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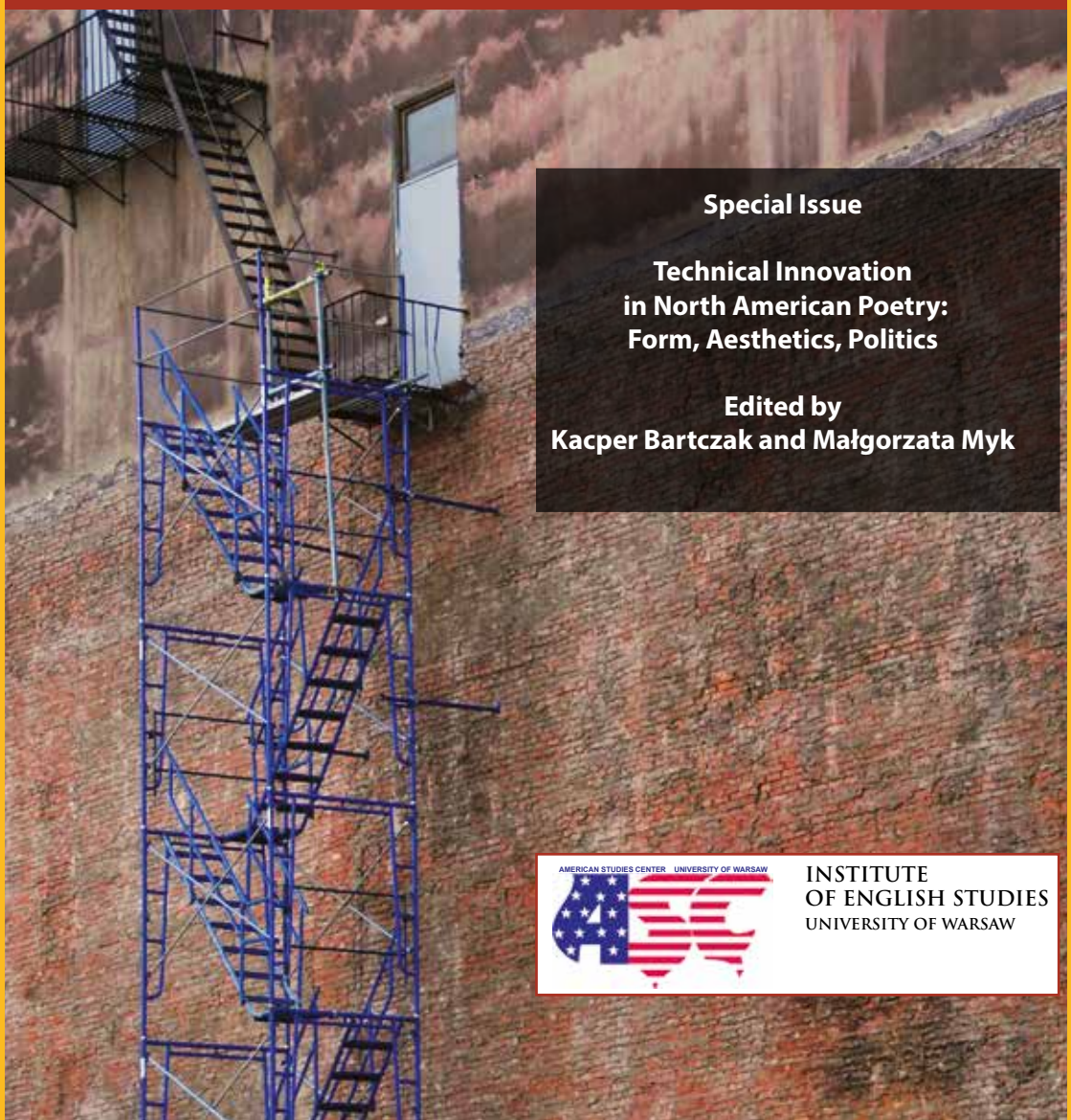

Special Issue

Technical Innovation in North American Poetry: Form, Aesthetics, Politics

Edited by
Kacper Bartczak and Małgorzata Myk

AMERICAN STUDIES CENTER UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

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From the Editors

> The experimental viewpoint... necessarily holds that avant-gardism is first and foremost an attitude towards life if it is to be anything at all. This raises the question of whether the long-standing debate over 'the avant-garde' and its various manifestations is simply a contest over terminologies or whether it is tied-in to a broader aestheticisation of ideology and of ideological purchase upon critical 'praxis' and upon the 'real.'
>
> Louis Armand, *Avant-Post* 16

The eleven essays collected in this issue of *PJAS* germinated as scholarly and artistic responses to the call for papers written for the Innovative Poetries / Innovations in Poetry Conference, hosted by the Department of American Literature at the University of Łódź, in September 2016, and were subsequently developed and sent to us in the wake of the event's illuminating lectures, sessions, and discussions featuring scholars and artists from Europe and the U.S. Drafting the first conference circular, we were wary of a politically and aesthetically naïve ring to the present-day use of the words "innovative" and "innovation." We thus modulated the idea of poetic innovation as a kind of versatile textual praxis that extends across the traditional barriers of the academic, artistic, aesthetic, and political: we wanted to treat it as an intervention into the real as a field of meaning making. The responses of our contributors have followed this idea, by tracing several modes, in the historical and formal contexts, in which innovation and originality have remained a feature of poetic efficacy even as originality is no longer treated as an attribute of the expressive lyrical subject. Such an approach to innovation takes into account the legacies of Modernism, the on-going succession of avant-gardes, specifically the New York School and the Language movement, as well as present and future consequences of Language writing visible in post-Language poetries and in the recently burgeoning Conceptualism.

The chronologically earliest impulse to technical innovation that the participants of the conference chose to focus on has been the styles found within The New York School of poetry. Clearly, the New York poets' major and ongoing significance lies in their infringement upon the more established generic categories,

enshrined within the post-war, modernist legacies. The energy of the poems by Ashbery, Schuyler, or O'Hara, continues to be important for the critics in the way their work bursts open the boundaries of verse and proliferates into stylistic shapes associated with prose. This has a lot to do with various other conceptual and aesthetic shuttlings, notably those between psychologically posed interior and materially captured externality of the world, or between the abstract or lofty on the one hand and the particular or banal on the other.

This is precisely the reason why we decided to open the issue with two texts that return to the New York School innovation. Joanna Orska investigates the complex relation between John Ashbery's poetic prose in *Three Poems* and Andrzej Sosnowski's prose poem "Konwój." Through close attendance to Ashbery's rhythms and the way Sosnowski renders them in his translations of *Three Poems*, Orska's groundbreaking reading shows the originality with which Sosnowski remains a poet independent from Ashbery in his "Konwój." At the same time, her discussion illustrates how Sosnowski's innovative approach to translation and poetic prose alters the tradition of poetic prose in Poland. Also concentrating on poetic prose, Mikołaj Wiśniewski investigates the relations between James Schuyler's diaristic entries and his other projects, both poetic and novelistic. As Wiśniewski shows, the element of the quotidian inscribed in the very procedure of keeping a diary is a source of inspiration for Schulyer. The deliberately "flat" style of the diary becomes a sort of experimental ground and major aesthetic impulse behind the more well-known works by Schuyler, notably his long poems.

Another area of interest in the issue is the experiment of the Language movement. The Language poets shaped a kind of poetic utterance that proved to be an expansion and reinforcement of the modernist experiment. In some sense, such expansion can be treated as a development of at least some of the impulses signaled by the New York School. Continuing to work with textual disjunction and dispersal of the lyrical subject, the Language poets stressed the importance of linguistic medium to the conceptual schemes by which the community shapes its lifeworld, also stressing the immediately public and political character of the shifts of emphasis in our understanding of the "poetic."

The contribution that most directly refers to the activities of this poetry group is Tadeusz Pióro's "Autobiography and the Politics and Aesthetics of Language Writing" that surveys the Language poets' collaborative endeavor of *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography* (1998-2010). Pióro discusses in his contribution *The Grand Piano*'s intellectual and political potential, examining it in the broader context of the authors' theoretical and poetic practices. By departing from the complexity inherent in *The Grand Piano's* concept of "collective autobiography," calling it a "provocative group memoir," Pióro concentrates on two writers from the Language group, Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian, and shows how the aesthetics of their work is inextricable from their nature as acts of opposition to the dominant political orders of the day.

The radical formal gesture of the Language group finds its poignant continuations in the poetry of Susan Howe. Two of our contributors comment on her poetry. Jacek Partyka analyzes the relations between poetry and history in Howe's 2014 collection *Spontaneous Particulars*. Partyka puts Howe's practice in the context of Marjorie Perloff's concept of the "unoriginal genius." But his discussion goes beyond the affinities between Howe's archival procedure and Walter Benjamin's aesthetics of quotation and montage, already spotted by Perloff. According to Partyka, Howe's poetry finds an early equivalent in Charles Reznikoff's utilization of legal documents as material for his "poems."

A further exploration of Susan Howe's interdisciplinary poetics is found in Floriana Puglisi's contribution. Puglisi focuses on the poet's collaboration with avant-garde musician and composer David Grubbs. Examining *Thiefth* (2005), Puglisi shows how the aural aspect of the project augments Howe's graphic experimentation by bringing to the foreground the materiality of language. For Howe, as Puglisi contends, sound enhances the anti-expressivist mode of the poet's visual texts, as if releasing them from the domain of signification founded on the notions of hierarchy, authority, and stability.

The next group of the texts we have selected for this issue discuss poetries of concrete social, political, and public engagement. The poets discussed in them have absorbed the avant-garde formal impulse toward building oppositional, politically critical stances of more direct engagement with the materiality of political and social life. Małgorzata Myk's "Citizen Myles," a reading of Eileen Myles' 2007 poetry collection *Sorry, Tree*, moves away from the a-subjective Language-oriented poetry towards Myles' defiantly frank semi-autobiographical writing. Via Agamben, Myles' fate as the contemporary is seen as inevitably shot through with the sense of the untimely. Myk looks at Myles' *oeuvre* through the lenses of Lauren Berlant's notion of "intimate citizenship" and Lee Edelman's reflections on queer sexuality, as well as Berlant's and Edelman's co-authored rehabilitation of negativity in discussions of queer publics. The chapter on Myles' minoritarian poetics is followed by Magdalena Zurawsky's review-essay of Anne Boyer's 2015 prose-poetry collection *Garments Against Women*. Zurawsky approaches Boyer's text as an example of proletarian, materialist poetics indebted to contemporary American avant-garde poets, in particular Alice Notley and Bernadette Mayer. Zurawsky's fierce indictment of the early days of the Trump era that frames the piece becomes an extension of Boyer's Marxist feminist call for interrogation of the major institutions of American social and political life.

