

Tim Dlugos (1950–1990) was a significant gay experimental poet of the 1970s and 1980s. He was an early poet to write in a thoughtful and artistic manner about the experience of living with HIV/AIDS. Dlugos wrote some of his best-known poems

while recuperating from pneumonia on G-9, the AIDS ward at Roosevelt Hospital. Dlugos died of AIDS-related complications on December 3, 1990. His selected poems volume, *Powerless*, edited by his friend and fellow gay poet David Trinidad, was published in 1996.

In a statement for the 1976 younger poets anthology *None of the Above*, Dlugos wrote: “1. I try to write out of the time & space I find myself in. 2. My best work takes the ‘timeless’—spontaneous goofs, flights, body motions—and drags it onto timeline, the ‘real world’ where most of us live. I am ‘successful’ when the language (clean combination of words) takes me or someone else back to the original combination of feelings & perceptions ‘out there,’ or somewhere equally nice. 3. My work is part of the nostalgia craze; all of it reminds me of where I used to be. 4. Grace, in a very orthodox sense, is my major preoccupation.”

This early statement accurately sums up the concerns and methods of Dlugos’s poetry throughout his career. Many of Dlugos’s poems begin with memories, or move into and out of memories, and memory often blurs into both present reality and future possibility. Memory in these poems is not a fixed picture of the past, but a vehicle for mental travel. Similarly, Dlugos’s poems are often strongly grounded in the moment of their enunciation, but they constantly remind us that all space and all time are ultimately one, that this moment’s present is yesterday’s future and tomorrow’s past: by being fully here now, one can be anywhere at any time. And any moment, any place, can become luminous, numinous even, if seen closely and accurately, if experienced in a properly receptive mode. Grace abounds in these poems, inhering in the smallest and the largest things. As Dlugos writes in “Ordinary Time,”

Which are the magic
moments in ordinary
time? All of them,
for those who can see.
That is what redemption
means.

(74)

Frank O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems are a pervasive influence on Dlugos's work. Like O'Hara, Dlugos has both an exuberant, passionate interest in the things of this world (especially those things made by man) and the capacity, by virtue of the intensity of his attention (and poetry can in part be defined as a mode of attention), to illuminate those objects into epiphany, a kind of secular revelation. Dlugos's poetry incorporates a wide range of subject matters, including literature, pop culture, visual art, classical and popular music, the textures and neighborhoods of New York City, contemporary urban gay life (and the traumas of gay adolescence), alcoholism, and AIDS. For Dlugos, however, content was always second to style; he wrote sonnets, sestinas, rhymed quatrains, and other formal poems (some of his own design), list poems, love poems, elegies, tight lyrics, and extended narratives. He constantly explored what and how a poem could speak. Dlugos's was a wide-ranging and eclectic sensibility, but he didn't simply juxtapose disparate elements for its own sake. Instead, he synthesized those elements into new and unexpected wholes. The early poem "Gilligan's Island" combines imagined scenes from the popular kitschy (and retrospectively campy) television comedy series with references to Puccini, Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds*, the assassination of President Kennedy, and a boy (presumably a member of the show's original audience) masturbating in his room to the voice of the opera singer Dorothy Kirsten while thinking of boys in his high school government class to create a kind of mosaic portrait of the 1960s, bringing out the elements of sexuality, anxiety, danger, death, and desire of the larger cultural and historical context, elements that the titular TV series, to which many look back as an emblem of a simpler, more innocent time, represses or excludes. That innocence was only ever an illusion, and the poem cracks that facade to let us see underneath it.

Poems like "Stanzas for Martina," "Day for Paul," and "Chez Jane" illustrate the collage-like technique of assembling sensory impressions and passing thoughts into a snapshot of the motions of a particular consciousness that Dlugos inherits and develops from Frank O'Hara. O'Hara is mentioned in "Day for Paul," and "Chez Jane" is named after a poem of O'Hara's. "Day

for Paul” also explicitly mentions Marcel Proust, and the Proustian method of conjuring up panoramas of the personal past through sensory detail is very much in operation in this poem, in which seeing a neighbor boy smoking a joint conjures up the speaker’s adolescence, and the act of writing down these memories and impressions calls up his younger self, an aspiring writer “on the verge of big breakthrough accompanied by pain” (17). By the end of the poem the speaker is both the man looking out his window at a boy, a man looking back on himself as a boy, and the boy that he was and somewhere inside still is, dreaming of the current lover to whom the poem is addressed: he is in “the place inside my body where I can feel you living all the time,” where memory, desire, anticipation, and present experience meet (17). “The Lions of St. Mark’s” is a wide-ranging meditation that cinematically intercuts images of life in New York City’s St. Mark’s Square with images of a trip to Venice and its famous St. Mark’s Square (juxtaposing Venetian monuments with “the corner where the bialy man / hangs out”), weaving images of the body of Saint Mark with images of the beefed-up bodies of gay men lined up to get into the now-legendary Saint nightclub, and images of the crocodile of Saint Theodore (Venice’s first patron saint) with the alligators on the Izod tennis shirts that were for a time *de rigueur* in the gay scene. What unifies the poem is the coexistence of these different elements and levels of culture in the mind and sensibility of an educated, artistic, and eclectic American gay man in the 1970s.

“The Morning,” a seemingly simpler poem in which the poet recounts his impressions and thoughts during the course of a single morning, also involves such layering of different levels and kinds of experience, from breakfast cereals to a morning prayer to memories of having dreamt of the lover who lay beside the speaker when he spoke. The speaker sees people through his windows as if on a television screen, admitting, in his reference to the biblical notion of seeing through a glass darkly, the difficulty of truly knowing other people or perceiving them accurately, especially in the anonymous and at times alienating context of modern urban life, in which people are often only spectacles to one another, like walking television shows. Any accusation of randomness to this collection of images is answered in the lines

I risk playing the fool
because this is a world I am creating,
not “text” or “slice of life.”

(55)

Dlugos wants the poem to be capacious enough to hold all that the poet encounters, to contain a world and be a world in itself. The poem concludes with an extended and explicitly partly imagined view of New York Harbor, which becomes an analogue for the mind filled with everything it has ever known or thought, the place where all these things otherwise lost or forgotten are kept:

This world’s finest anchorage is filled with freighters
which themselves are filled with freight
from everywhere. Drop it here.

(57)

“The Morning” is a kind of *ars poetica*, which shows by its example that the poem is one of Marianne Moore’s “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” the place where and the means by which all these various things meet.

Similarly, in “The Fruit Streets,” a sunset or sunrise (it’s deliberately left unclear in the poem whether this multihued sky represents a beginning or an end, though in either case “It’s a new world / out there”) is revised and almost transfigured in terms of the colors of Trix cereals, Cranberry, Pineapple, Orange, and Joralemon—a clear metaphor of the transformative operations of the imagination. Some of the colors are spurious, but they are nonetheless spectacular, and they are perhaps even more spectacular *because* of their artificiality—artifice is, after all, a close relation of art. The poem asserts that

The life
of the flesh is lived inside a sack
of flesh, but the life of the memory
is spun out in the names by which
we know the streets.

(62)

The poem informs us, and exemplifies through its own compositional structure, that it is the mind, and naming as the paradigmatic act of the mind, which brings things into meaning and makes them last. Again, we see the meeting of mind and world on equal terms: the materials of the world are held and shaped by the artist's consciousness and thus made available to other minds, allowing the reader to live in or at least visit a city

you know about because you've heard it
in my voice, as if by faith.

(62)

In "Healing the World from Battery Park," this image of taking the world inside oneself is made literal and physical. The speaker breathes in the world, breathes in history in the smell of the sea from which all life came and, more recently, from which came centuries of immigrants (all of us except for Native Americans), beginning with the colonial settlers, to populate what we still call the New World. He breathes in a whole panorama of America's past, from the sale of Manhattan Island for a few trinkets to Andrew Jackson's defeat of the British in the Battle of New Orleans (after the War of 1812 was actually over) and his massacre of the Creek Indians to the Trail of Tears on which so many Native Americans died, and then he breathes in more: the whole history of exile and displacement, of lost or abandoned love, of isolation and loneliness. He breathes in the suffering of men who can't speak and can hardly feel their own emotions, of women who suffer those men's withdrawal and their rage. He breathes all this in and then seeks to breathe out a balm, a little peace for all those stories of sorrow and pain. As Dlugos writes near the end of the poem,

a little part of you is in the wind now,
a trace of pain or coffee in the scent
of brine that clasps you like a lover,
closer and more faithful than a lover.

(65–66)

Much of Dlugos's later poetry is about his experiences of living with HIV and AIDS, but the sense of the importance of the

here and now is, if anything, only sharpened by the poems' keen awareness of mortality not just as a universal human fact but as an impinging and imminent reality. The poet still seeks to be

fearless and thorough
enough to give [the magic] room,
all the room there is in ordinary
time, . . .
the undescribed
and undescribable, more various
and cacophonous than voice
can tell or mind conceive.

(76)

In keeping with the this-worldliness of his sensibility, its insistence on the precious quality of the things of this world, Dlugos's late poem "Turandot," an ironic meditation on ideas of the afterlife, imagines heaven as the imperial Chinese court of Puccini's opera, in which the titular virgin princess (recorded by, among other sopranos, Joan Sutherland, who is mentioned in the poem) subjects each of her suitors to a set of three riddles, and executes all those who cannot answer correctly (that is, all of them). As the comic courtiers Ping, Pang, and Pong complain in the opera, life has been reduced to three bangs on a gong, three riddles, and one head chopped off. This is how Dlugos pictures heaven, as a place where nothing happens, over and over again for all eternity:

where riddling has metastasized
from a show of wit into a burning
passion, consuming all the time
that passes in the progress
toward an end that never comes.

(112)

Whereas the opera ends with Turandot's heart finally being melted by the Prince Calaf, who has answered the three riddles and whose true name, she now realizes, is love, in the heaven this poem posits there is no end to the riddling, to the pomp and ceremony and ritual. There is a clear allusion to and implied

critique of the ceremonials of organized religion, specifically the elaborate rituals of the Catholic Church in which Dlugos was raised, and of the religious emphasis on the life to come as opposed to the earthly life that is the only life we know we have. At the end of this rather brief poem, everyone, having had more than their fill of the wonders of Peking, the imperial capital, simply wants to go home, but of course there is no home to which one can return after death, no going back to earthly life. Thus the poem also implies a critique of the Christian notion of the resurrection of the body, and indeed of all the ideologies that induce one to value an imagined or potential afterlife over the actual life we are living. In this way, “Turandot” functions as a veiled *carpe diem*, in which the reader is warned to seize the day and live in the now. As the opera tells us, the riddles are three but death is one—and so is life.