The materialist notes of Myk's and Zurawsky's essays are complemented by Jerzy Kamionowski's contribution devoted to Claudia Rankine's highly acclaimed volume of documentary poetics *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Kamionowski begins the essay by a re-appraisal of the concept of innovation itself. A cornerstone of his analysis of Rankine, innovation becomes equated with "poetic ore" as a special kind of "knowing," as well as a new way of seeing. In Rankine's case, as Kamionowski's

reading shows, it is formal innovation that largely produces in the text the conditions for increased legibility of instances of racism. Indeed, the reader of *Citizen* confronts his or her own obliviousness and blindness in a way that is felt more acutely not only due to Rankine's use of disturbing narrative vignettes, but also due to the text's complex and disquieting visual discourse.

The next two articles in the volume, by Marianne Ølholm and Kacper Bartczak, explore the more recent developments in technical and conceptual innovation. Ølholm's article discusses the conceptual poetics which continue the avant-garde gesture of problematizing the boundaries of the poetic by engaging with radically non-"literary" materials. Ølholm discusses Christian Bök's experiment of encoding a poetic text into the DNA sequence of bacteria. This post-humanist gesture is consistent with the idea of testing and probing the dependence of the literary output on the material conditioning of the text. By foregrounding the character of the poem as a product of a formula, a procedure, a process within a defined material-biological environment, Bök's texts follow other experiments in the appropriation of external materials and they help us to rethink the concepts of both author and reader.

While Ølholm discusses a poetry whose exploration of material externality erases the human, Kacper Bartczak's article is devoted to Peter Gizzi whose work becomes a witness to a specific form of the return of the human. Bartczak shows Gizzi as a poet of what he calls the "poetics of plenitude," an aesthetic-poetic negotiation of the energy-surplus of externality. Gizzi's strategy of listening to a "dictation" of the outside confronts externality as an impinging overabundance of stimuli. Such confrontation redefines Harold Bloom's idea of influence. Here, the defense is not against a predecessor-poet, but against the painful birth of the very act of cognition and sensation established by the fluency of the poem. However, as the poem becomes a device that registers the tension of such defenses, it also becomes a stage on which a kind of artifice-bound subjectivity emerges, fully conscious of its belonging to the formal field of the poem.

As theoretical takes on poetry are themselves altered by the energies of technical innovation, the boundary between the theory of poetry and the poetic text itself blurs. Thus, the final contribution to the issue is Joel Katelnikoff's performative essay that engages with the poetry and poetics of Steve McCaffery. Using cut-up and montage, Katelnikoff remixes McCaffery's work, "producing critical writing by means of poetic technique." The text's critical gesture unfolds in a non-standard way by re-aligning the author's Recombinant Theory with the artistic energies and forces underlying McCaffery's writing.

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Joanna Orska

Transition-Translation: Andrzej Sosnowski's Translation of *Three Poems* by John Ashbery

Abstract: Narrative poetic forms became popular in Poland in the 1990s, and just as it is the case with other changes in poetic style and genres, this tendency can be associated with the popularization of the styles of the New York School of poetry. I would like to reflect on the poetic practice of John Ashbery and its presence in Poland. My main interest is to show how translations of his texts refresh through their formal and conceptual novelty the range of the Polish lyric poetry's sensitivities, expanding the possibilities of poetic imagination and language. The translators of poems by the New York School poets remain to this day perhaps the most important contemporary authors, who are also most often mentioned by critics as reference points for new Polish poetry. This is the case of Andrzej Sosnowski, whose translation of *Three Poems* (a prose poem from 1974), published in Poland in 2012 as *Cztery poematy*, is undoubtedly the crowning achievement of this poet-translator. Sosnowski himself is the author of several poetic prose pieces (which may be aptly described, after Fredman, as *poet's prose*), whose relationships with both Ashbery himself and the authors translated by both poets (Raymond Roussel, Arthur Rimbaud) seem to be part of a complicated "translational-transitive" game that Sosnowski may play with Ashbery. I decided to choose this example of the very unique Polish reception of the American poet because it seems to be a wide-ranging artistic project, far exceeding the boundaries of an adventure that might be called a faithful or masterly translation.

Keywords: prose poem, New York School, translation turn, John Ashbery, Andrzej Sosnowski, translation practice, poet's prose

It is safe to say that in Poland the 1990s marked the beginning of a boom in a new type of poetic prose, resembling the one that began in the US in the late 1970s.[1] That formula did not have much in common with the French prose poem whose tradition

1 Stephen Fredman writes in his groundbreaking book, *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, that an impulse towards prose "is embedded in the larger issues of the character of American poetry and the crisis of modernity" and that poet's prose is "a key indicator of the overall direction of American poetry" (Fredman 2). Fredman lists numerous names of the great 20th century American poets who wrote poetic prose. The whole new group of writers, however, working with prose poem seen as the new experimental mode of writing, giving the way almost wholly to the new forms of prose or non-versified performance text, emerged together with the Language poetry movement. In the introduction to anthology *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to Present*, David Lehman, the editor, writes in a similar manner, that, from the beginning of 1970s, the prose poem in America has been gaining independence as a "surreal fable" (by Russel Edson or Robert Bly), and as a "language experiment": giving autonomy to the sentence of prose independent from the sentential logic and the context of the story. Following in footsteps of Marjorie Perloff, Lehman points to the works of Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinjan and Rosemarie Waldrop, among others.

is behind virtually all borderline poetic endeavours in which authorial intention is an important factor. The new strategies aimed to reformulate numerous parameters of poetic prose.[2] It seems that the surge in exploration of trends supposedly inaccessible to Polish lyric poetry stemmed from English language modernist traditions related to the broadly defined American avant-garde. Even though 20th century Polish literature was variously, and frequently, influenced by all kinds of aspects of the Anglo-Saxon culture, during the later period of the Polish People's Republic the dominant voice of Polish structuralism, reinforced by specific critical choices regarding American literature resulted in a situation where the legacy of such poets as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein or William Carlos Williams, remained largely unrecognised in our society. Structuralism—the most prominent academic language in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s, insisting on a clear-cut separation of genre models—has produced and continues to produce theories of poetry that are based on a strong opposition of verse and prose. To the extent that these theories have recognized forms of hybrid nature, such allowances were made on strict rules stipulating that the hybrid be commensurate with the Polish literary tradition.[3] Narrative poetic forms only became popular in the 1990s. On the one hand, they are distinguished by the poetic treatment

2 The notion of American prose poem was considered subversive and having a certain political potential by many critics researching the issue (S. Fredman, M. Perloff, M. Murphy, M. Deville, S. Monte). Fredman opposes the language-centered, highly aestheticized French prose poem—"a paean to the isolated genius"—rooted in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, and the democratic tendency of American formula, where prose is to "articulate a shared world in which the experience vouches for truth rather than for isolated genius" (Fredman 10). The American prose poem was giving up not only verse itself, in a gesture of freedom, but was also leaving behind the tradition of short narrative prose poem treated as confession (*The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1112). As Fredman sustains, prose offers an American poet not only "distancing mechanism from the regulation of verse": "American poets employ prose to engage and interrogate what has been thought of as 'antipoetic' realm of fact and argument. . . . The whole range of mood, tone, and address, inherent in the discourse of statement and proposition becomes available in the prose sentence. In other words, the most encompassing freedom that these poets seek is the freedom to construct the poetic entity capable of including what poetry has been told to exclude" (10). Na temat poematu prozą jako gatunku uprawianego przez Johna Ashbery zob. także: R. Ring, *An Open Possibility: John Ashbery and the Postmodern Prose Poem* (1998).

3 Recently published monography by the Polish theoretician of literature, Agnieszka Kluba, under the title *Prose Poem in Poland*, excludes outside the range of interests all those forms of prose poem that are lacking the strong lyrical subject. These are, supposedly, incongruous with the tradition of the 20th century Polish prose poem, traditionally keeping the strong relation with the French, symbolist model. Surprisingly, this kind of argument ignores a range of experiments that were crucial for some poets of Polish modernity. Among the more striking examples of Kluba's exclusions are Różewicz's and Białoszewski's experiments which violate the boundaries of poetic genres, as they create longer narratives, explore the poetic potential of a narrative sentence, and make poetry out of material not immediately tagged as "poetic."

of language, which hinders the development of the plot or story; on the other hand, they play with the category of truth, drawing on various tools and styles appropriate for prose but until then not necessarily assimilated by Polish lyric poetry. As I am going to argue, their success, just as it is the case with other changes in poetic style and genres, can be associated with the popularization in Poland of the styles of the New York School of poetry. These styles represent the strand characteristic of the American avant-garde tradition that had previously been absent in Poland.[4] The phenomenon of the presence of the New York School in Poland in the 1990s has already been the subject of several discussions, which referred mainly to the surprisingly weak and superficial reception of Frank O'Hara's poetic styles.[5] The Polish 1990s did open up as a poetic ground particularly suitable for the introduction of more conversational utterance and colloquial language that can be profusely found in O'Hara's poetry. The presence of his work, however, was connected mainly to the translations of only a selection of his poems (mostly by Piotr Sommer, starting from the famous "blue," New York School issue of *Literatura na Świecie*, a magazine devoted to translating literary texts magazine in, published in 1986). Consequently, the reception of his poetry suffered from insufficient recognition of his views on poetry and ignorance of the specific experience and contexts that were vital for the New York artists in the American 1950s and 60s.[6] New Polish poetry in the 1990s was nevertheless largely inspired in its methods, interests and ideas by Bohdan Zadura, Piotr Sommer, and later Andrzej Sosnowski, Tadeusz Pióro, Jerzy Jarniewicz and Marcin Sendecki—important poets translating countercultural English-written poetry not only from the United Stated, but also from Great Britain, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

4 To explain this sudden absorption of the New York School legacy at the beginning of the 1990s in Poland, one must take into consideration the general strong presence of the French and Russian modern tradition in the Polish 20th century. From the 1920s on, French and Russian poetical model played a prominent role in understanding the essence of poetry and its social meaning. Poetry was seen consequently as a sublime and elitist mode of communicating, a kind of a sacred text conveying the universal wisdom on the one hand, and an expression of authorial freedom in dense, obscure, experimental verses, focused on the problems of poetical language and imagination on the other. In Polish poetry there was not much space for the common language of the shared, everyday experience of the countercultural origin—or the experiment heading in the way of the hybrid, ambiguous in generic terms poetry of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams or prose of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. Avant-garde revolution of this kind was going on in Polish poetry throughout the whole of the 20th century, but in a silent, marginalized way (represented, for instance, by Białoszewski and Różewicz, mentioned in the preceding footnote, both acknowledged authors, but read in a largely traditional manner).

5 Kacper Bartczak has pointed out a certain one-dimensionality of the way in which some "bruLion" poets respond to the subtleties of Frank O'Hara's urban stylistics (Bartczak, "Drapieżność" 436).

6 Several Polish critics (as Marta Skwara, Tadeusz Pióro, Kacper Bartczak and myself) have written about the influence of the New York School on contemporary Polish poetry and about superficiality of the presence of the most popular one, Frank O'Hara, in Polish reception.