A Short Trip to *Italy*: Introducing Donald Britton

Donald Britton (1951–1994) was the author of one, rather brief book, *Italy*, published in 1981 by poet Dennis Cooper’s Little Caesar Press, and featuring blurbs from John Ashbery and novelist Edmund White. *In the Empire of the Air*, an even more brief volume than *Italy*, was to have been published by Little Caesar Press, but the project ran into financial difficulties. Britton essentially stopped writing poetry in the late 1980s, though he frequently expressed a desire to write. Though Britton died of AIDS, the disease is not a presence in his work, which avoids the chronicling of personal experience.

Donald Britton’s poems are full of vivid yet subtle language and wistful reticence, a sense of romance all the more powerfully affecting for its understatement. While clearly in the line of John Ashbery, Britton’s poems have a greater intimacy even in their distances, and a verbal glamour all the more enchanting for its modesty.

The blurbs by Ashbery and White on the back cover of *Italy* accurately introduce the methods and themes of the work. Ashbery writes, “One is led gradually into these poems, which seem so quiet and open at first, like empty streets on the periphery of

a city. Soon one realizes that for some time one has been involved in a strong dialectic with Donald Britton's remarkable and inspiring intelligence. By that time it is too late to do anything but enjoy." Ashbery's comment emphasizes the effacement of self in Britton's poems; while there is often an "I," that pronoun sometimes serves as no more than a marker or a point of view, a place from which the poem sets out. As in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," or *The Waste Land*, the "you" that flickers in and out of the poems is at once and by turns the beloved, a friend, a companion wanderer, a doppelgänger or imago, and the reader. There is thus, despite the poems' lack of a fixed or defined self, the sense of intimacy I mentioned above, and an emotional openness all the more moving because of their surface reticence.

Many of Donald Britton's poems do not have "topics" in the conventional sense (though they do have places, indeed are places): they are not subject-centered in either meaning of the word. Britton doesn't usually write about himself or any version of himself, nor about characters or personae, but rather about states of mind as it moves through the world. His poems trace out the meanderings of embodied consciousness, teasing out the links between bodily experience and consciousness. The mind that these poems explore is particular and even individual, but it is not personalized in the post-Confessional manner, but abstracted and generalized, much as in the work of Ashbery himself, who is the single strongest influence on the work. As Britton writes in his poem "Sonnet" (which consists of fifteen unrhymed lines and is thus insistently askew formally, at once calling up and exorcising the ghost of the sonnet),

My unkempt mind is yours, and the purity
Of my body, and the lesions joining them.
My outfit is yours, though you wear
But one thing, amply clothed in the capsule
Of a single sense of yourself.

(*Italy*, 11)

Donald Britton's poems wear the outfit of self lightly, and rarely singularly; they explore not just what it might mean to be

someone else, but what it might mean to be no one at all, or everyone. In them, as he writes in “Heart of Glass,”

Personal history [is] annihilated, ground
Into a very fine talc and gathered

Into structures of air that are always
Collapsing . . .
But retaining [its] essential substance.

(*Italy*, 18)

In his only statement on his work, the commentary on “Winter Garden” in the anthology *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms*, Britton writes that the formal rigor of the poem lies “in my attempt to ‘non-personalize’ or psychologically denature the poem—to detach it from any single speaker or communication context, yet maintain the illusion of a coherent, at times elegant discourse.” Britton writes that “Winter Garden” has “no ‘speaker,’ no ‘voice,’ no ‘persona,’ no ‘point of view.’” This is not true of all of his poems, but in all of them there is a distance from even the most personal and intense emotions, which are objectified rather than treated as an individual’s possessions or characterizing features. This refusal to treat emotions as the property of any one self paradoxically makes them more available to the various selves who are the readers of the poem: as Britton writes in the poem entitled and on the question of “Inner Resources,” “If you had them, they would take them. / So you give them away, freely.” For Britton, selfhood was something best dispersed or at least shared. This refusal to hold onto the self as a personal possession may be the source of the paradoxical intimacy of these seemingly impersonal poems.

In his blurb for *Italy*, Edmund White, one of Britton’s mentors in New York, writes that “The technique is dazzling, flowing from one tone of voice, formal and grave, and thence into something enigmatic and slangy. The sensation is like driving a car through an always changing but always beautiful landscape. Donald Britton has invented the tourism of the mind.” White concludes, “This is a poet constructing poems in a more rigor-

ously esthetic manner than almost anyone else in his generation.” Indeed, their formal poise and elegance is one of the most striking features of Britton’s poems.

Both Ashbery and White use the metaphor of a landscape or cityscape to describe Britton’s poems, and this is quite apt, as the poems are (again, like Ashbery’s) often about what might be called the experience of experience. They are wordscapes through which the reader journeys, marveling at their various features, some shining, some rather understated, but glistening when glimpsed more closely: as he writes in “We Loved the Inexact,”

Several other things called
Attention to themselves
In the act of crawling quietly
Out of view toward an out there
Not located on any map.

(*Italy*, 13)

Landscape, both physical and psychic, is central to Britton’s work, and it is these mapless locations that his poems sketch out for the receptive reader.

In this regard Britton is a follower not only of John Ashbery but of the French symbolist poets, especially Mallarmé, who sought a pure poetry, what could be called a poetry in, of, and for itself. As Britton writes in *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms*, his poems are a way “to project oneself toward that point where one’s words cease to comment on *any* experience, but become an experience in and of themselves: empty of discursive content, perhaps [though replete with what Susanne Langer calls virtual speech and symbolic form], but full of all manner of things *language* wants to say, but people usually don’t.” Britton’s work explores the “White Space”

Beginning where words drop off
In a remnant of music too simple
For speech.

(*Italy*, 7)

Having Tea with D. A. Powell

Very open about his status as a person living with AIDS, D. A. Powell is a poet, along with such writers as the late Paul Monette and the late Tory Dent, who has taken the HIV/AIDS epidemic not only as a (sometimes overwhelming) subject matter, but as the occasion for finding a new way of writing at the extremes, one that would be equal to (in both senses) the immensity of the AIDS crisis on both a personal and a social level. His work can be harshly brutal and meltingly lyrical, sometimes in the space of a single stanza.

In an interview with the *Harvard Crimson*, Powell lists T. S. Eliot, William Shakespeare, Sylvia Plath, Wallace Stevens, Federico García Lorca, Gertrude Stein, the Black Mountain poets (specifically Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan), and the New York School poets, especially Frank O'Hara, as influences. This list displays an eclectic taste and sensibility that is very apparent in Powell's kaleidoscopic, collage-like poems, with their wide range of voices, echoes, allusions, and references (some apparent, some buried), and their often fragmentary syntactical units, linked in a linguistic mosaic: "I have the sort of mind that lumps together odd events, that enjoys the simultaneity of experience. If two objects occupy the same space, is one a metaphor for the other?" (xxii). The "Notes" at the end of *Tea* indicate the variety of sources that have shaped its discourse, from *Macbeth* to *The Aeneid* to the Supremes and mid-1980s disco divas, from Tennessee Williams's memoirs to Batman's sidekick Robin to *The Exorcist*, from Gertrude Stein to Julie London to spirituals to gay slang. As Powell writes in "The Tea on *Tea*," the book's preface, "I wished to bring into the language of the poems all of the kinds of speech that I have heard around me—tall speech and short speech, the proper and the vernacular." He goes on to say that at least in the case of the some of the voices the poems contain and re-create this is not only a formal, compositional method, but a gesture of remembrance and memorial: "I honor my dead in the attempt to recapture their voices" (xiii).

Among the voices that fill these poems, pop music is pervasive. The lives these poems limn always have a soundtrack, usually one that can be danced to, appropriately enough, since so

much disco music is about fleeting contacts and moments of pleasure that can never be recaptured, that are savored exactly for their ephemeral quality, lost as soon as they are found: “Touch me in the morning, then just walk away” or “Remember me as the sound of laughter, and my face the morning after.” As Powell writes in his “[ode]” to the mid-1980s, “all of your best composing is lament” (57). The book’s paradoxically titled final poem, “[first fugue],” brings together fragments from what can be called a gay male poetic canon (Whitman, Hart Crane, Duncan, O’Hara, Merrill, Essex Hemphill, and others) with lyrics from songs by the late black gay disco singer Sylvester and lines from preceding poems in the book to create a kind of envoi that is also an invocation of the future, a heavenly afterlife just out of reach on earth: “reveries are rivers: *why don’t you take me to heaven?* the shiny buckle unfastens at last” (67). The second section of *Tea* is entitled “Tea Dance,” the last chance to dance, drink, and hook up before the working week begins, and is prefaced by a list of “Eleven Disco Songs That Equate Sex and Death Through an Elaborate Metaphor called ‘Heaven.’” “[now the mirrored rooms seem comic. shattered light: I once entered the world through dryice fog]” chronicles a youth marked and measured out by the dance songs that accompanied it, when the world of gay clubs seemed an enchanted wonderland (as the immediately preceding poem succinctly puts it, “heaven is a discotheque”). In retrospect that world appears laughable; the mirror ball that scattered multicolored stars in constellations around the room is now shattered like the speaker’s youthful illusions. Powell has spoken of his dual desire to elegize and to “lay waste” to the elegy, and this poem exemplifies both impulses.

“[jackbooted. buttonflyed. hungering out of muni stations. spilling into clubs as sweet sweet tea]” is subtitled “a song of Patrick Cowley,” the San Francisco dance musician best known for writing and producing many songs by Sylvester. Both are now dead of AIDS, and the distinctive high-energy disco they produced, the soundtrack to the 1970s and early 1980s San Francisco gay world of tight-fitting Levi’s 501s, construction boots, moustaches, and plaid shirts, is now a kind of requiem to that vanished world. The poem posits Cowley as the mouthpiece for that culture, the embodiment of those men’s collective voices

and collective desires: “they chose me for a host: I was already carrying this choir in my head. the language we share.” Here, disco is the folk music of gay men; the song of the moving body (dancing or making love, or both) is the antidote to centuries of silence and oppression: “the music had to magnify: silence would be unbear/unthinkable.” The word “host” connotes Catholic communion, and thus evokes the idea of disco as a sacrament of the gay male community, and also conjures notions of an army, as in the early gay liberation slogan “An army of lovers can never fail.” Retrospectively, the word also connotes Cowley’s body as the host of the virus that killed him and so many other members of the community he exemplified and gave voice to. In an apt conjuring up of what was so often called the gay clone subculture, Cowley’s individual creative expression is at the same time the expression of thousands of men; he is them and they are him: “I’m out among the multitude” (18). The invocation of silence (which is inevitably in this context both the silence of shame and the silence of death) as both unbearable and unthinkable also anticipates the AIDS activist slogan “Silence equals death.” To be silent is to be dead already. Despite his physical demise, Cowley has defeated death because his music lives on: whenever and wherever it is played, it resurrects him and the community he spoke to and for.

In “[these moves were not acquired overnight. stop: extended palm. love: suggestion of a hug],” the young boy learns emotion and sexuality from the songs of the Supremes, or at least learns a language (physical, visual, cultural or subcultural) by which to express these “unmanly” feelings: “how many times did I learn to walk.” Singing and dancing along to these perfectly poised songs of heartbreak, he learns how to perform those emotions and that sexuality which are forbidden or at least inappropriate for a boy, miming to the voices and mimicking the movements of these singing women (“what right did I have to assert these hips”). Boys aren’t meant to model themselves on women, and white boys are certainly not meant to model themselves on black women. And yet, for a certain audience, that “inappropriate” sexuality is highly desirable: “talent scouts taloned me: chickenhawks.” The boy gets his own fans to perform for. He also learns that, isolated as he is, he is not

alone: "I am not of this world. I know others like me." Like the Whitman of the poem's epigraph, like the birds fill the skies with song, and like their namesake Cindy Birdsong, he too can be "one of the supremes" (45).

"[*tall and thin and young and lovely the michael with kaposi's sarcoma goes walking*]" ironically juxtaposes the healthy, lovely, and universally desired protagonist of "The Girl from Ipanema," or in this case the boy from Ipanema, who elicits sighs whenever he passes by on the beach, with Michael who brazenly displays his Kaposi's sarcoma lesions as "he sambas past the empty lifeguard tower," evoking not the "ah" of desire but the "whisper-whisperwhisper" of vicious gossip and sarcastic or condescending smiles that grow a little sharper each day. It's not incidental that the lifeguard tower is empty: Michael is past the point at which a lifeguard can save him, and though he might indeed need a lifeguard, "days like this who wouldn't swim at own risk." By the end of the poem the song that has been rewritten by the marks of disease and the scandalized beach queens as a dirge or a mocking scherzo is rewritten again as a celebration of survival and defiance in the face of death and social disapproval: thin as he is, Michael is still young and lovely; "he writes his own new arrangements" (9).

Despite its subject matter of pain, loss, abuse, rejection, exploitation, and disillusionment, Powell is no more than accurate when he writes of *Tea* that "the true hero of the poems is survival" (xiii).

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On Linda Gregg's *Too Bright to See*

Linda Gregg is one of our most important and accomplished poets, yet despite the respect with which her work is regarded, it has not received the critical attention that it deserves. This may be due to its indifference toward poetic fashion, its scorning of easy confessionalism or equally easy irony. The deep engagement of her work with questions of spirit, beauty, and their dangers, and with the fleeting presence of the transcendent in the everyday, as well as its insistence on the seriousness of poetry as a vocation and a spiritual enterprise, constitutes a major project in contemporary American poetry. Her first book, *Too Bright to See*, exemplifies these concerns.

Among this book's preoccupations is the condition of being (and of being made) female as an ontological, almost metaphysical category, embodied in the recurring figure of Alma, Gregg's doppelgänger of pure "femininity." "Whole and Without Blessing" casts a cold eye on the feminine role and the speaker's relation to it, her final evasion or refusal of it. In this poem, femininity "is a sickness" from whose fever the speaker wakes to and as herself, finally seeing her life clearly. Paradoxically, it is her entrapment in female flesh that provides the means for her liberation, as that flesh ages and so helps her free herself of the mask of beauty: "What is beautiful alters, has undertow. / Otherwise I have no tactics to begin with" (34). The loss of socially sanctioned, recognizable "beauty" allows her access to real beauty, "the meaning / of my life": she has rejected external (and specifically male) endorsement and definition. Alive in her animal being, knowing that nothing lives except to die, she is "a fish of my own / spirit" (34). This clarity allows her to belong to no one.

The figure of Alma, self and/as other, the other of pure fem-

ininity, is a projection of femininity's otherness outside of the (female) speaker. Through Alma, Gregg externalizes the feminine identity that has been imposed upon her and that has composed her, and thus can speak of it and to it: "The girl I call Alma who is so white / is good, isn't she?" (11). The creation of the figure of Alma as the speaker's double is also of a piece with the sibylline impulse to speak both in one's own voice and in a larger voice, the will to speak oneself as other.

In 1967 Gregg (and her then-husband Jack Gilbert, with whose work her poetry has many affinities) left the United States to live for many years on various islands in Greece, among them the tiny island of Monolithos, often without electricity or running water. That setting, saturated in history and myth (Gregg has said, "there are gods in that earth") and the paradoxically ascetic hedonism of the classical Greek tradition, which finds pleasure and beauty in the spare and pared down, extracting the maximum of meaning from the most minimal of materials, is central to Gregg's poetry. Gregg's sojourn in Greece may be seen as a stage in the search for a landscape equal to her spiritual longing, a landscape stripped of the inessential and infused with the numinous: as Gregg says of her and Gilbert's decision to live in Greece, "we thought it would be beautiful and important."

Myth is crucial to Gregg's poetry, and in her work the materials of myth are as real as the objects of the phenomenal world. She explains that, "Myth for me . . . starts with the things themselves. . . . the myth is alive only when it is born from the real." Gregg does not "use" myth but lives it. The myths live and speak through her as the gods live through the bodies of their devotees, as Apollo speaks through the mouth of the Delphic oracle or the Sibyl. In ancient Greece poetic inspiration was considered a form of possession by a daimon, and there is a sense in many of Gregg's poems that she provides the voice for something larger and more powerful than herself. This is the source of the passionate impersonality of many of her poems, the sense that the voice in them is both hers and not hers at all.

Myth is a means for Gregg to live more fully, more completely, than the world of dailiness allows: myth is Gregg's real life, which she lives here on earth. As she says, "the myths are

not decorations." The mythic intensities of her work are the infusion of the actual, that which merely exists, with the substance of the real, that which exists beyond the contingencies and ephemera of the quotidian.

"The Marriage and After," the second section of *Too Bright to See*, exemplifies this interpenetration of the mythic and the mundane. Gregg transfigures personal experience into archetype and emblem, thus making it more intensely itself than it could ever have been. In Hegelian terms, her poems sublimate the ephemeral by raising it to the level of the eternal. Making things more themselves can serve as a definition of one role of myth. Such a notion of mythic illumination is analogous to the German philosopher Ernst Bloch's definition of aesthetic illumination, which answers the question, "how may the things of this world be completed without their ceasing, apocalyptically, to exist?" Gregg's is the impersonality of the medium or the oracle: hers is the voice of passion itself. The sense that her life and her feelings are not personal possessions but archetypal materials lends a frightening innocence to her work. The coexistence of the realm of myth and the world of dailiness is perhaps most apparent in such poems as "Eurydice" and "Lilith," in which the two worlds explicitly interpenetrate, but it is continuous throughout Gregg's work.

In "Eurydice," the characters of the myth live simultaneously in their ancient world and in our modern world. This coexistence seems oddly proper: for its inhabitants, the world of myth is not "mythic"—it's simply the world. In a vision reminiscent of Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*, Orpheus is a contemporary poet reading the Troubadour poets while Eurydice puts on her makeup for a journey (presumably to a party or a fancy dinner) that becomes her journey to the underworld into which Orpheus descends in search of her but from which he does not in the end rescue her. He reads about a man who swore to love one woman forever, and he himself is such a man, but what remains of his love are "the songs / which are my mourning" (40), his reward for his loss. Eurydice has nothing but her own death, while Orpheus has the music of his mourning, the poems of his grief.

Time folds in on itself for Eurydice; she relives the moment of her loss over and over again. It was only "Yesterday" that

Orpheus stood in the bathroom doorway reading those dead poets, only yesterday that she was part of the “sacred world” of “house, color, leaves.” If he had saved her by not turning around as he led her out of Hades, taking her “almost to the world,” she “could be in the world remembering this.” Instead, she is doomed perpetually to undergo that moment at which he looked back and lost her:

I did cry not as much in the darkness
as I will when we part in the dimness
near the opening which is the way in for you
and was the way out for me, my love.

(41)

In the darkness of the realm of the dead, Eurydice at least had a certain peace—the journey for which she had so carefully painted her eyes was over—but to be pulled out of that repose halfway toward but not into the light of the living world, to be taken only to “the dimness / near the opening” and then to be reclaimed by Hades, is to die again and again. She remembers her tears at her first death while she anticipates her tears at her second, more painful death. These lines’ play with tenses emphasizes the way that Eurydice’s loss replays itself over and over: she has cried and she will cry, forever. Nothing happens for the dead, again and again. Trapped in the moment of death, nothing changes for them and they can change nothing. The irony of the last lines is wrenching, since what could have been Eurydice’s way out of the underground became the way in that trapped her forever, and Orpheus’s way in to the realm of the dead was the route he took back to the world she would never see again.

Gregg is obsessed with purity and with the minimal as the pure or the essential, all excess stripped away: life pared down to passion and hunger and loss, for which the rocky islands of Greece provide the objective correlative. She has compared her compositional process to Brancusi’s, deriving an almost weightless figure from a mass of intractable matter, stone or steel.

Gregg’s poetry resembles fifth-century Attic *kouroi* and *korés*, the archaic, archetypal statues of boys and girls: it addresses itself to the perfect incarnation of Being in matter.

Being is neither good nor bad, neither life nor death: it is indifferent force, innocent as the Greek gods, and like the Greek gods it is neither cruel nor kind, but a power beyond moral judgment. Her work dedicates itself to what Hegel called the consecration of the sensuous, the finding of a fit home for spirit in the material world, which is also the discovery of spirit's immanence in the material world. Like the ancient Greeks, Gregg can imagine no more suitable home for spirit than the body: spirit longs for shape and form. As she writes in "The Gods Must Not Know Us," the gods "like beauty so much / they fill the world with it" (54).