In what follows, I would like to reflect on the presence in Poland of the poetic practice of John Ashbery, taking up a subject that has remained virtually undiscussed. At the same time, I want to show how translations of his texts refresh, through their formal and conceptual novelty, often received as „strangeness," the range of the Polish lyric poetry's sensitivities, expanding the possibilities of poetic imagination and language. I will demonstrate how these styles migrate over various textual boundaries, find their way from the translation to the translator's own poetic work, and begin a new life in the Polish language.

Obviously, prose poems by Ashbery—the famous *Three Poems* as well as previous attempts made already at the stage of *Some Trees*—could not have contributed directly to the popularity of narrative forms of poetry in Poland. On the other hand, until 1989, all of our post-war achievements in this regard had amounted to a dozen or so random works, written by fewer than ten important authors in essentially 19th century style (excluding the experiments by Tadeusz Różewicz and Miron Białoszewski). For the sake of comparison, since the early 1990s there have appeared about thirty poets successfully engaged in all kinds of poetic prose. Among them, to mention just a few important names, have been Andrzej Sosnowski, Jacek Podsiadło, or Marcin Świetlicki. Although the real impact of the poetic styles brought in by the translations of O'Hara's poems remains to be ascertained, and even though it is even more difficult to measure any strong presence of Ashbery or Schuyler and Koch, it does not change the fact that the translators of poems by the New York School poets remain to this day perhaps the most important contemporary authors, who are also most often mentioned by critics as reference points for new Polish poetry.[7] The translation by Andrzej Sosnowski of *Three Poems*, a prose poem from 1974 published in Poland in 2012 as *Cztery poematy* (with the addition of *Fala* [*The Wave* from 1984]) is undoubtedly the crowning achievement of the poet-translator

7 John Ashbery's works were translated in the 1990s in Poland many times by several artists (Bohdan Zadura, Piotr Sommer, Tadeusz Pióro, Jacek Gutorow, Julia Fiedorczuk, Kacper Bartczak, Paweł Marcinkiewicz). In 1993 first Polish short collection of his poems was published under the title *No i wiesz* (*As You Know* in translation of Sommer, Sosnowski and Zadura). The poetry of Ashbery was presented to the Polish reader in two recognized anthologies of American poetry in translation of Piotr Sommer (*Artykuły pochodzenia zagranicznego*, 1996; collection reprinted in *O krok o nich*, 2002). Broader selection of Ashbery's works was presented in three monographical issues of *Literatura na Świecie* as well: first one dedicated to the New York School poets („blue issue" [1986, nr 7]; second the issue with fragments of *Flow Chart* poem in translation of Sosnowski [1994, nr 3]; finally the whole issue dedicated to Ashbery [2006, nr 7-8], with *Self Portrait in the Convex Mirror* in Sommer's translation and the first publication of *The Wave* in Sosnowski's translation. Several important books and articles about Ashbery, written by Polish scholars specializing in American literary studies (Krystyna Mazur, Kacper Bartczak, Paweł Marcinkiewicz), have been published within the last ten years. One of the most important statements, written in the formula of poetical, avant-garde-like manifesto, was written by Andrzej Sosnowski and reprinted in his critical book *»Najryzykowniej«* in 2007 (*O poezji* flow *i* chart [About *flow* and *chart* poetry]).

with regard to his Polish translations of Ashbery. Sosnowski himself is the author of several poetic prose pieces (which may be aptly described, after Fredman, as *poet's prose*), whose relationships with both Ashbery himself and the authors translated by both poets (Raymond Roussel, Arthur Rimbaud) seem to be part of a complicated "translational-transitive" game that Sosnowski may play with Ashbery. I decided to choose this example of the very unique Polish reception of the American poet because, as in the case of works by Ashbery, it seems to be a wide-ranging artistic project, far exceeding the boundaries of an adventure that might be called a faithful or masterly translation.

Let us first focus on the poetic prose of Sosnowski, which could be considered as a kind of "conversation in translation"—a broadly-conceived transposition of creative concepts beyond the limits of language and conditions of local culture. It seems fitting to start with *Nouvelles impressions d'Amerique* (1994) by Sosnowski, a publication inspired by Raymond Roussel's *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (1932), which was a fascination of a lifetime not just for Ashbery.[8] Paweł Marcinkiewicz in his large Polish study dedicated exclusively to Ashbery's poetry, *Oni przybyli, żeby wysadzić Amerykę*, argues that *The Vermont Notebook* (1975), a book illustrated by Jo Brainard, draws for its strategy and the concept of its drawings on *Nouvelles Impressions* by Roussel. If we were to agree with the above assessment, then Ashbery's volume—focusing on a vertiginous idea of meticulous chronicling, sorting, and cataloguing various elements comprising the landscape of experience, perhaps of the author travelling by bus across the US—must also be a testimony of the difficulties, or even impossibility, of creatively reacting to Roussel's text. It may be seen as both a

8 First translations of Raymond Roussel's works by the New York School poets had been published in 1969 in Trevor Winkfield's magazine *Julliard*. These efforts were completed when the collective edition of Roussel's translation appeared in 1995 under the title *How I Wrote Certain of my Books*, preceded by an introduction by John Ashbery. This particular essay had a history of itself and was cited many times as important self-statement about Ashbery's own works. It was published first in 1962 in *Portfolio and Art News* (Diggory). The collective edition of Roussel's works was published by Quick Change (Winkfield's publishing house). It contained 59 illustrations of Henry-A. Zo, ordered by Roussel for *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*. In that first American collection one will find the fragments of *Nouvelles Impressions*, with the famous many-levelled suitcase-sentences, in translation of Kenneth Koch; couple of pages of *Impressions d'Afrique*—prose in translation of Ashbery; finally a long excerpt of his translation of *Documents to Serve as an Outline*. The Polish translation of the last position, by Andrzej Sosnowski, appeared in Biuro Literackie publishing house in 2008. In an essay dedicated to Roussel, published first partly as the afterword to the Polish edition of *Locus Solus* in 1998, Sosnowski reminds the story of the New York School poets meeting with Roussel legacy in Paris in 1950, accidentally, in the surrealistic meaning of an accident, in the case of Kenneth Koch, looking "for something exiting and mad." The same meeting happened less accidentally in the case of Ashbery, who came to Paris to write his PhD. thesis about Roussel. The essay by Sosnowski is a kind of homage to the procedural machinery of Roussel's surrealism—his fascination shared with the poets working within this same, particular avant-garde tradition.

tribute to Roussel and admitting one's helplessness in the face of the French writer's daunting formal undertaking, especially his derivational generative or algorithmic method, which permits a kind of endless imploding—or maybe exploding—of the text. If we accept the idea proposed by Marcinkiewicz, the intent of the original was extended in the new work inspired by it.[9]

The same interpretation can be given to Sosnowski's *Nouvelles impressions d'Amerique*. In its initial, borderline conditions, it may be regarded as a kind of perverse tribute to the collective presence and importance of Roussel to the New Your School poetry; a tribute to Roussel himself that would echo the New York writers' veneration of the unrestrained and boundless genius of word formation; finally, a sign of respect toward Ashbery himself, for whom Roussel's hyper-complex sentences, packed in an intricate system of multilevel parentheses, posed a great challenge, which he expressed, among others, in *Three Poems*. On the other hand, *Nouvelles impressions* by Sosnowski, which reuses 59 illustrations by Henry-A. Zo., is a book following in a relatively straightforward manner the instructions that Roussel gave to his illustrator. Following the instructions closely and meticulously, the drawings illustrate nothing in particular, in the sense that they present totally imaginary, and yet banal, situations and landscapes. In the volume, the drawings are supplemented with small, poetic, but quite clearly written prose pieces. In their intent they follow the instructions in a way that reflects the subjectivity of the Polish author, who also partially adheres to the romantic genre of intellectual journey, here presented in a removed, poetic manner, which, however, has as little as possible in common with differently understood American reality.[10] None of the texts contained

9 The conception of translation as an extension of the life of the original text in a different culture and different langue determinations, often producing different form and even meaning, comes from Jacques Derrida. In *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, the book of texts and discussions with the French philosopher, the result of the series of meetings at the University of Montreal in 1979, in the *Roundtable on Translation*, Derrida formulates his thesis basing on Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*. He was asked by Christy McDonald about his poetical book *Living on: Border Lines* (1977), that was playing with notions of total translatability and total untranslatability. Derrida says then: "Translation has nothing to do with reception or communication or information. . . . the translator must assure the survival, *which is to say the growth*, of the original. Translation augments and modifies the original, which, insofar as it's living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow. It modifies the original even as it also modifies the translating language. This process—transforming the original as well as the translation—is the translation contract between the translation and the original text" (*The Ear of the Other* 122).

10 Andrzej Sosnowski spent the years 1989-1992 in Canada and Untied States of America. He worked in London (Ontario) at the University of Western Ontario as a research assistant of prof. Leon Surette, specializing in works of Ezra Pound. Sosnowski was supposed to write his PhD. thesis about Pound. Ontario Province granted Sosnowski with Ontario Graduate Scholarship that allowed him to travel through Canada, and visit the United States, mainly Chicago and San Francisco. He was seeing his poet-fellows, Kuba

in Sosnowski's volume fulfils the task of bringing American any closer to the reader; in fact, the texts move away from their alleged general subject, using a somewhat fictionalized, discursive, yet flat and ironic style typical of his poetry. *Nouvelles impressions* by Sosnowski consists of clear, "smoothed," stylistically polished images. The writer, faced with a translation effort by Ashbery, an effort that will ultimately produce a text that only imitates the intentions of the original creative formula, chose a different path, responding to the challenge made by Roussel in yet another manner. Sosnowski's efforts seem consistent with the principle of fidelity of the translation, used in a perverse manner and consistently with the guidelines for Henry-A. Zo.'s illustrations. *Nouvelles impressions d'Amerique* by Andrzej Sosnowski is not even trying to be an impossible translation-interpretation of *Nouvelles impression d'Afrique* of Roussel; still the book is a sort of a textual counterpart, a variation on the theme, parallel to Roussel's originally heterogeneous idea that complicates the relation between the fact of travelling and textuality. In this sense, we could say that Sosnowski's text is written "next to" the previous textual events, first Roussel's, then Ashebry's *Vermont Notebook*.

Konwój (Convoy) by Sosnowski, a prose poem published as *Konwój. Opera* (Convoy, An Opera) in 1999, is a good example of a hybrid variant of *the poet's prose*, which seems to be inspired by John Ashbery's experiment from the volume *Three Poems* (1972). Even a cursory discussion of the genre formula, on which *Konwój* is ostensibly based, brings to mind numerous associations with the creative strategy of Ashbery. According to the Polish poet, the meanings of the word "convoy" should designate themes that organize the images accumulating in the text. It becomes obvious, however, that whatever such accumulations do accrue in the text, they constitute only an imitation of a normal development of a story in the narrative or a coherent sequence of arguments in a discursive argumentation. *Konwój* also lacks a dominant poetic voice that could transform the entire presentation into a space of an autobiographical and self-referential confession. But the most disturbing element of *Konwój* is the poetic sentence, which sometimes replaces the verse, and other times – the paragraph. To better present the work of such a sentence, whose idea and structure were, in my opinion, taken by Sosnowski from Ashbery, I will first try to refer to its usages found in Ashbery's poem "The New Spirit," the first element in the cycle of *Three Poems*.

Ashbery's poetic sentences work performatively—I am not saying anything new here, as such thesis has been put forward many times by numerous critics who have dealt with the subject of the author's prolific poetic output.[11] Among the

Kozioł and Tadeusz Pióro, there. An outcome of these meetings was, among other things, the collective poem, *Dom bez kantów* (*House without Corners*) first published in USA in 1992. It can be called one of not many poetic manifestos of the Polish 1990s.

11 Performative—lively, motion-like, everchanging, and self-playing element in John Ashbery's poetics—was mentioned by many critics: starting from Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* ending with Michael Davidson's essay *The*

studies on *Three Poems*, the most useful one, for my purposes, is Stephan Fredman's discussion in his *Poet's Prose*. In his discussions on the form of the sentence, Fredman shows a way of thinking about sentence as a section of organised meaning, whose measure would correspond to a poetic line or stanza.[12] A similar theme was taken up in 1987 by Ron Silliman in his famous manifesto *The New Sentence* directed against structuralism—not only as a way of modelling and normativisation of styles of expression, or, consequently, reproduction of thinking patterns. Silliman's intention was Derridian; he talked about the need to go beyond looking at a sentence as an organised expression, whose sense, resulting from the allegedly underlying syntactic order overrides the actual semantic realisation. A play with the sentence notation—which would belong to the avant-garde legacy of Gertrude Stein[13]—in Silliman's case becomes a significant factor, using the possibilities of an often extensive or, conversely, fragmentary, shredded syntax that wriggles free of the conditioning of a closed expression with a clear meaning and fixed logical pattern.

Fredman, who follows a similar path, also perceives primarily such aspects of the new prose poem that are associated with the written sentence, and not a statement. A written sentence that plays with its own recording, using as significant the space of a paragraph or a whole page, also its graphic record, is just one of the issues that I find interesting. A prose sentence that acts as a poetic line, transposes onto syntactic structure the issues that are usually associated with formulation of meaningful images, reflections of life or reality—both in poetry and in prose. The poetic principle guiding "The New Spirit" could be a broadly understood mobile *metalepsis*—that is

Pleasures of Merely Circulating: John Ashbery and the Jargon of Inauthenticy (in *On the outskirts of Form*). Polish critics were also noticing Ashbery's performative method. Kacper Bartczak in *In Search for Communication and Community: The Poetry of John Ashbery* connects it to the vague personality of the Ashbery's poetical self.

12 In his essay about W. C. Williams's *Cora in Hell*, Fredman, analyzing one of the paragraphs of this prose poem, makes a statement exposing the poetical work within the sentences of prose poem, using the potential of the syntax, but in a counter-logical, counter-narrative way, usually associated with the syntactic order of prose: "Rather than taking the more or less logical order of hypotaxis, the sentences are inventively paratactic, often keeping in suspense the exact relationship between contiguous syntactic units. The compositional continuity forged is on the syntactic level, not the logical or narrative levels, and the ambiguity and propellant quality of the syntax combine to effect what Williams called the 'simultaneous' impression of his improvisations, the attempt to evoke a fleeting moment" (Fredman 30). See also the whole part *The Generative Sentence* within this unit.

13 The main focus in this paper is to show the relation of the generative sentences built in the text of Ashbery and the "sentential" work in Sosnowski's translation of *Three Poems* as well as in his *Konwój*, having a source of inspiration in Ashberian *poet's prose*. I leave aside the sources of inspirations that are recognized as important for Ashbery and for his *Three Poems* in particular: the prose of Gertrude Stein, the narratives of Henry James, and finally Auden's performative speech mode of "Caliban to the Audience," in *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944). See also: D. Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*, especially the chapter on *Three Poems* (2000).

a rhetorical move of reversal. In this case, it might be argued, we have to do with a formula representing the internal as the external and the external as the internal. In a system understood as a section of prose consisting of several sentences or one very long sentence (Fredman uses the term *paragraphs*), it could be understood in accordance with the Latin name *transsumptio* as a replacement of meanings (e.g. closer with more distant ones), here understood not as a result of poetic activity taking place outside the text but represented during the course of poetic narration in the form of a writing-as-process. *Metalepsis* is a trope still causing controversies; in Poland it is hardly ever used; its meaning and function described in Polish dictionaries of literary terms is played completely out by metonymy.[14] Metalepsis has been brought into the centre of attention by Harold Bloom who, in his *A Map of Misreading* (1975), defines it as a revisionary trope functioning in the style of major writers whose work absorbs a tradition and transforms it (102-103). More important however, from the Ashberian point of view, seems to be the meaning of "bridging" associated with this trope by Douglas Robinson in *The Translators Turn*, representing *metalepsis* as one of the modes of translation. Here, this trope is called, after Quintillian, an intermediate step, placing us between the term and the thing to which it is transferred, having no meaning in itself, but actually providing transition. Bloom states that it has no presence or time of its own—it is, in fact, for Bloom, an *agon* with time (*Map* 102; *Agon* 167-168). Robinson cites the work of Angus Fletcher on Kenneth Burke and compares *metalepsis* to a "baton" in a relay race, unendingly pointing towards the leading character of the leading question that is never to be answered:

> The key is the time, and specifically a medial location in time, a being (or finding yourself) in the middle of the time, after the beginning, before an end—or rather, more specifically, after what just came before and before what is about to come after. It is a being torn in two directions, toward the past that defined but deserted you and the future that eludes you as you reach toward it. It is—in Burke's terms—the bridging that never reaches the opposite bank, or—as Fletcher says—running 'toward infinitely receding finish line.' (Robinson 182)

The *metaleptic* transference of meaning that is never to be transferred, always finding a symbolic action of "handing the meaning over" instead of arriving at a final resting place, could be a fit depiction of Ashbery's narrative method in *Three Poems*, finding ever new ways of saying something that was never to be really exhaustively expressed or articulated. It represents the idea of the poet's prose narrative, with its always

14 Recently *metalepsis* came to life in Polish cultural and literary studies in the interpretation given by Gerard Genetteand applied to narratology—as a trope transgressing the boundaries between the world in which one tells and the world of which one tells, violating the barrier between the fiction and the world of the reader. This understanding of the trope narrows down the range of its meanings. Metalepsis is here quite narrowly understood (Swoboda, Karkiewicz).

writing "next to"—where the idea of getting the creative intent across, without the actual transference of the idea in its fullness ever taking place, turns out to be the only way of rendering the writer's experience that is in fact untranslatable. *Metalepsis* works like a story—compressing within itself a reality already absent or past, in order to suggest it as a description of a future that hasn't happened yet.

The figure of *metalepsis* would have an essentially prose formula, i.e. continuous, narrative, and involving constant telling of (here metaphorically understood) events, except that this is a narrative without a significant progression in terms of the development of themes and subjects, not to mention building up of specific plots. A similar continuous rule seems to exist in many longer poems by Ashbery, where this continuity may be the result of a repetitive use of diverse figures in a poetic story. Consequently, in "The New Spirit," *metalepsis* becomes not so much a trope, a single "change of meanings" (understood as a 'plot twist'), but rather a creative act, whose essence is primarily "transitive." If we look at the way sentences are put together in "The New Spirit," we will notice that initially they constantly intermingle, substitute, and mix references to two main movements—one that descends, perhaps into the "inner" reality, and one that goes outwards towards a jointly shared world. Throughout the poem we come across noun motifs that seemingly put the "story" in order but in fact do not combine into themes linked by any more recognizable poetic principle. A flower, tree, mountain, valley, river, moon, stars, winter, road, ship or dream, journey, progress—depending on the mode of getting inside or getting outside, these are more significant as metaphors of spiritual life than indices of narrative continuity. Alternatively, however, they are terms enabling formation of some real space. It is this space that becomes a medium, formed in real time during the reading of the text, which enables the existence of any narrative time or plot. The "story," then, that Ashbery's poem as narrative medium spins is of its own continuity: it remains repetitive and monotonous, with nostalgia and the sense of progression becoming its major persistent themes.

A centre of gravity for such mode of poetic narrative was actually provided by a single sentence: "To formulate oneself around this hollow, empty sphere . . . . To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out" (Ashbery 5). "Hollow, empty sphere" marks a certain continuity within a multi-layered, complex poem. It is visualized over and over again as "leaving," translated into Polish very accurately, though not very faithfully, as "opustka",[15] which is illustrated in the text in the form of blank spaces between paragraphs and gaps within individual lines. "Leaving" finds its metaleptic counterparts in "The middle of the journey, before the sands are reversed: a place of ideal quiet" (4); as "the narrowing-down feeling conflicts with the feeling of life's coming to a point, not a climax but a point" (8); as "that emptiness that was the only way you could express a thing?" (12) and so on. Around the hollow essence, which

15 "Opustka" in Polish language is a word meaning a part of the text that has been left out by mistake during the composition setting in the printing process. Unlike "a leaving," Polish "opustka" is a professional term, functioning only within the printing dictionary; it has no use in everyday life language.

can be treated both as a means of the story's ascending/descending and as the dead space between inhalation and exhalation, sentences unfold that branch out more and more: from a solitary walk in the mountains, to a joint trip by car, a common room and the wind inside it, to "the eternal disarray of sunrise" (43), "moon" that "had triumphed easily once again" (46), to the famous "horrible vision of the completed Tower of Babel" (50). "He thought he had never seen anything quite so beautiful as that crystallization into a mountain of statistics: out of the rapid movement to and fro that abraded individual personalities into a channel of possibilities" (48)—one might want to say, following the thought of the poem. The falseness of the narrative is proven in some places, but not by openly addressing the reader as is sometimes the case in classic moments of *parabasis* (by Genette described as *metalepsis*). The themes that preserve the "sentence-ness" of experience, for example placing us insistently inside the narrative, are discreet, mentioned in passing in the form of an intimate address to some "me" or "you" as in the following instances: "the everyday glamor of a 'personal life,' keeping a diary and so forth, is the outward sign of this progression that is built into us like the chain of breathing" (23); "the result that the dislocations come through to us as romantic episodes or chapters" (25); "the totality of its gradations had been breathed into the start" (25); "interrupted spiral of that other narration whose purpose was to instruct and entertain" (25). There is only one moment in the poetic story that remains self-referential in a direct manner and thus underlines own, "written" status, while at the same time it carries a certain instruction regarding the functioning of the proliferating text: "The motion of the story is moving though not // getting nearer" (12). So, in "The New Spirit" we are faced with a fairy tale, the queen of stories, that's been told this throughout all times, in all cities" (12), whose foreground—"distractions for the imagination, incitements to the copyist"—seemingly captivates our attention but in fact we are focused on the background, defined as "the thinness behind, the vague air" (12). Obliterating the boundary between, on the one hand, the inner materials that have been metaphorically processed and thus related to the external world, and, on the other, the materials which, although they derive from the external world, represent the memories of the author—this is the work of metalepsis. In *Three Poems* though, the dominant mode is not a referential one; the story to tell pretends only to form a background; otherwise it serves as a matter for proliferating the poet's thought, setting it in the rhythms of coming and going, highlighting the central character of an issue thought of as central which, however, never gets to be resolved.