This aesthetic of the immanent is the source of what can seem an odd literalness in Gregg's poems. Though they are replete with vivid images, figurative language, whether metaphor or simile, is rare. Like classical Greek statues, these poems will not be completed from without, whether by interpretation or by paraphrase: they are in full possession of their secrets, which are worn on their surfaces.

The danger of this constant presence of spirit in the world of matter is that the merely human may be overcome by such a superabundance of Being. As Rilke wrote, beauty is the beginning of a terror we can barely endure. In "The Gods Must Not Know Us," Gregg fears of the gods what Rilke feared of his angel, that such a superabundance of being will destroy her:

It overwhelms us. Spills over.
I am afraid the earth will take it back
and part of my self will get lost
and I will not be a fitting gift.

(55)

To be thus broken by beauty is to become unworthy of it, to be rendered unfit to be offered up on its altar, which is far worse than to cease to exist. The gods despise whatever is marred, and turn away in disdain.

Beauty is always sacrificial. At best, one offers oneself up in joy begetting joy, but an offering is always demanded—beauty commands that we give ourselves up to it. Concomitantly, in such poems as "Whole and Without Blessing," pleasure is a

guide to how to live, a rigorous duty and adventure to which one must make oneself equal. It is the only clue to life that we have. Happiness is a fate, as in “Gnostics on Trial”:

Ignore melons, and talking with friends.
Try to keep from rejoicing. Try
to keep from happiness. Just try.

(14)

But pleasure is not comfort. Comfort is antithetical to pleasure and thus to happiness. Comfort dulls the senses and perceptions, leading to complacency. One has to be alert to know the world and the painful pleasure it forces upon one. As Gregg writes in “Not Singing”:

We sing of loss because the only voice they gave us
was song and reasoning. It is not love we are after.
No love. Not singing. But a somber thing.
A going to the opening and entering.

(51)

If beauty is life and the meaning of life, and if beauty demands sacrifice, then beauty can also be antithetical to life, beauty can discard life. If perfection is to be found in death, then death must be accepted as perfect, and the deathlike stasis of art (the unwavering smile on the face of an archaic Greek kouros) is the closest human approximation to that perfection.

Too Bright to See’s most perfect expression of this paradox is found in the poem “Sigismundo,” spoken in the voice of a courtier at the court of the fifteenth-century condottiere Sigismundo Malatesta, podesta of Rimini, tyrant, mercenary, murderer, and patron of the arts:

All through my boyhood I was told I’d walk hand in hand
with death. I chose the good, and cried
when they marred the statues.
But there is nothing, nothing to say about my life.
Unmerciful Sigismundo did many wrongs and his people
loved him
and he will live forever. I who go down like Persephone

with my accomplishments of silence and weeping
unrecorded,
even if I were a girl would answer Yes, I know how to swim.
Lie for the chance to drown in that blue water of his.

(20)

“Sigismundo the Beautiful. / Out for himself. Torturer of doves. A killer of cities. / Killer of wife before breakfast” will live forever because he has become death, which is a gallery of perfect form and beauty supplied by life. Art is a kind of death, stilling the living thing to fixed image, cold artifact. What remains is what art records and keeps—paradoxically, this death preserves beauty from death. Sigismundo Malatesta, who murdered his first and second wives in order to marry Isotta degli Atti, and built the Malatesta Temple to glorify his love for her, is a killer who leaves behind beauty, all that will remain of him. (Why else do we remember him, write and read poems about him?) Like the Greek gods, Sigismundo is neither good nor kind, but he is strong and beautiful and thus more alive than ordinary mortals. Indeed, like the gods he is immortal, his name and legend alive forever. Beauty is power and it draws us inexorably, even when we know it to be fatal. This poem’s speaker, conscious of the inadequacy of his own too-ordinary life, knowing that though he will descend into death like Persephone down into the earth, unlike her he will not return from that long winter into spring, can long for nothing more than the opportunity to drown in beauty and so to become one with it.

Coupled with the possibility that beauty is, finally, equivalent to death, which would mean that the goal of life is its own end, is the fear that the things of the phenomenal world, the numinous objects upon which so much depends, may not always serve as receptacles of Being, that the physical world may fail as it has failed the girl of Part I of “Now Destroyed,” who knows life to be “a dependency on things / which can be taken away, or forgotten” (42). This fear is also, as in “What If the World Stays Far Off,” the fear that the world may remain itself, but merely itself, that “there is no recognition.” A world of mere matter, devoid of spirit, is a hollow shell: “What if the world is taken from me?” (58).

The threat of dissolution into the merely particular is always near. Many of these poems are haunted by the fear that all one may be left with is meaningless existence, the empty succession of objects, this then that then that, “Sun Moon Kelp Flower or Goat.” Spirit may abandon matter, everything may draw away into itself, distant and sterile because without resonance. This is the shadow face of a poem like “Classicism,” which celebrates the state of pure being without interpretation. I quote it in its entirety:

The nights are very clear in Greece.
When the moon is round we see it completely
and have no feeling.

(32)

The longing to merge with the phenomenal world that is the embodiment of Being is under threat from that same world, which changes and deteriorates. In its transience, the world refuses to remain perpetually itself: Becoming refuses to be one with Being. To be poised on the threshold between Being and Becoming, spiritual fixity and material flux, is the ideal. To commit oneself wholly to pure Being is to cease to exist as a discrete entity, while to surrender to the material world is to dissolve in process and decay, which violates and mars Being. Art and religion find their life on that precarious threshold. On such a borderline, Linda Gregg plies her craft or sullen art.

A Poetics

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Coat

Nuances of a Theme by Stevens

I

In his poem of the same name, Wallace Stevens addresses and implicitly rebukes William Carlos Williams's demand for "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself," pointing out, figuratively rather than discursively, that the thing itself, that "scrawny cry . . . at daylight or before" which, though it initially "Seemed like a sound in [the] mind" (already doubly mediated, seeming and mindful), nonetheless "would have been outside," turns out to be "like / A new knowledge of reality": that sound is a semblance of a representation (*Collected Poetry and Prose*, 451–52; subsequently cited as *CPP*). Fact, here, is concept, or at the very least fact is not to be untangled from concept. For Stevens, there is no presence beyond representation, no truth beyond the truths we make and thus make true.

Posed on the double occasion of Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and Yeats's "A Coat," my question is whether Williams's "Say it, no ideas but in things!"—a demand Yeats echoes in the poem under discussion here—can arise from anything but a confusion of the actual and the real. (Here I am using Plato's sense of the real, as the realm of Ideas of which the phenomenal realm of objects is merely a reflection.) As Stevens reminds us in and about "The Plain Sense of Things," "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (*CPP*, 428)—even if it is imagined, as Williams and Yeats do, as "an inevitable knowledge," which is an inevitability of knowledge. An image beyond imagination is both the final image of the imagination and the imagination's final image.

The “thing,” for us, inheres in its “idea”: “the plain sense of things” is never a thing but a sense of a thing. Indeed, the co-presence of two polar meanings in the single word *sense*, which refers both to perception and to conception, sensation and idea, embodies this interrelation. Any poem is both an “idea” about a thing and a “thing itself”: as both object and discourse about an object, the poem simultaneously enacts and repairs the duality that is my topic, negotiating the chasm between discourse and being. Though Stevens reminds us about the supreme fiction that “It Must Be Abstract,” he simultaneously reminds us that “It Must Be Human”: the poem’s thingness is an asymptote, but it is the aspiration toward that unreachable goal that defines the poem. Mutlu Konuk Blasing notes that Stevens’s poetry never forgets or tries to conceal the distance between language and the presences it seeks to name. It also never abandons the effort to name and thus to realize those presences, while knowing that, like Zeno’s arrow that never attains its target, the names it gives can only ever approach truth, but they can never be truth.

My question is that of aesthetic causation, of the relation between what Blasing calls force and form. In the mode of what Theodor Adorno calls immanent critique, I shall take many of my terms from Stevens himself, his poetry and his prose on poetry. (Mine is a materialist reading in that it takes as its starting and ending point the matter of the poem itself.) Stevens states in a letter that “Whether beauty is roused by passion or whether passion is roused by beauty is pretty much the same question as whether a poem about a natural object is roused by the natural object or whether the natural object is clothed with its poetic characteristics by the poet” (*Letters*, 302). The aesthetic question can be philosophically restated as one of the relation of the actual and the real, of phenomenology and ontology. In Blasing’s formulation, the question is that of “whether forms or natural facts are the givens. Are art forms and other measuring instruments . . . prior to, and do they define the shape of, the nature they register . . . or is nature a prior force, shaping the instruments that would chart its course, measure its force?” (111).

II

Yeats's "A Coat" states the poet's determination to rescue reality from appearance, to liberate the real from the clutches of the actual:

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

(127)

The unenlightened "fools," here represented by those poets who seek to mimic the mere trappings of poetry, the vagaries of poetic style, can apprehend only the appearance, not the reality it simultaneously embodies and occludes: appearance, here, is only error. These "fools" are yet another version of the unenlightened inhabitants of Plato's cave, mistaking shadows for real Things. Indeed, the speaker's ambition in this poem is a Platonic one: to move past the ephemeral and illusory appearances of objects, the merely actual, to apprehend the True, the Real, which is both permanent and incorruptible. The speaker will make reality walk "naked" so that it will be nothing but what it is. The desire is somewhat like that to eliminate the singer because he contaminates by his presence the purity of the song.

Plato's doctrine of Ideas informs us that the apparently solid phenomenal world available to the senses is only the shadow or reflection of the invisible, impalpable world of the true forms of things. Yeats would banish the shadow to lay bare the Idea, peel away the image and leave only that which it represents. In "A Coat," Yeats wishes to strip the metaphor of its figure to free presence of representation, rejecting metaphor by means of a metaphor, for I grant that I never saw a song walk or wear a coat.

Such a rejection of figuration amounts to a demand that poetry cast off poems, that the ideal slough off its equipage of immanence: this would be the naked song, liberated from the shackles of mere singing. The speaker of "A Coat," like Stevens's Peter Quince playing the clavier for his beloved, believes that "Music is feeling, . . . not sound" (Stevens, *CPP*, 72), forgetting that, contrary to Plato's confident assertions and as Stevens's poem on the aforementioned Peter Quince at his keyboard reminds us, beauty is momentary in the mind (a fleeting, immaterial idea, a "fitful tracing" quickly imagined and as quickly forgotten, replaced by another thought) but immortal in the flesh: though any individual's flesh dies, the flesh persists and perpetuates itself.