The puzzling "relay race" movement, similar to breathing—of ascent and descent, immersion and surfacing, closing and opening—is presented in "The New Spirit" in many different ways. However, in Ashbery's work the most interesting things happen to sentences, or rather paragraphs. Inside them, we observe the alternating rhythm of descending and ascending. The descending movement—an escape from "the ball of contradictions. . . that is heavier than gravity bringing all down to the level"—happens in order to "think" (4) in

accordance with the (ascending) "dream of young and old alike moving together where the dark masses grow confused" (4-5). As we learn next, "We must drink that confusion, sample that other, concerted, dark effort that pushes. . . ," which would signal an interiorizing effort and movement that will push us onwards. This would, again, signal ascension, if it were not for the fact that we must break through "into the meaning of the tomb," which presents us with an ascending-descending contradiction, which Ashbery calls "the act is still proposed, before us" (5). In the system of this prose-poem, such contradiction stands for "this hollow, empty sphere" around which one needs to "express oneself" (5). The final example, with its contradictory splicing of both movements, the counterpoint of "your breath as it's taken in and shoved out," makes it impossible to decide whether the narrative turns inside, toward "hollow, empty sphere" one must "formulate oneself about", or if it moves outward—along "the dream of young and old alike moving" (5).

The text of the poem is shot through with temporal indeterminacy. Frequently, the figurative clusters seem to keep the time flowing in a seemingly contradictory manner in both directions. For example, the question of "And what about what was there before" (5) is unclear and it sends us back to the future oriented "act still proposed, before us," which, however, is inextricably bound up with the past dimension, the future act having being "proposed." The past and future are caught in a shuttling, oscillating rhythm of reciprocities: "This is shaped in the new merging [of the past memories]" (5), although it is also "something new": "Outside, can't you hear it, the traffic, the trees, everything getting nearer" (5).

To put the matter of this dance of sentence functions—or in Fletcher-Robinson's words: handing over the baton in a relay race—in more concise terms: tropes of pointing in the outward directions are constantly shifting to those pointing inward. We learn that: "There is nothing to be done, you must grow up, the outer rhythm more and more accelerate, past the ideal rhythm of the spheres that seemed to dictate you" (6). This theme obtains its consistent, logical continuation in a number of ways, as the narrative cycle of inhalations and exhalations leads us to increasingly complex issues. At the same time, one might notice that the verbs used here do not only refer to motion and constant metaphorical change. In a countermovement to the notion of constant change, we notice a composition rhythm infusing the level of sentences, then whole paragraphs, whose comings and goings suggest some order, a law. In thus rhythm the alternative directions of inhalation and exhalation, connected to descending and ascending, correspond, on a different level, to the prosodic rules of cadence and anti-cadence.

To sum up this dense network of exchanges, rhythms and counter-rhythms, one might say that the succession of sentences in "The New Spirit" is governed by (roughly) two rules. Firstly, we have to do with an ellipse which obtains its text image in the figures of a ball, a zone, an empty place, a leaving, a room, which also simply breaks the thread of the argument, enabling replacement of some meanings with

different ones. Secondly, we sense the mode of growing and retreating, which on the level of prosody is played out as the shift from cadence to anti-cadence. The prosodic tone, length of sounds, distribution of stresses in a single statement—in other words those elements which are used to build a verse of an ordinary poem—are here liberated, as the meaning of words results from the ordering of the syntax, from its associations with voice modulation, melodiousness of the poem—with what would remain associated with recitation. The prosodic undulation transits into the sphere of syntactic logic of sentences, following its sense of obligation that puts meaning in order but is unable to resolve it due to the arbitrary actions of the authorial self, which through those very actions lives in the text. There is a self-emerging within the medium of the text, a somebody who breathes this text in the cadenced/anti-cadenced rhythm of separate paragraphs and "leavings'. Of course, it takes place so clearly only at the very beginning; later on poetic and narrative rules in "The New Spirit" become again complicated.

What Ashbery does with sentence is absolutely fascinating in reading, and it is equally fascinating to observe how the text of "The New Spirit" acquires a new expression in Polish. The literary style presented by Sosnowski is unique in Polish poetry. One feature that it shares with Ashbery is the fluid, though often paradoxical and juxtapositional way of phrasing sentences, or even building a poetic text on the basis of a sentence that repeatedly exceeds the line boundary. This method uses the narrative energy that comes from a complex dialectic of meanings, various rhetorical figures, and the possibilities of a logical ordering of the contents in such a wat that it serves poetic purposes. We can also speak of the ability to expand the text through a compound-complex, although mostly paratactic, syntax of great figures of movement, playing out performatively the experience in the poem. Due to its inflected nature, Polish language is particularly suitable for making of long, multi-compound statements, especially hypotactic in form; on the other hand, the need to adapt to a specific grammatical rule means that a Polish long poetic sentence will be much more decisive in its meaning and will have a much more rigid structure. Connections between sentences are also more rigid, partly because of the need to determine the gender of pronouns. The text of *Three Poems* flows more easily in Polish, it is not as polysemantic and maybe more ornate than the language of the original. Contextual ambiguities must be replaced in translation with the rich Polish vocabulary, whose synonyms exhibit a plethora of shades of meaning which get integrated "into words." Let us compare two fragments, in which the principle of cadence is strengthened through the use of syntactic anti-gradation due to which connections of individual sentences systematically depreciate the meanings of what has already been written. First, a fragment of a paragraph/stanza by Ashbery:

> It's just beginning. Now it's started to work again. The visitation, was it more or less over. No, it had not yet begun, except as a preparatory dream which seemed to have the rough texture of life, but which dwindled into

> starshine like all the unwanted memories. There was no holding on to it. But for that we ought to be glad, no one really needed it, yet it was not utterly worthless, it taught us the forms of this our present waking life, the manners of the unreachable. (7)

In the Polish translation, the principle of multiple negations-corrections, suggestive of the speaker's hesitation about the phenomena he is describing, is maintained; here, too, the effect of conjunctions and particles is such that what we instinctively treat as a logical development of thoughts in a complex formulation consisting of more than one sentence turns out to be a string of denials, plot twists, and changes of the subject—so there is no way to determine the final sense of the whole. At the same time, we can see how a suggestion of such "whole" is built; a consistent structural principle becomes more important than the meaning of the words themselves. However, in the Polish version inter-sentence relationships must be disambiguated. In the section of "The New Spirit" that reads "The visitation, was it more or less over" (7), the pronoun "it" may refer to the subject of the declarative statement, which hides an additional question—but it may also create a relationship with previous uses of this pronoun, which introduces the layer of a strange, impersonal, yet continuous, story of some indefinable existence. In the Polish version, in order to keep a relationship with the subtle link in a section of Ashbery's poem ending with "we must prepare, now, to try to live" (8), the translator replaced the word "visitation" with its English synonym "rehearsal" (*próba*), to which leads the "preparatory dream" (*przygotowawczy sen*). The Polish equivalents of "visitation" (*wizyta, wizytacja*) have a limited range of meanings. However, the feminine gender of the Polish word *próba* necessitated a disambiguation of the pronoun "it," a move that further organises the meaning of the sentence.

As we can see, the flickering of Ashbery's text is very creatively extended in the Polish text. However, as a result, the Polish text appears to be less cut by sudden changes of subjects and predicates of sentences, interconnected by seemingly correct, logical bonds of syntax. The story seems to be perhaps more flowing, transitions between sentences more logical, and the narrative itself, also through selection of words particularly liked by Sosnowski, acquires qualities that characterize the poet's poem in Polish. Perhaps *Three Poems* is the actual source of the adventure in *Konwój*.

Konwój is a poem largely reminiscent of *Three Poems* by Ashbery, but written entirely differently; it was released together with *Cover* and the cycle *Opera*, which includes a prose poem in instalments, *Bebop de luxe*, which does not have much in common with the essence of the discussed work. I would also like to focus for a moment on the phenomenon of translation, or transition of the creative convention—whose principles could be in perfect harmony with the meaning of the word from which the narrative of the poem stems, its initial moment of indeterminacy: "Nikt nie wie, kiedy zaczął się konwój" ("No one knows when the convoy has started"; Sosnowski 15). In the final footnote appended to the text, the author expands the

semantic range of the word "konwój," repeatedly used in the closing lines of the poem, fully informing us about the meanings that the word evokes in different languages.[16] All those meanings and expressions used to convey them could be associated with "The New Spirit," in which some of the leading themes concern travel, exchange, communication, passing on the baton in the relay race of communication, and the multiplicity of languages itself. Fredman refers to the method of poetic narrative, often used in Sosnowski's works as well, as "translative."[17] Extending the life of the foreign text in completely different cultural and linguistic conditions is an element of the translation strategy that links Sosnowski's *Konwój* with "The New Spirit" or, more broadly, with the style of *Three Poems*. In other words, the narrative progression of the poem is closely integrated with the entire multilevel history and semantic structure of the word "convoy"—with its etymology, meanings, possible poetic "events", that is its plot twists and multiple rephrasing. The narrative stems from, and develops over, a survey of certain uses of the language, and not from consequences of a logical progression of the implicit story or quasi-essayistic argument. Hence, as in "The New Spirit," the often surprising associations of the written words and progressions of syntactic patterns seem to designate a certain theme that organises images in the text by only imitating the development of a story in the narrative mode. However, *Konwój* also lacks a dominant poetic voice that could fully substantiate any autobiographical dimension. This trait of the Polish writer has been typically associated by Polish critics with the wider concept of the death of the author, a well-known post-structuralist theorem that only became popular in Poland in the 1990s. However, the lack of the dominant, central authorial subjectivity in Ashbery's poetic prose acquires a different tinge when viewed, in a reading suggested by Fredman in his *Poet's Prose,* from the standpoint of the Emersonian poetics. Fredman points out the Emersonian and democratic backgrounds of the American poet's prose spirit, i.e. a kind of egalitarianism and collective subjectivity operating in the structure of Ashbery's poems, a characteristic enhanced by the poet's own frequent declaration

16 The meanings include: to accompany, to lead, to see off, to steer a vehicle and people, to provide armed escort, to hand over, to carry, to deliver by car; bypass, guard on the way, funeral procession, wedding procession, medium of communication, guarded commodity, caravan, to transport, to pass on, make off with something, bequeath to posterity, to express something.

17 Fredman, reminding the famous text of Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator* (1923), contrasts, in quite a sublime, typically Benjaminian style, the goals of creation and translation, assuming that the second one applies much better to the purposes of Ashbery's poetical prose. The translative intention is supposed to be always at work in search for an original language which is understood not as "spontaneous, primary, graphic" but as "derivative, ultimate, ideational": "Ashbery's sentences are much more ideational than they are concrete or graphic; rather than presenting the primary sensations of experience, he presents the experience of experience, the ultimate sensations and ideas one encounters when trying to gauge experience (how it happens and how it changes)" (Fredman 126).

in interviews that his sense of his own identity was far from firmly established. The constantly changing, flickering subjective roles could be a source of fascination for the reader, for whom the primary tradition was Polish modern lyric poetry, based essentially on a traditional category of confession, for which a play with subjective masks was and achievement in experimental prose rather than something that one might expect even in avant-garde poetry.

However, of particular interest for us should be the way in which *Konwój* differs from Ashbery's poem, constituting a kind of variation on the narrative and poetic concepts of the American poet. As I have already noted, translation shows that the Polish syntax demands the use of certain working decisions. Due to its meandering, counter-logical, associational narrative, "Konwój" can be easily compared to *Three Poems* in the way it plays with the sentence: the semantic values are undermined by syntax, while constant multiplication of sentences, completely unnecessary from the point of view of the economy of information, enhances the effect of repetitive pronouns, conjunctions, and particles. However, in Ashbery's text, the whole sphere associated with formulation of specific themes that could become arranged in cause and effect sequences is put in the background, subordinated to more abstracted progress of some formula of random *poliloquium*. In Sosnowski's case, in turn, meandering, polymorphism, and variation in the narrative is obtained not so much by continuous replacement of the topics of individual sentences, but rather by continuous breaking of the narrative threats in which he tries to conduct a story, which actually cannot really start. In this way, the main motive of the "convoy" that has been announced from the beginning, which is to set off on an unspecified journey and for a largely unknown purpose, receives a constantly refined and renewed clarification through adhering to the circumstances and the conditions of that journey. Those conditions, in turn, also initiate the consecutive fictionalized narratives which by themselves get us nowhere, only amplifying the mood of expectation and tension. Going back to the conclusions associated with subtle complications of the translation of "The New Spirit" into Polish we can say that Polish syntax does not allow so many different connections, which, although normative, are semantically illogical. In order to create an equally branched and diversified narrative as the one found in Ashbery's narrative, whose complications and progression depend exclusively on the way the sentence is written, one can reach for the proliferation of the themes of the narrative, as Sosnowski does in *Konwój*. Sentences with a rather rigid syntax that disambiguates interrelations of words may remain fruitfully unfaithful to the story only through the strategy which consists of the multiplication of events, facts, and images—an incremental layering of small stories in places where in an ordinary narrative text we would have place for a quick comparison or condensation through metaphor. In other words, the micro-stories, prolific themes accompanying the frozen story of the "convoy," function in a poetic order, similarly to repetitive, layered syntactic structures of Ashbery. "Leavings" could be a kind of birthmark for *Konwój* and the Polish translation of "The New Spirit," also playing a significant role in Sosnowski's

poem. Another similarity between these poems is found in the way of using elements indicative of the writerly character of the text, the self-referential element. In Sosnowski's case, once again, such elements are used to change the plot of the story. An example of such technique is the adventures of a question mark that a moment ago was part of the sentence "CONVOY IS HERE?" A common aspect of Sosnowski's and Ashbery's texts would be "undulation" of the poem, here transiting from anti-cadence ascents to the lowering cadence, accompanied by a lowering of the register of the narrated micro-stories. Finally, *Konwój* develops motives which in a more discursive poem by Ashbery serve as the background. In the poet's own words, these are "distractions for the imagination, incitements to the copyist" (12). In Sosnowski's poem they become the basic threads of the breaking narrative of multiple themes—replacing English multiple sentences. Here, the most prominent figure would be, of course, a "ship", whose function in the "The New Spirit" is completely marginalised, only fulfilling the role of a metaphor supporting an idea:

> therefore we are to travel abreast, twin riders dazzled and disintegrating under the kaleidoscopic performance of the night sky this time, we too projected sideways in advancing like waves pushed away from the keel of a ship, rejoining in this way the secret of the movement forward that made possible this full-circle absorption of the voyage and its brilliant phenomena. (24)

In the poetic novel by Sosnowski, which is also a journey, although more explicitly gliding over surfaces, the ship turns out to be one of the most important figures of convoying.

Text translation: Marcin Bieszczanin

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Mikołaj Wiśniewski

The Matrix of Poetry: James Schuyler's Diary

Abstract: In his essay Mikołaj Wiśniewski presents an unpublished 1962 diary entry and two chapters from an unfinished novel found by the author when conducting research in the James Schuyler archive of the Mandeville Special Collections Library at UCSD. Wiśniewski goes on to show how Schuyler experimented with the diary form long before he started keeping a diary in the late 1960s (the published *Diary of James Schuyler* starts with 1967) and how the practice always served him as a starting point or "training ground" for other projects, be it a novel or the late long poems of the 1970s and 1980s. The author also comments on Schuyler's poetics of the quotidian and the boring, contrasting it with Frank O'Hara's focus on moments of exceptional emotional and perceptual intensity.

Keywords: James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, New York school, diary, everydayness

In his book *The Last Avant-Garde*, David Lehman stated (somewhat provocatively perhaps) that O'Hara's death enabled James Schuyler to "take over [his friend's] poetical project and to adapt it to his own sensitivity" (45). I would like to consider Lehman's proposition by looking at Schuyler's long poems—all of which were written after O'Hara's death and seemed to have been inspired by Schuyler's growing fascination with "the art of the diary," with everydayness, the quotidian and the boring. Conversely, O'Hara was always interested in the electrifying detail, the surprising diversity of city life, and in avant-garde experimentation, or, as Tadeusz Pióro puts it, in "various forms of rhetorical excess" (31), from "Second Avenue" to his late masterpiece "Biotherm." Everydayness and the language of everydayness made O'Hara uneasy, anxious. As he often stressed, he wrote *against boredom*. In the prose-poem "Meditations in an Emergency" he states for instance: "I am bored but it's my duty to be attentive" (*Collected* 197). When asked whether he thought it was "important to be new," he answered: "No, I think it's very important not to be bored, though" (Pióro 99). O'Hara seems to be dismissing here the Poundian „make it new" slogan—perhaps because he was aware that *novelty* is too often fetishized and commodified, and (to quote Walter Benjamin) that it "is a quality independent of [any] intrinsic value"—but there is little doubt that O'Hara was devoted to making things new in poetry, specifically in the sense of the avant-garde ethos of constantly probing the limits of form and language. In fact, when O'Hara compliments Kenneth Koch what he says is: "Mr. Koch intends to 'make it new'" (Pióro 99). Similarly, he praises Pollock's action paintings because they are something "new in the history of Western civilization" (*Chronicles* 26).

Returning now to the relationship between the poetry of O'Hara and Schuyler, I think the simplest way of juxtaposing the two would be to say that, whereas in O'Hara's

poetry "Everything / suddenly honks" ("A Step Away from Them" *Collected* 257), in Schuyler's "Everything chuckles and creaks / sighs in satisfaction" ("Today" *Poems* 26). What I mean by this is that, in contrast to O'Hara's focus on moments of exceptional emotional intensity (the elation of "everyone and I stopped breathing" (*Collected* 325), but also profound anxiety, for example in the poem "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" which ends with the following sudden interjection: "Shit / on the soup, let it burn. So it's back. / You'll never be mentally sober" *Collected* 159), Schuyler tends to be emotionally more subdued, or perhaps more ironic about his own feelings; at least, this is what "chuckle" seems to imply. Elation in Schuyler is *quieter,* so to speak (it's just a sigh, not "breathlessness"); similarly, desperation is more resigned (as in Schuyler's exquisite poem "Afterward"). What is more, the verb "creak," as opposed to "honk" in O'Hara's "A Step Away from Them," suggests a preoccupation with things (or emotional states) which are not *singular*, but repetitive and in fact slightly tedious. Schuyler (especially in his later poems) is bent on articulating the experience of everydayness; on representing "things as they are," and not making them new.

In an early piece (from 1954) called "Four Poems," dedicated to Frank O'Hara, Schuyler unabashedly imitates O'Hara's style. At one point, in fact, he says: "Oh shit (excuse / me, Frank, for stealing your stuff)" (*Poems* 68). Indeed, the similarities are striking: the opening of the poem, in which the lyrical subject is precisely located in time and place, brings to mind the first lines of O'Hara's famous elegy for Billie Holiday (although "The Day Lady Died" was written seven years later). Schuyler writes: "It's 4:30 in Cambridge // and I have a slight headache / on one side only just / enough for a drink" (*Poems* 67). The poem then develops in a characteristically O'Haraesque rhythm of free associations, reminiscences, fleeting impressions and trivial sensations (Schuyler is slightly hung-over; O'Hara is sweating in the July sun). Both poets focus on what O'Hara called "my personal / mess" ("A Poem in Envy of Cavalcanti", *Collected* 35); on simple occurrences of everyday life (such as having a drink, a "malted" in O'Hara's case, in Schuyler's—"malt whisky" is more likely). The dominant tone of both poems may be described as "local and intimate" (to use another O'Hara phrase, from "You are Gorgeous and I'm Coming"). What interests me here most, however, is a curious declaration in Schuyler's "Four Poems" which seems to point to a later development in his writing. He states: "Anyway what I really like best / I guess is just driving in a car / the turnpikes are simply grand / and so BORING" (*Poems* 68).

Schuyler's fondness for the BORING is reflected in his life-long fascination with diaries, not necessarily diaries of famous people and writers (for example Virginia Woolf's *Diary* which was one of Schuyler's favorite reads), not only diaries affording insight into a creative artist's mind, or those dealing with remarkable events, but in particular those which simply recorded the monotonous flow of everyday existence, for instance James Woodforde's *Diary of a Country Parson: 1758-1802*, the diary of the reverend Francis Kilvert, 1870-1879, or—Schuyler's favorite book—*The Diary of George Templeton Strong*. Schuyler's own diary will no doubt disappoint anyone interested in the poet's opinions on art and other writers. It eschews confessionalism,

intellectual analysis, and instead carefully registers such BORING phenomena as the weather or everyday chores. It is full of *ad hoc* remarks pointing to the moment of inscription, repetition of day-to-day events, observations of humdrum occurrences. The vehicle of the occasional metaphor is always some mundane phenomenon (say, the sound of the ocean may be compared to the sniveling of someone who has a runny nose). Here is a characteristic entry from the very beginning of Schuyler's diary: "Snow, enough wind to rattle the shutters, cold, rather bitterly so. A few minutes ago there were bright blue shadows—Prussian blue, I think—and the forsythia, which in dull winter weather has a rich hibernating glow, looked like a lifeless snarl of hair from someone's comb" (*Diary* 27).