To quote a passage from Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* couched in terms very close to those of Yeats's poem, "This approach to the [signified] . . . derives from what Jacques Derrida calls a 'metaphysics of presence' which longs for a truth behind every sign: a moment of original plenitude when form and meaning were simultaneously present to consciousness and not to be distinguished. Though dissociation is a fact of our post-lapsarian state, it is assumed that we should still try to pass through the signifier to the meaning that is the truth and origin of the sign and of which the signifier is but the visible mark, the outer shell" (19). Such a metaphysics sees the sign as the coat of reference (the naked song), of what Yeats posits as being itself, undisguised by translation into language, unbetrayed by the treason that language always performs toward the thing. Using the same figure, Stevens epistolarily asserts that "Poetry is like anything else; it cannot be made suddenly to drop its rags and stand out naked, fully disclosed" (*Letters*, 303). And the contemporary French poet Yves Bonnefoy reminds us that language's "well-known incapacity to express the immediate . . . has not been solved. . . . Speech can indeed celebrate presence, sing of its being, . . . but it cannot in itself allow us to achieve it" (113).

The song that Yeats would have walk naked is Stevens's black-bird: "An indecipherable cause," it can be described but not defined. Somewhat the inverse of Kant's sublime, it can be imagined but not conceived of. We know not the bird itself but only

its indications, its shadow crossing the window, the circle defined by its disappearance, the motion of the river that calls to or responds to the blackbird's flight. In Jack Spicer's figure, we are given not the moon "itself" (*der Mond an sich*, as it were) but only the finger pointing at the moon. The science of optics tells us that what we see is not the bird itself, but the light the bird reflects: what we perceive is not object, but relation. Spicer, in a letter "to" the very late Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, expresses the desire, like all desires an impossible one, that "the moon in my poems . . . be a real moon, one which could be suddenly covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with the poem—a moon utterly independent of images. The imagination pictures the real. I would like to point to the real, disclose it, to make a poem that has no sound in it but the pointing of a finger" (33–34). Even here, in yet another version of the will to an Adamic language, there is the knowledge that the poem is not the object itself but the gesture toward it, a gesture without which we should know neither where to look nor that there is something to see. Without that gesture, as far from "the real" as the earth is from the moon, we would miss (in both senses) a light that although "merely" reflected is nonetheless necessary to sight. The moon is for us precisely an image, a shape cast by light of which it is not the source: without image there is no imagination.

There can be no literal connection between the real and the actual, conception and perception, but only, in the contemporary Mexican poet and critic Octavio Paz's word (which is also Stevens's), analogy. Which is to say that the connection is only ever literal: as Stevens notes in his poem "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," "the real" is a text "difficult to read. The page is dark" (*CPP*, 240). "For the ancients the world existed with the same plenitude as consciousness, and its relations were clear and natural. For us its existence takes on the form of a bitter controversy: on the one hand, the world evaporates and changes into an image of consciousness; on the other, consciousness is a reflection of the world" (Paz). Words may emerge from Nature's temple of living pillars, as Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondences" asserts, but they are always confused and dim, though somehow familiar, being both of us and wholly Other.

We cannot read the great Book of Nature, but we are written in it: so we have written another book, and read it, like Phosphor, by our own light. As Stevens writes in *The Necessary Angel*, “What our eyes behold may well be the text of life but one’s meditations on the text and the disclosures of these meditations are no less a part of the structure of reality. . . . It is, nevertheless, a text that we do not write” (*CPP*, 689). The translation that is our knowledge does not represent but rather corresponds (in Spicer’s word) to the words of that original language. The defining characteristic of Mallarmé’s Book in which all things are destined to find themselves is that it can never be written; in the infinite stacks of Borges’s Library of Babel, the Book containing all the other books can never be located. As Yves Bonnefoy asserts, “Language is not the Word. However distorted, however transformed our syntax may be, it will always remain merely a metaphor for the unachievable syntax, signifying only exile. And what a sentence reveals is not the Idea, but our aversion from facile speech, our reflection so to speak, the confirmation of exile” (103).

The chasm between language and being, the inability of any naming to be the true name of the thing, is one that can be broached in many ways: at one extreme is scripture or dogma, which proclaims its names to be the literal equivalent to the thing; at the other is pure linguistic play (what Julia Kristeva calls unlimited semiosis), which neither claims nor seeks any such correspondence, for the rules of a game are unabashedly arbitrary. Between the two lies poetry, which combines the will to such an identity, the determination to speak the true names of things, with the awareness of the impossibility of such an endeavor, that the departure of the thing leaves us with only the name. That will is the guarantee of poetry’s seriousness; that awareness is the seal of its probity.

When one determines oneself, as Yeats’s speaker has, to speak in what Stevens calls “noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms,” to strip one’s song of the embroideries of old myths (as if figuration were merely an ornament of speech and not its essence: what is the relation between word and thing but a metaphor?), one simply ensures one’s own unknowing implication in the workings of a figuration one refuses to ac-

knowledge. One surrenders not even to language but to the conviction that one can get beyond language by means of language. The “nakedness” Yeats demands of his song is a figure for a wordlessness to be attained through words, the other of language to be possessed by means of language. His ambition, like that of MacLeish in his famous, not to say notorious, metapoem “Ars Poetica,” is a poetry equal to silence, to its own absence as poetry: a song that is not sung. Tellingly, MacLeish’s poem is hardly “palpable and mute,” as it asserts far from silently that “a poem” should be: replete with meaning (indeed, with dicta) rather than being, it is the opposite of the wordless flight of birds (blackbirds, perhaps?) that it proposes as its ideal. As Paz notes, “A pure poem could not be made out of words and would be, literally, unsayable. At the same time, a poem that did not struggle against the nature of words, . . . a poem that did not try to make words say the unsayable, would remain a simple verbal manipulation. What characterizes the poem is its necessary dependence on the word as much as its struggle to transcend it” (167–68). Words will not take one beyond words, though it is words that conjure up that wordlessness.

As Paz notes, the distance between language and things and between language and man is a distance engendered by language (228). The prose of fact is itself a figure of desire and figured by desire. Songs, after all, wear neither coats nor rags, nor has a song ever been known to walk, clothed *or* naked: except, of course, in metaphor. The end of figuration is itself a figure, the figure of all figures. In Stevens’s poem “The Motive for Metaphor,” a desire for representation (“The motive for metaphor, shrinking from / The weight of primary noon”) is opposed to a wish for presentation (“The A B C of being, . . . The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X”): a will to resemblance is set against an insistence on identity, only so that such an opposition can be revealed as illusory. “The hammer / Of red and blue, the hard sound,” is as figurative as “The obscure moon lighting an obscure world / Of things would never be quite expressed”: identity is as metaphorical as resemblance, one desire set against another (*CPP*, 257). A man for whom reality is sufficient “sees without images. But is he not seeing a clarified reality of his own? Does he not dwell in an analogy? His imageless world is, after all,

of the same sort as a world full of the obvious analogies of happiness or unhappiness, innocence or tragedy, thoughtlessness or the heaviness of the mind. In any case, these are the pictorializations of men, for whom the world exists as a world and for whom life exists as life" (*CPP*, 722).

Identity is, if anything, *more* metaphorical than metaphor acknowledged as metaphor, for its denial of its own metaphorical nature adds yet another level of figuration. What could be more figurative than a metaphor that pretends to be life? "Both in nature and in metaphor identity is the vanishing point of resemblance. . . . [Nature's] prodigy is not identity but resemblance" (*CPP*, 687). Thus the world represented as the world of metaphor is actually more recognizable than that represented as that of the *Ding an sich*. Who has ever encountered the much fabled "thing itself" except in the sessions of sweet thought? That "The Motive for Metaphor" conducts its argument in favor of the desire for metaphor as against the desire for reality in figurative rather than in discursive terms lends it greater conviction, for it thereby avoids the aporia of appealing to the authority of a transcendental signified to support the claims of the signifier.

"*Now night has fallen (Maintenant, c'est la nuit)*: if by these words I claim to express my sense-experience they promptly become merely a frame from which presence has disappeared. The portraits that have seemed to us the most lifelike turn out to be mere paradigms. Our most private words become myths once we have let them go" (Bonnefoy 107). This is both a critique of language and an affirmation of its only possibility of communication. What is most intimate, coterminous with the thoughts and emotions it expresses, is simultaneously exterior and utterly other: my language is both mine and not mine at all. Similarly, physical sensations can only be articulated and vicariously shared by being turned into abstractions, virtual feelings.

Language exists in and as a liminal state between the material and the immaterial, thing and idea: it is neither sheer marks on the page, sounds in the air, nor sheer ideality, but rather it is their contingent and temporary union. (This would be Saussure's union of signifier and signified that together produce the sign, which Saussure brackets off from the unattainable, and un-

sayable, real.) It cannot veer too far in either direction without losing its character as language. (The poetic avant-garde seeks to discover how closely language can approach either pole without losing its language character.) Language is neither object nor concept but their articulation. Words hover and hesitate over the abyss between being and nonbeing, presence and absence. They embody a non-Aristotelian logic of both/and, in which A need not equal A and simultaneously equals B, as well as some third term that's both their combination (A/B) and some other item altogether (a not A/not B not quite reducible to C).

The notion of direct, unmediated presentation of the "as is," Pound's demand for "direct presentation of the thing itself," is itself a metaphor, a speaking of one thing—the things of the phenomenal, event-full world—in terms of another—words, which are at once tangible and intangible, which are both things and nonthings. The world is, for us, always a topological world.

Language converts the intangible into the tangible (thoughts or feelings that are events into words that are objects) and the tangible into the intangible (trees or dogs or the skin of a lover into words that cannot *as such* be touched, heard, or even seen, yet only function as words by being heard or seen, by their materialization): poetry foregrounds this travel between realms of being, this transfer of contents. (The word *metaphor* means "transfer" in Greek.) As Paz writes, "Language is symbolic because it tries to relate two heterogeneous realities: man and the things he names. The relation is doubly imperfect because language is a system of symbols that reduces, on the one hand, the heterogeneity of each concrete thing to equivalences and, on the other, constrains the individual man to use general symbols. Poetry, precisely, proposes to find an equivalence (that is the metaphor) in which neither things in their concrete particularity nor the individual man will disappear" (227). Language is by its very nature metaphorical, calling a near infinity of unique, individual entities all by the same name, *chair* or *fig tree* or even *person*, calling an unlimited range of movements all the same action, *walking* or *laughing* or even *writing*. The name asserts that all the phenomena it points toward are if not identical then equivalent: this is like this is like this is like this, or even, this *is* this *is* this *is* this.

The poem always aspires to be an object in itself (as all art aspires to the condition of music), but is always also a thing *about* things. The thingness of language is an asymptote (neither marks on a page nor sounds in the ear are language per se): language is by definition both object and metaobject. Thus there cannot be an abstract poem in the way that there is abstract music or abstract visual art, with no content but its formal procedures, for language is not a discrete entity the way sound and color and shape are: like Gertrude Stein's Oakland, when examined closely, there is no there there.

"Abstraction" in art is the foregrounding of the materiality (as against the referentiality) of the medium (in this sense, "abstract art" is the opposite of abstract). Given language's tenuous materiality, its capacity to foreground that materiality and still remain language (as shapes and colors *are* palpable and perceptible as such even when not "representing" anything) is limited. Compared to music or painting or sculpture, language has no "as such," which puts stricter limits on the degree to which one can successfully experiment with it as a medium. The art critic Clement Greenberg characterized the history of modern art as the process of each form stripping itself of all that is not unique to its medium, an Hegelian coming to awareness of its own essential nature. In this sense, literature has no unique medium. What poetry captures isn't things or events, but mind's relation to objects and events. Perhaps this is what literature has/is that is unique: all relation itself, it is perfectly suited to enact and embody relation.

The poem performs a double transformation: translating feelings (in the sense of physical sensations) into feelings (in the sense of interior phenomena), and also vice versa (thought-feelings become sense-feelings, including the words themselves as sensory experiences). It turns conceptions and emotions into analogues of sensuous experience (by turning thoughts into images) and simultaneously turns both thoughts and images into, if not the intangible, then the not-quite-tangible: that is, into words, which can function as a shared medium precisely *because* they are not specific to individual sensations, while at the same time they are sources of sensation.

While for Plato the actual is that which is graspable by the

senses but fleeting and ultimately insubstantial, whereas imperishable but not immediately apprehensible ideas comprise the real, for Kant the never to be attained *Ding an sich* is exactly the naked, unmediated physical existence—it is not the material world but mental phenomena to which we have immediate access. Following in Kant's very regular footsteps, in his *Speaker's Meaning* Owen Barfield maintains that it is not our thoughts but our physical sensations that are unique to us as individuals: anyone can have the same thought that I have had (and I can share any thought I have with another), but no one can experience the same sensation on biting, for example, into a ripe Bosc pear on a May morning at nine: I can attempt (hopelessly) to describe it, but I cannot share it with anyone. (From this perspective Williams's poem "This Is Just to Say" assumes a wider significance than its unassuming surface pretends to: the taste and feel of the cold, delicious plums the speaker's wife cannot experience at breakfast because he has already consumed the fruit are a figure for all physical sensation, private and unshareable.) I would assert that thoughts are more events, and thus unrepeatable in identical form, and sensations are more things, and thus reproducible, than Barfield acknowledges. The distinction he draws between thoughts and sensations, events and things, is too sharp; it is exactly the double sense of the word "feelings" (which double-faced word can here stand in for language as such) that exemplifies their interpenetration.

III

Something is occurring: the blackbird is whistling; the shadow of the blackbird is crossing the glass, tracing on the icicled window a cause, though indecipherable, an idea of order in opposition (or supplementation) to winter's "nothing that is." But this whirling in autumn winds is only "a small part of the pantomime." We can never know the whole of the event: though it is perhaps possible to *understand* the whole, just as we understand, and not by means of the senses, that such a whole exists, or could. Poetry is thus not meaning but meaning-making. The blackbird's flight defines the edge of the circle, though only one

of many possible fields of vision: and this field only takes shape (is only visible) after the blackbird is gone. In the presence of the blackbird, the edges of the circle are invisible: the man and the woman and the blackbird are one, as rational and sensuous apprehension, for Stevens, are and must be one.

Yet the blackbird does not apprehend the circle it defines. The act of looking defines what is seen, the circle is only a possibility until grasped by the synthesizing mind. To cite Paz's summary of Heidegger's explication of Kant (another exercise in mediation and belatedness), "Imagination unfolds or projects objects, and without it there would be neither perception nor judgment; or rather: as a manifestation of the temporality that it is, it unfolds itself and presents objects to the sensibility and the understanding. Without this operation—in which what we call 'imagination' properly consists—perception would be impossible" (215). The real, the blackbird, is involved in what we know, but it is neither that knowledge nor the process of knowing, but rather the occasion for the exercise of the act of knowing. Those noble accents and those inescapable rhythms are "part of a major reality": there is the snow, but there is also the forgotten warmth, finally recalled "As You Leave the Room" and speak. It may seem that the only moving thing among the twenty snowy mountains is the eye of the blackbird, but this is to neglect the eye that notes that motion.

Without the act of mind, the gesture of differentiation on which all union is premised, there can be no ways of looking at the blackbird, or at anything: there is only the winter motionlessness among the cedar limbs, each one "a countryman of all the bones in the world," which one is not even while leaving the room of phenomenal experience, which one is not until after one's own death (and even then one is not only that in the minds and memories of one's others, those in whom one lives on). None of us has a mind of winter. The circle whose edge the blackbird's disappearance defines can only be discerned from within another of the endless possible circles, apart from the occasion of that definition: apart, that is, from the blackbird, which must first vanish from sight. And yet that definition cannot occur without the blackbird. Stevens writes in a letter to the critic Hi Simons that "A poem is like a man walking on the bank of a river, whose

shadow is reflected in the water. If you explain a poem, you are quite likely to do it either in terms of the man or in terms of the shadow, but you have to explain it in terms of the whole . . . the thing and its double always go together" (*Letters*, 354). The river is in motion as much as the man is, the shadow is the relation of their mutual motions (an occasion, not a thing), and the same man cannot step beside the same river twice.

Yeats's determination in "A Coat" is to pry apart the actual and the real, to strip his song of its coat and reveal the essential nature of each, because the "fools" mistake the one for the other (the blackbird is involved in what I know, but it is not what I know); in Stevens's terms, they mistake the blackbird's shadow, or the shadow of their own equipage, for the blackbird's presence. Yeats seeks communication without expression, to take away both the word *moon* and the pointing finger, leaving only the sphere, pristine but (and/or because) lightless, invisible. Spicer's sentence to his dead Spanish interlocutor speaks to this yearning while speaking simultaneously of its impossibility: "We have both tried to be independent of images, . . . to make things visible rather than to make pictures of them (*phantasia non imaginari*)" (34).

Yeats longs to strip away appearance, art identified as "mere" artifice, so that both the coat (the appearance) and the thing that walks naked (the reality) can be seen for what they are. An interjection from Walter Benjamin on "the polarity that exists in every linguistic entity: to be at once expression and communication" seems appropriate: "The development of the communicative aspect of language to the exclusion of all else in fact inevitably leads to the destruction of language. On the other hand, the way leads to mystical silence if [language's] expressive character is raised to the absolute. Of the two, it seems to me that the more current tendency at the moment is toward communication. But in one form or another a compromise is always necessary" (47). This insistence on communication is still the dominant mode in the current cultural milieu.

It is only by means of Benjamin's necessary compromise between communication and expressiveness (as distinct from expression) that either can show itself forth: for us, neither pure appearance nor pure being is possible except as dream or nightmare. For the speaker of Yeats's "A Coat," this compromise

is a betrayal to be rectified through the absolute divorce of perception and being, mind and world. For Stevens, by a logic of both/and as distinct both from Yeats's logic of either/or and from the logic of neither/nor of Mallarmé's poetics of the impossible, such a compromise is the only possibility of meaning for either term, and nothing without meaning can be experienced.

Yeats's mistake is to think that the song and its coat can *not* be mistaken for one another: "reality" as such is the final illusion. There may be "more enterprise" in walking naked, but there is also the snow of metaphysics in which nothing can be seen, which makes the bare being of the phenomenal world into a "nothing." Stevens knew that nothing was something to see, perhaps *the* thing to see, and to hear, "nothing which is not there / And the nothing which is." As his poem "The Snow Man" demonstrates, it is only the "mind of winter" of a man made of snow, made of the substance of what he sees, inseparable from the landscape which he beholds, that can view the phenomenal world as "nothing," the impossible, barely bearable *Ding an sich*. As Helen Vendler astutely notes, "Oddly enough, beheld with a mind of winter, the world does not appear bare: the boughs of the pine trees are crusted with snow, the junipers are shagged with ice, the spruces are rough in the distant glitter of the January sun. It is only with the introduction of the wind, and misery, and the noticing of the few remaining leaves on the deciduous trees that the world becomes 'the same bare place'" (187).

There is never "nothing" in this world, not for us; there is always something to see, something to hear: spruces rough in glittering sunlight so much like the glitter of snow, leaves blowing in a winter wind. The world for us is always an interpreted world, inevitably invested with meaning. "The Snow Man" proposes the question of how to live in this world, a world that is not always amenable to our desires for comfort or consolation. However one interprets the "must have" of this wintry mind, as imperative or admonition (one should strive to have such a mind of winter, or one would literally have to be made of snow to have such a mind), the valedictory "As You Leave the Room" reminds us, "That poem [is] not what skeletons think about." We do not have such (no-) minds; that replete bareness or bare repleteness is a product of mind. The snow is part of "a major

reality,” “An appreciation of a reality.” Otherwise, it is “forgotten”: which, of course, it has not been—the poem is evidence of that. What the speaker in Yeats’s poem might consider a disbelief in reality is the possibility of that major reality.

Yeats’s song is apprehensible only by means of its coat: the coat is its performance, its summons from the realm of Being into that of being (to be momentarily Heideggerian). As Paz writes of William Blake’s poetic worldview, “The universe in its essence is a longing for manifestation, desire that is projected: the imagination has no mission other than to give symbolic and sensible form to energy” (253). The moon might still remain without the pointing finger, the word’s hopeless gesture, the sphere might still revolve around the earth without shining, but how could we know? The moon’s light, its presence in our eyes, is after all secondary, derivative of the originary if not original light of the sun, the weighty but still hypothetical “primary noon.” It is the absence of the sun that makes possible the presence (a representation of that enabling absence) of the moon. There is no experience without reflection, on which thought Stevens reflected greatly.