The Diary of James Schuyler, published in 1997 and edited by Nathan Kernan, is in fact comprised of two separate diaries: one kept between the years 1967-1971, and the other between 1981-1990. Kernan explains the long break between the two diaries by saying that the seventies were a difficult decade for the poet who had serious health problems, suffered mental breakdowns, found himself in financial dire straits, lived in shelters and shabby hotels. However, during the same decade, he published three volumes of poetry, a novel (*What's for Dinner?*) and finally the Pulitzer prize winning, 50-page long "The Morning of the Poem." It seems then that Schuyler did not abandon his diary, but channeled its energies into other artistic projects. The diary served Schuyler as a sort of training ground for the ideas, themes and formal solutions he would pursue both in his poetry and prose. We can see this on the example of a diary entry which is not included in the published *Diary of James Schuyler*, but which survives in the Schuyler Archive of Special Collections at UC San Diego. Schuyler tried keeping a diary before he started doing so more systematically in the late sixties. The first page of an earlier diary (from 1962) in the UCSD archive reads as follows: "This is the third diary I have started but it is the first one I will not slip up on, i. e. I will write in it every day and if I slip up and miss a day due to having to go to bed or a prior social engagement that will not stop me. I will plunge on ahead and bring it up to date. / First about me. On the other hand first about the diary" (Schuyler Papers Box 6 Folder 23). The gesture at the end of this passage is quite typical for Schuyler's poetry: although it is very personal, he tries to keep himself out of the picture, refuses any sort of confessional disclosure, and instead he focuses on the objects around him. He goes on, in the diary, to describe in detail the notebook he is writing in and other notebooks in which he kept his previous diaries. The entry ends in another evasion. Schuler says: "Who I am will have to wait until tomorrow." The diary breaks off here, but not necessarily because Schuyler "slipped up" so soon.

If the arrangement of the unpublished papers in the archive folder is not coincidental (and it seems that it is not), Schuyler used the diary entry as a starting point for an unfinished novel. The title of its first chapter, "The Next Day," suggests that it is a continuation of the first page of the diary. Indeed, certain descriptions in the chapter are very similar to the observations of "weather effects" in the later diary, for example: "Gray under gray, clouds, clouds, or the bottoms and frayings of clouds

dangling wetly" (Schuyler Papers Box 6 Folder 23).

The point I want to make is that, whenever Schuyler started keeping a diary, he would attempt to develop it into an independent project (whether poem, novel or short story), in which, however, he wanted to preserve the diarist's "flat style" (as he called it in reference to his novel *What's for Dinner*? The same urge to poetically utilize the diary took hold of him soon after he had started keeping one again in 1967. This is the moment when Schuyler began writing *long* poems, written in lines *longer* than anything he had tried before. In one of those, called "A Vermont Diary," he actually included excerpts from his diary entries for November 1970. At the time, however, Schuyler's method was limited to interjecting short lyrics (in the style of William Carlos Williams) into the prose passages. Later on, in his three major long poems: "Hymn to Life," "The Morning of the Poem," and "A Few Days," he accomplished a deeper fusion between poetry and diaristic prose. All three poems are accounts of particular days or periods in the poet's life. Their time frame is always indicated. In "Hymn to Life," it is early spring, March 1972, to be exact, when Schuyler went on a trip to Washington D.C. with John Ashbery and Anne Dunn. In fact, the poem is, among other things, an account of that trip. The 50-page long piece "The Morning of the Poem" was written during Schuyler's visit to his mother in July and August of 1976. Schuyler therefore wrote, on average, one page a day, and the rhythm of the diary, the scrupulous day-to-day account of his visit, is what gives the poem its unity. "A Few Days" might be seen as a continuation of "The Morning of the Poem." It too was begun when Schuyler was staying with his mother three years later, in late 1979, and it ends when Schuyler receives the news of his mother's death in March 1980. Although there is quite a lot of reminiscing in the poems, Schuyler constantly returns to the temporal horizon of dailiness—the DAY is the basic component of time, perhaps its only dimension, and Philip Larkin's "Days are where we live" would serve as an adequate epigraph for all three of Schuyler's long poems. This, of course, is connected with a typically diaristic gesture which we find in the poems, one which insists on the simultaneity of poetic inscription and feeling, observation or reflection. Time and again Schuyler draws attention to what is happening at the moment he is writing the poem, or, to put it differently, it is the moment, or the course of the day, that determines what finds its way into the poem. Here are three such instances: "[a] phone calls and a door slams / A couple passes, jogging. A dog passes, barking / And running. My nose runs, a little" (from "Hymn to Life"); "Sit down to coffee and the news: the Republican Convention, rapes / and muggings" (from "The Morning..."); (from "A Few Days") "I / started this poem in August and here it is September / nineteenth" (from "A Few Days") (*Poems* 214-223).

Schuyler's long poems might also be described as intimate inscriptions of the fleeting moment. In one of the first reviews of "The Morning of the Poem," Stephen Yenser wrote that "Schuyler could call many of his poems *I Sit Down to Type*" (120), in reference to O'Hara who said that he *liked playing on his typewriter after breakfast*. A less enthusiastic reviewer, Hugo Williams, put it differently: "Schuyler—he says—

has no qualms about writing down the first (or last) thing that comes to his mind" (707). The critic suggests that Schuyler's peculiar chronicles of everyday life lack any sort of unity; that poetry is reduced to a sterile accumulation of random observations and that, in Andrew Motion's words, "it transforms nothing." Therefore, instead of "the well-wrought urn" the reader is handed "a jotter by the ashtray" (the title of Hugo Williams's review). Andrew Motion's assessment of Schuyler's poetry is the most severe: "Schuyler," he says, "has always sought to make a virtue of observing random details and attitudes as simply as possible . . . The point of this style is that it transforms nothing. And that . . . is also its problem. Sentimentality, mawkishness, stupidity and boastfulness are all writ large—so much so that they dwarf the occasional intelligent remark or moment of lyrical intensity. . . . The consequence," Motion adds, "is . . . pulverizing boredom for the reader" ("Some New Strain" 20). No doubt, one of the things that Motion must have found BORING, and, at the same time, one of those diaristic aspects of Schuyler's long poems, is their repetitive character. Instead of introducing something new in each part of his poem, Schuyler returns to the same: the same events, the same daily occurrences, the same (or almost the same) descriptions of commonplace objects or sights. The fact that the poet repeats himself so often might be seen as a proof that he indeed writes down the first (or last) thing that comes to his mind, or that he is distracted and does not remember that he has already said something very similar. In "Hymn to Life," for example, Schuyler describes the various ailments he and his friends suffered from in adolescence: "One of us / Had piles, another water on the knee, a third a hernia—a strangulated / Hernia is one of life's less pleasant bits of news" (*Poems* 214), and, only two pages later, he writes about „pain, ordinary household pain, / Like piles, or bumping against a hernia. All the signs are set for A OK / A day to visit the National Gallery—Velázquez, Degas—but, and / What a but, with water on the knee 'You'll need a wheelchair'" (217).

Schuyler also returns to the same images, quite ordinary ones, as if he wanted to grasp them in a more accurate way, but never in 13 different ways (as was the case with Stevens's blackbirds). One such recurring image in "Hymn to Life" is that of raindrops on a window screen. Schuyler offers three different versions of it (four, if we include one more description in which rain and raindrops are substituted for sunlight and particles of dust): 1) "A window to the south is rough with raindrops / That, caught in the screen, spell out untranslatable glyphs"; 2) "The wind shakes the screen / And all the raindrops on it streak and run in stems"; 3) "It rains again: the screen / And window glass are pebbled by it"; 4) "light becomes entrapped in a dusty screen, masking out / The view into the depths of the garage" (*Poems* 214-223). In "A Few Days," the recurrent image is that of a balcony (at Chelsea Hotel where Schuyler lived in the 80s) with a "wrought iron [balustrade] in shapes of flowers" (*Poems* 323).

Repetition in Schuyler's long poems is definitely NOT a matter of distraction or sloppiness. It is a *method*: Schuyler is probing the limits of repetition, so to speak.

He is doing so in order to capture in his poetry the diarist's mode of attention, that careful registering of monotonous everydayness. In this he resembles a painter who returns to the same landscape, the same set of objects, in order to polish his technique by tackling (over and over again) a well-known theme or motif. His intention is to make things more intimately familiar, not to make them new, i.e. *defamiliarize* them.

Schuyler never commented on his poetic pursuits, or on the philosophical outlook behind his poetry, in any comprehensive essay or manifesto. He was even more evasive and reticent than O'Hara when it came to explaining what it was that he was *after* in his poetry ("it's all in the poems," O'Hara said famously in his mock manifesto "Personism"). But just like in O'Hara's case, certain clues can be gathered from Schuyler's art writings.

That is why, to conclude, I propose to consider two passages from Schuyler's essay "An Aspect of Fairfield Porter's Paintings" as veiled statements about his own poetics. In fact, the first may be seen as referring both to painting *and* poetry, because Schuyler is invoking (and at the same time—distancing himself from) Ezra Pound's famous pronouncement: "[Fairfield Porter's] natural subjects [are] the people and places he knows best. It is doubtful that he would paint well a subject with which he was not well acquainted. . . . He once said to a painter who was thinking about moving away from a familiar landscape to an unknown one: 'Any place becomes interesting when you get to know it.' He is very much an artist for whom art is *not* (to lift one of Ezra Pounds's chewier *bonnes-bouches* from a current ad) 'news that stays news'" (*Selected* 13).

In the second passage, by substituting the word "poems" for "paintings," we get as close to a Schuyler manifesto as possible: "What we are given [in these poems] is an aspect of everyday life, seen neither as a snapshot nor an exaltation. [Their] art is one that values the everyday as the ultimate, the most varied and desirable knowledge. What [these poems] celebrate is never treated as an archetype: they are concentrated instances. They are not a substitute for religion, they are an attitude toward life" (16).