The *fact* in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (and Wittgenstein has reminded us that the world is made up not of things but of facts, that is, of propositions) is the relationship between the speaker and the blackbird. The blackbird’s metamorphic manifestations and the observer’s shifting states of contemplation of the blackbird, and the ways in which each determines the other, are the content of the poem. (Perhaps a more explicitly directive title for this poem by the most suggestive of poets would have been “Thirteen Ways to Figure a Blackbird”: that is, thirteen ways to deploy the figure of the blackbird.) Each is an expression of the blackbird’s existence as perceived and thus construed by the observer, and of the observer’s existence as defined by the blackbird (subject and object are mutual), and finally of the new existence called into being by their mutual perception and definition, as aspects of the same activity of world-making. The blackbird is only the pretext for our knowing, but as such makes that knowing possible. Conversely, our knowledge is the context for the blackbird, which makes the bird possible: for what can an object be for us but an object of knowledge?

In his early play *The Heroes*, John Ashbery has his Theseus explain of his escape from the labyrinth: "I took advantage of the fact that it was built like a maze. . . . Without imagination nothing can be easy" (3). Without imagination nothing can be possible, and thus nothing can be real: the imagination, projecting the possible, is constitutive of the real. Hegel was wrong to believe that whatever can exist in the mind must be real, but nothing can be real for us without existing in the mind, which does not invent but discloses the world to us. (The dichotomy between invention and disclosure is Stevens's.) "In short, a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality creates a reality of its own. Here what matters is that the intensification of the sense of reality creates a resemblance: that reality of its own is a reality" (*CPP*, 691). The imagination is both an enclosure of and enclosed within the real, an intensification. "The eye does not beget in resemblance. It sees. But the mind begets in resemblance as the painter begets in representation; that is to say, as the painter makes his world within a world" (*CPP*, 689). Such a formulation presumes both an entity to be disclosed and the necessity of its disclosure.

Belated as always, we see now that the question with which I began this essay, that of the relation of fact and form (that is, the question of meaning), is in itself mistaken, if one poses it in such starkly binary terms. The question is not that of referential language and the objects it hopefully, helplessly points to, but of the creative process of the mind in relation to the world and the words by which mind knows that world. The relationship between representation and world is not dichotomous, as in Saussure's bifurcated sign. Instead, it is a relationship between the object, the name by which we know that object, and the active subject who creates meaning out of that interaction. "All things speak names, by which they leave us," writes Richard Howard (40), and what they leave us with is knowledge. Meaning is relation, not reference: it is a verb, not a noun.

Like the blackbird and the knowledge of the blackbird, like the inescapable rhythm and the innuendo, the actual and the real (in Stevens's parlance, the real and the imagination), exist only in relation: but each exists: "It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the

imagination and that the interdependence is essential" (*CPP*, 663). The conclusion is clear as the blackbird's shadow on the window: "Thus, reality = the imagination, and the imagination = reality. Imagination gives, but gives in relation" (*Letters*, 364). The "fools" who take this relation for an identity, or who see only one of its terms, cannot keep from one the knowledge that what for a moment pierced one *was* the blackbird: and, of course, it was not.

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Why I Write

I

I write because I would like to live forever. The fact of my future death offends me. Part of this derives from my sense of my own insignificance in the universe. My life and death are a barely momentary flicker. I would like to become more than that. That the people and things I love will die wounds me as well. I seek to immortalize the world I have found and made for myself, even knowing that I won't be there to witness that immortality, mine or my work's, that by definition I will never know whether my endeavor has been successful. But when has impossibility ever deterred anyone from a cherished goal? As the brilliant poet and teacher Alvin Feinstein once said to me, "Poetry is always close kin to the impossible, isn't it?"

My aim is to rescue some portion of the drowned and drowning, including always myself. For a long time my poetry emerged from and was fueled by an impulse to rescue my mother from her own death and from the wreckage of her life, out of which I emerged, in both senses of the word. That wreckage made me who I am, but also I escaped that wreckage, which she, by dying, did not. So I had a certain survivor guilt toward the person who both made my escape possible and represented that from which I had escaped. Many of the poems in my first book, *Some Are Drowning*, centered around an absent, speechless other, an inaccessible beloved who frequently stood in for my mother, though she's an explicit presence in very few of my poems. But her absence was always palpable, a ghostly presence haunting the text. My poems were an attempt to speak to her, to get her to speak back to me, and above all to redeem her suffering: that is, to redeem her life. "Danger invites/rescue—I call it loving,"

as James Tate wrote in his early poem “Rescue.” That project is over, not completed but abandoned (as Paul Valéry said all poems are), but the attempt to rescue my mother through poetry was a major motivation for many years.

The possibility of suffering being redeemed by art, being made meaningful and thus real (as opposed to merely actual, something that happens to exist, happens to occur), is still vital to me. Art reminds us of the uniqueness, particularity, and intrinsic value of things, including ourselves. I sometimes have little sense of myself as existing in the world in any significant way outside of my poetry. That’s where my real life is, the only life that’s actually mine. So there’s also the wish to rescue myself from my own quotidian existence, which is me but is at the same time not me at all. I am its, but it’s not mine. For most of us most of the time, life is a succession of empty moments. You’re born, you go through x experiences, you die, and then you’re gone. No one always burns with Pater’s hard, gem-like flame. There’s a certain emptiness to existence that I look to poetry, my own poetry and the poetry of others, to fulfill or transcend. I have a strong sense of things going out of existence at every second, fading away at the very moment of their coming into bloom: in the midst of life we are in death, as the *Book of Common Prayer* puts it.

In that sense everyone is drowning, everything is drowning, every moment of living is a moment of drowning. I have a strong sense of the fragility of the things we shore up against the ruin which is life: the fragility of natural beauty but also of artistic beauty, which is meant to arrest death but embodies death in that very arrest. Goethe’s Faust is damned when he says, “Oh moment, stay.” At last he finds a moment he longs to preserve, but the moment dissipates when it’s halted. The moment is defined by its transience; to fix it is to kill it. Theodor Adorno points out the paradox that “Art works . . . kill what they objectify, tearing it away from its context of immediacy and real life. They survive because they bring death” (193). Art is a simulacrum of life that embodies and operates by means of death. The aesthetic impulse is the enemy of the lived moment: it attempts both to preserve and to transcend that moment, to be as deeply in the moment as possible and also to rise beyond it. “Wanting to immortalize the transitory—life—art in fact kills it”

(194). This is the inescapable aporia of art, that its creation is a form of destruction. "One has to be downright naive to think that art can restore to the world the fragrance it has lost, according to a line by Baudelaire" (59). Art itself is so vulnerable, to time, to indifference, especially in a society like ours that cares nothing for the potentials art offers, that if anything seeks to repress them in the name of profit or proper order. I have an intense desire to rescue these things that have touched me and place them somewhere for safekeeping, which is both impossible and utterly necessary.

What we take out of life is the luminous moment, which can be a bare branch against a morning sky so overcast it's in white-face, seen through a window that warps the view because the glass has begun to melt with age. Or it can be the face of a beautiful man seen in passing on a crowded street, because beauty is always passing, and you see it but it doesn't see you. It's the promise that beauty is possible and the threat that it's only momentary: if someone doesn't write it down it's gone. The moment vanishes without a trace and then the person who experiences that moment vanishes and then there's nothing. Except perhaps the poem, which can't change anything. As Auden wrote, poetry makes nothing happen, which also implies the possibility of making "nothing" an event rather than a mere vacancy. Poetry rescues nothing and no one, but it embodies that helpless, necessary will to rescue, which is a kind of love, my love for the world and the things and people in the world.

In a graduate contemporary poetry class I took some twenty years ago, a fellow student complained that a poem we were reading was "just trying to immortalize this scene." I found it an odd objection, since I thought that's what poems were supposed to do. One is deluded if one believes that one can actually preserve the world in words, but one is just playing games if one doesn't try.

The world cannot be saved, in any of the several senses of the word. To save the world would be to stop it, to fix it in place and time, to drain it of what makes it world: motion, flux, action. As Yeats wrote in "Easter 1916," "Minute by minute they change;/ . . . The stone's in the midst of all." Poet and critic Allen Grossman is not the first to observe that poetry is a

deathly activity, removing things from the obliterating stream of meaningless event that is also the embodied vitality of the world and of time's action in and upon the world, which creates and destroys in the same motion. The stream of time is both life and that which wears life down to nothing. "Poetry is the perpetual evidence, the sadly perpetual evidence, of the incompleteness of the motive which gives rise to it" (Grossman 71).

But elements of the world can be and have been saved. Thus the history of art. Each artwork that has endured through time is a piece of the world that has survived, and carries with it other pieces of a world, of worlds, otherwise gone. That we are able today to admire the sculpture of Praxiteles, to gaze upon a Rembrandt painting, to read of Keats's fears that he shall cease to be, is evidence that something does remain, something can be carried over, rescued from oblivion. The artwork is evidence of its own survival. Allen Grossman writes: "My most fundamental impulses are toward recovery, the securing once again of selfhood in something that lies invulnerably beyond history, something which promises enormous, inhuman felicity" (41). I would add that, for me, the impulse is not just for the conservation of personhood, but of worldhood. I seek to save the sensuous appearances, the particulate worldness of the world.

II

I write not to be bored. I hate being bored, and I don't want to bore others. Unlike Zelda Fitzgerald, I can't say that I'm never bored because I'm never boring. I am often bored, and undoubtedly I am sometimes boring. But I try not to be boring in poems, and in turn I don't want poems to bore me. Poems should be *interesting*, should engage and hold the interest. The most basic level of interest is the sensual, the aural, the texture and feel of words and phrases: the poem in the ear, the poem in the mouth. Helen Vendler has called the poem a musical composition scored for the human voice. The poem is a palpable sensuous entity or it is nothing.

What is it that I seek when I read a poem, when I write a poem? Above all, I desire an experience, a mode of experience available

to me only through poetry. "The reading of a poem should be an experience [like experiencing an act]. Its writing must be all the more so," as Wallace Stevens reminds us (905, 909). A true poetic experience is worth more than a thousand oppositional critiques, most of which tend to be rather predictable in any case.

My interest can be defined by at least part of Charles Reznikoff's characterization of his poetry: "images clear but the meaning not stated but suggested by the objective details and the music of the verse." As a reader, I look for such clarity of image and phrase, for a rhythmic pulse and a rich verbal texture, for a sense of shape and coherence even in the midst of apparent fracture. As a writer, I try to provide these things. But an overall "meaning" or "interpretation" isn't the first or the main thing I seek, as either reader or writer. "A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have one" (Stevens 914). Attend to the senses and sense will often attend to itself.

I respond to urgency, to a sense of felt necessity, to passion. The word *passion* derives from the Greek for "suffering, experience, emotion." The word itself summons up the poem as an experience undergone by the writer and the reader alike. Passion is not just a passion for my lover or for botany or for history, but a passion for words, a passionate struggle to try to create verbal experience that would be as real as the rest of the world. Stevens insisted that "In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all" (902). Like any object of love, that also means that the poem will resist its creator, just as the world resists us. The struggle such passion entails is both joyous and painful. As Stevens also famously wrote, "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully" (910). Of course, that presumes both an intelligence to be resisted and an intelligence that resists. The poet, the poem, and the reader must all be as intelligent as possible.

I desire variety in my poems and the poems of others because the expansion of my poetic territories is the expansion of my world. The poem expands the world as I find it, it makes more world available to me. Works of art are (or should be) like people: no person is new, but every person is unique. To encounter a work of art is to enter into a new relationship, with the work and with the world to which it is an addition.

If art really is some kind of compensation or restitution for what we lack in our lives, and I believe that among many other things it is, it can be so only by providing something different from what we already have, not merely by reflecting or reflecting upon those lives and those myriad lacks.

I want to write good poems (and I still believe that there is such a thing, that aesthetic judgment is not merely an ideological mystification), but not the same good poems that I've already written. I'd like to do what I haven't done before. This has proven to be an impediment to my poetic reputation: I don't have a trademark style that I repeat from book to book, I haven't commodified myself and my work into a brand. Critic Vernon Shetley describes the contemporary American poetry world "where each poet seems compelled to enhance his or her brand recognition with an easily recognizable gimmick" (79). A reader too often knows exactly what he or she is getting, whether from a "mainstream" poet or an "avant-garde" one. Philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto concurs that "There is an overwhelming tendency in America to brand artists, so that the well informed can identify an example of an artist's work in a single act of instant recognition" (33). Not to so brand or trademark one's work puts one at a distinct disadvantage in what is too often a literary marketplace.

To attempt something new and fail is much more interesting than to attempt something that's already been done and fail. I don't want to write something just because I know I can, just to reaffirm what I already know. Of course, to say that I don't want to do the same thing twice is to assume that I've done something in the first place. I not only don't know what I can do, I don't know what I've done. How could one, not having access to the vantage point of posterity? With every poem I'm trying to do something that I can't achieve, to get somewhere I'll never get. If I were able to do it, if I were able to get there, I'd have no reason to continue writing. As Allen Grossman suggests, poetry aims at the end of poetry, which is unattainable (the ends of poetry are the end of poetry). Thus poetry continues, despite the frequent reports of its death.

I would like my poetry to bring into existence something which did not previously exist, including in my mind or my intention. I want to surprise myself, to do something I didn't plan

to do or even that's not immediately recognizable to me as something *I* did. (Though poet Donald Merrill, on a panel we were both on about difficulty in poetry, reminded me that not all surprises are good.) For the writer as well as for the reader, poetry should shake one out of one's habitual ways of seeing and thinking, conceiving and perceiving. As Hemingway said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the writer "should always try for something that has never been done or that others have tried and failed." The goal is to achieve the higher level of "mastery" that permits the medium to do things of its own accord, out of its own internal logic, in which the writer participates but which the writer doesn't determine.

I think of the poem the way that I think of a painting or a sculpture: a new entity in the world, not just a comment on the world. While meaning is hardly insignificant, it's not what defines the poem as a poem. I seek out the specificity of the poem as an event in language ("language as the material of poetry, not its mere medium or instrument," in Stevens's formulation), and not a recounting or re-enactment of an extra-linguistic event, though of course such events enter into poems. The poem is not hermetically sealed off from the world, but encounters and engages the world as an independent element.

The forms that these things which have not previously existed, these events that have not previously occurred, take are not predetermined. If one is sufficiently lucky and open to possibility, they can be found, they will happen, in the villanelle as well as in the most self-consciously avant-garde poem. Among others, Karen Volkman demonstrates the continuing vitality of the sonnet as a field of exploration and experimentation. As Wallace Stevens points out in his "Materia Poetica," "All poetry is experimental poetry" (918). To maintain and expand the formal capacities of the medium is also to conserve and preserve those capacities. In Susan Stewart's words, "the disappearance of any aesthetic form from human memory is a disaster not unlike the extinction of a species, since a realm of possible actions is now precluded and not necessarily provided with a compensatory analogue."

As many poets have done, I look back, to the High Modernists and to the poets of the English Renaissance, to move for-

ward. Eliot looked back to the English Metaphysical poets and the Jacobean dramatists, Pound looked back to Sappho and Catullus and to the Provençal troubadours, Stevens looked back to what critic M.H. Abrams calls the major Romantic lyric, and Paul Celan looked back to medieval German mysticism and the Hebrew Bible. Louis Zukofsky's anti-capitalist "A 9" is modeled after Guido Cavalcanti's canzone "Donna Mi Prega" (a poem highly recommended by Pound in his *ABC of Reading*).

Thus I prefer words like *distinctive*, *different*, or *unique* to a word like *new*, with all its connotations of novelty and fashion, of doing the not-yet-done for its own sake. Or perhaps, even better, the word *original*, which means both "of the first instance" and "of the origin, of the source." To be original is at once to do what has not previously been done, to produce something which did not exist before, and to draw on the beginnings of one's practice, to move forward by casting back.

I don't write a poem and ask, "Is this new?" I ask, "Is this individual, distinctive, unique?" Of course, for a poem to be completely unique, for it to have no relationship to anything that's come before, would be for it not to be a poem at all. As would be the case for the completely new poem.

Forms, styles, modes, and genres don't have intrinsic meanings or values. A self-consciously avant-garde poem can be as rote as the most bland pseudo-autobiographical anecdote, if its writing is not approached in a true spirit of adventuring into possibility. Simply to seek the new for its own sake is a shallow and pointless affair, like chasing after the latest fashions. As the New Wave group Talk Talk sang, mocking such a dedicated follower of fashion, "She'll wear anything you can't recognize." And too often, of course, one does recognize it.

One is always setting out in search of the new, as Baudelaire wrote, seeking out what does not yet exist. But I would rather write a good poem than a new poem. And many of the varieties of "the new" currently on offer seem rather shopworn and aged. Rimbaud wrote that it is necessary to be absolutely modern (*il faut être absolument moderne*). As if in response, Wallace Stevens wrote that "One cannot spend one's time in being modern when there are so many more important things to be" (912).

Stevens also wrote that "Newness (not novelty) may be the

highest individual value in poetry. Even in the meretricious sense of newness a new poem has value" (914). Too many poets confuse novelty with genuine newness. "The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover" (Stevens 919). This is a fault shared by too much of the contemporary American poetic avant-garde: it is filled with entirely too many accordion-playing clams.

III

Any artistic medium calls forth a self and a world which exist specifically in their relationship to that medium, a self which did not exist prior to that engagement. As Yeats wrote, the self who writes is not the self who sits down to dinner or reads the evening paper. Contrary to Mikhail Bakhtin's assertion that the lyric is monologic (as opposed to the novel's "dialogized heteroglossia"), the lyric problematizes and decenters the univocal speaking subject. The self in the most determinedly confessional poem is still a mask, a construct. In his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," Eliot writes that "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes" (1975: 64). Eliot's statement needs to be amended to acknowledge that such a perfectly receptive state (for it is receptivity and attention of which he is writing) is always an asymptote, striven for but never achieved, and that the poet's mundane experience as an ordinary individual is no less chaotic, irregular, and fragmentary than anyone else's. As Eliot points out in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "It is not in his personal emotions . . . that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting" (43). The difference is what one makes of those fragments of experience, what and what kind of order,

however tenuous and contingent, one brings to the chaos of quotidian life.

I would like each poem of mine to be as close to perfection as possible, and I think that good poems are much more rare than some believe them to be. I would also like my work to be more than just an accumulation of good poems, difficult as even a single good poem is to achieve. I would like the whole to add up to more than the sum of its parts. Eliot said that this is one test of a major poet (his example was George Herbert): “a major poet is one the whole of whose work we ought to read, in order fully to appreciate any part of it” (1957: 44). Each individual part illuminates and is illuminated by both every other part and the corpus as a whole. To produce such a body of work is one of my goals as a writer.

Obviously one can’t predict this about one’s own work or about the work of one’s contemporaries. But in his late poems “The Planet on the Table” and “As You Leave the Room,” Wallace Stevens was able to look back on his life’s work and know that he had accomplished something that mattered: “his poems, although makings of his self,/Were no less makings of the sun.” And Pound could look back at *The Cantos*, his failed epic, and realize that, though he had tried to write paradise, he could not make it cohere.

I won’t live to know whether my work has outlived me. But one can’t predict the future in general, and this doesn’t prevent us from making decisions that influence, change, and often determine that future. The future isn’t wholly unknowable, and the future doesn’t just happen: in large part we make it. This works no differently in poetry than in any other field of endeavor. There is no guarantee that one will reach any of one’s goals in this life. But not to struggle toward those goals is to guarantee that they won’t be attained. I choose, in the words of Tennyson’s Ulysses, “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

IV

And never to forget beauty, however strange or difficult.

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About the Author

Reginald Shepherd is the editor of *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries*, published by the University of Iowa Press in 2004. He is the author of five books of poems, all published by the University of Pittsburgh Press: *Fata Morgana* (2007); *Otherhood* (2003), which was a finalist for the 2004 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize; *Wrong* (1999); *Angel, Interrupted* (1996); and *Some Are Drowning* (1994), winner of the 1993 Associated Writing Programs' Award in Poetry. The widely anthologized recipient of grants from the NEA, the Illinois Arts Council, the Saltonstall Foundation, the Vogelstein Foundation, and the Florida Arts Council, among other awards and honors, Shepherd currently lives with his partner in Pensacola, Florida.

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