Schuyler does not wish to exalt the mundane and the quotidian in a manner which may be associated with the early poetry of William Carlos Williams (hence, I believe, the rejection of the term "snapshot," often used to describe Williams's of imagism). The emphasis is not so much on the poetry of dailiness, as on the dailiness of poetry: poetry understood as an everyday practice required to sustain that attitude to life which Schuyler has in mind—one of sustained attention. The only dogma it adheres to is the one formulated by Frank O'Hara in an essay on Edwin Denby: "attention equals Life, or is its only evidence" (*Standing* 184).[1]

1 Attention in Schuyler is also, of course, a mode of resistance, "the last antidote," says Douglas Crase, "to organized informational thuggery" (235). Andrew Epstein's recent book, whose title, *Attention Equals Life*, is taken from the O'Hara essay I quote here, offers a compelling reading of Schuyler's poetry as a "response to the crisis of attention roiling contemporary culture" and looks at the way "it forces us to think about the ways in which power and capitalism shape and affect tiny details of everyday life, the micropolitics of daily interaction and economic equality, the reality of everyday sexism

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and racism, the effects of consumerism and advertising on our minds" (11). Similarly, Wayne Koestenbaum notes that although "Adorno would have deplored Schuyler's gorgeous sentimentality, [he] would have appreciated his resistance to the received and the manufactured" (99). The most interesting discussion of Schuyler's camp attention to the refuse of consumer culture is to be found in Christopher Schmidt's brilliant study *The Poetics of Waste*. I wrote about these issues in an essay analyzing Schuyler's novel *What's for Dinner?* (see: "Prozac życia rodzinnego" ["The Prose(ac) of Family Life"] in *Literatura na Świecie*, no. 11-12, 2012, p. 339-356). Within the limited scope of this essay, I did not go into the possible philosophical readings of Schuyler's everydayness, but it is important to note that such interpretations, in the light of Wittgenstein's philosophy of ordinary language or Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, have been put forward, for example by Epstein in *Attention Equals Life*.

Tadeusz Pióro

Autobiography and the Politics and Aesthetics of Language Writing

Abstract: The article begins with a description of *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography*, which was written by ten Language poets from San Francisco, focusing on the paradoxes implied by "collective autobiography." It then proceeds to close readings of three contributions to this work, by Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian, examining the relations between poetics, politics, gender and ideology their texts bring to the fore. Harryman anecdotally describes her critical stance towards the Romantic lyric and its enduring influence on some avant-garde American poets (Robert Creeley is the victim in question), while Hejinian, combining personal reminiscences of political protest with attempts at situating it within a tradition of critical thought, from Adorno through Said to Debord, makes a case for the relevance of Language writing to a future remaking of the *polis*. The article is, in the main, descriptive, not critical or polemical; the only doubt I voice in it concerns the difficulty involved in reading Language poems and the uncertain status of pleasure such difficulty implies, for surely it is for the sake of future pleasures we would like to have the *polis* reinvented, or at least improved?

Keywords: Language Writing; San Francisco Language Poets; (Collective) Autobiography; Aesthetics/Politics; Gender Politics; UC Berkeley strike 2009; Robert Creeley, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian; The Grand Piano coffeehouse, San Francisco

The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography was written by Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Mandel, Ted Pearson, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten between 1998 and 2010. Its ten volumes number over 1600 pages sextodecimo. Each volume contains one contribution by each of the ten authors. The title *Grand Piano* comes from the name of a coffeehouse in San Francisco, "where between 1976 and 1979 the authors variously organized and took part in a reading and performance series that became a venue for many in the literary community to present and hear new work." No less important than this titular reference is the announcement that follows it: these ten volumes are an experiment in something that, to my knowledge, has not been done before, certainly not on such a grand scale. The notion of a collective autobiography seems to go against the definition of the genre, with its implicit emphasis on individual authorship. *The Grand Piano* also breaks with the usual autobiographical practice of recounting the author's life from birth to the time of writing. Although there are partial accounts of each poet's life in these volumes, it would be hard to assemble them into a well-rounded life story. Instead, we have at least as much analysis and reflection on aesthetic and political issues as recounting of biographically significant

events. To a large extent, these are intellectual autobiographies, and should be of interest to most readers of avant-garde poetry.

Language writing became known as such in the 1970's, although texts that could be classified under this rubric date back to the beginning of the 20th century and Gertrude Stein's experiments in poetry and prose. Stein's, however, was a solitary voice, appreciated when all things avant-garde were in vogue, but later dismissed and marginalized for several decades. Yet by the mid-seventies, there were enough poets developing on her insights for a movement to be definable and geographically localizable, with its main nodes in New York and San Francisco. The poets who lived in San Francisco at that time were seriously committed to collaborative work, but also involved in creating and maintaining a group identity. *The Grand Piano* may be seen as a recent effort at retaining this identity, while also pushing it ever so slightly in the direction of myth or legend. Yet by no means should we consider this a myth of some golden age: as Ted Pearson recalls, "the period in question began at the end of the postwar 'economic miracle' and at the onset of a long and devastating recession, deepened by the astronomic debt and social misery that resulted from the pursuit of imperial ambition, if not yet, as is now clear, overtly global hegemony" (II 21).[1] He goes on to quote Barrett Watten's remarks on that time: "The culture we lived in was fragmented, ugly and incoherent. . . . There was no money, and few agreeable jobs." There was, however, Pearson writes, a "surfeit of rage" that "led all too often to self-destructive symptoms of emotional exhaustion, chronic depression, and psychic stress." He also notes that "this was the moment when a continuing erosion of civil and human rights began . . . when the nation's 'unlimited drift / to the right' emerged from conservative think tanks and fundamentalist pulpits, leading . . . to the Reagan revolution of 1980 . . . and continuing under the twin signs of 'compassionate conservatism' and unrepentant neoliberalism to this day" (II 22). Pearson concludes this recital of woes with Barrett Watten's "wry injunction from those years, 'Start writing autobiography'" (II 23).

I am uncertain whether Watten was implying that things would get better, or much, much worse, that is, whether the future function of autobiographical writing would be to serve as merely a memento of hard times, or as a form of tragic witnessing. Yet the fact that his advice suggests a strong functional aspect of autobiography carries over to *The Grand Piano*, a project he initiated, coordinated and saw into print over a period of twelve years. The work is, among other things, a genealogy of West Coast Language writing, as well as a kind of canonization, albeit in a sense that runs counter to the one practiced in academia. If there is a central, canonized figure in *The Grand Piano*, it is not a person, but the coffeehouse itself, a site of symbolic exchange. Ted Pearson appositely quotes King Charles' II description of coffeehouses as "places where the disaffected meet and spread scandalous reports

1 Parenthetical references to *The Grand Piano* indicate volume number, followed by page numbers.

concerning the conduct of His Majesty and his Ministers" (I 63-4). *The Grand Piano* memorializes a historical process involving a series of literary events which resulted in the creation of a community (all of the Grand Piano readings are listed at the end of each volume). The autobiographical texts it consists of were made possible in part by this process. Thus the coffeehouse is not merely a symbolic origin of the genealogy of the San Francisco Language poets, but also the actual origin of their *necessarily* collective autobiography.

The use of the term "autobiography" is just as provocative as the mock-canonization of *The Grand Piano*. If we were to apply strict generic distinctions, the work would have to be called a group memoir, or something to that effect, yet without the "bio" root, that is, without the Greek word for "life" in it. As it stands, the title suggests that the lives of the poets in question had their symbolic beginning at The Grand Piano and were possible thanks to everything this site of exchange made possible, thus marking the passage from individual to collective *bios*. Obviously, the conventions of an individual autobiography cannot be adhered to in such a work.[2] My purpose in this paper is to examine the affinities between this experimental autobiographical project and the poetic theories and practices of its authors.

I must add right away that this has already been done, directly or obliquely, by each of the "Grand Pianists," and all I might hope to do is provide a synthesis of their reflections on the issue at hand. Yet even a synthesis would be hard to arrive at in a brief essay, since each poet chose to focus on a different aspect of the relation of their current autobiographical project to his or her own poetry as well as to Language writing in a broader sense. So instead of making general claims, I will limit my remarks to entries by Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian. I have chosen these poets because their contributions to the book clearly, directly and fairly succinctly refer to the oppositional politics and aesthetics of Language writing, revealing the breadth of its concerns, as well as Language writers' alertness to the political implications of any and all aesthetic judgments or presuppositions. While Harryman foregrounds gender issues, Hejinian's main concern is the influence of neoliberalism on civic awareness and responsibility. In each case, the authors are personally involved in the tensions and conflicts they describe.

Some of the volumes of *The Grand Piano* appear to have a guiding theme, although not every entry in these volumes addresses it explicitly. The main theme of the first one is love. If indeed love is what we actually talk about when we talk

2 Antoine Cazé's incisive and extensive discussion of the formal aspects of the books that make up *The Grand Piano* should be mentioned here, since it lucidly presents the tangle of theoretical problems raised by the experimental autobiographical *project* as such, as well as the evolving approaches of the authors to its realization, and, just as importantly, the final (?), material form it now has. My casual remarks on these issues merely scratch their surface. Antoine Cazé, "Intimate Communities: The Theory of Practice," in *Theory That Matters: What Practice After Theory*, ed. Kacper Bartczak and Małgorzata Myk (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

about poetry, Carla Harryman's essay suggests ways of making this statement less of a truism by placing its main components—love and poetry—within a specific, historical context, and also by bringing in talk, understood as a discourse on poetry, from time to time assuming the form of literary criticism. She begins by linking love to war and manhood, only to point out the anachronism of this connection, due to the increasing participation of women in warfare. She then brings in her employment at the American Poetry Archive and Poetry Center, where the most frequently reproduced audio recording was of Robert Creeley's "The Door," a poem from his important, early book, *For Love*. Finally, Harryman recalls meeting Creeley for the first time at a party and feeling uncomfortable as he keeps asking her "Where are you from?" In addition, she mentions two seemingly minor events involving this book. A colleague tells her how during his military service in Vietnam, in 1971, a helicopter dropped some books at his camp. When he could finally get at them, there was only one left—Creeley's *For Love.* Also in 1971, Harryman was in Paris with a college friend, who "upon parting gave [her] a copy of *For Love,* saying she had been disappointed by Creeley's poetry" (I 30-35). In the midst of these reminiscences, Harryman quotes one stanza from "The Door," and builds her essayistic argument on it, as well on the events I have just retold.

This is the stanza she quotes: "I will go to the garden. / I will be a romantic. I will sell / myself in hell, / in heaven also I will be" (Creeley 201). She then ponders what it might mean for her to have written these lines, how they differ—once she has written them, even though this is just a quote—from the very same lines as written by Creeley. Obviously, on account of the Lady in the garden in Creeley's poem, gender and subject position become important issues. Harryman finds that she "cannot identify simultaneously with the Lady and with the words such as 'shadow' and 'door' that stand for her." Hence, Harryman claims:

> the poem does not cohere, if I author it.... The shadows are an aspect of the environment the Lady inhabits but they are not attached to her even if, paradoxically, they are dependent on her image to work their 'magic.' As the writer of the poem, I am attracted to this unfixed effect of language; the stable image, which is the Lady, now seems to me to be a secretion, or hallucination, from the shadows of language. As Lady and author, I experience myself then both as something secreted (secret-ed) from language and as someone, contradictorily, producing the shadowy and excessive poem. (I 32-3)

In the stanza Harryman quotes, as well as in the poem as a whole, Creeley enacts an ironic surrender to convention, proclaiming he will risk death if only he can satisfy his desire to possess the Lady. Romantic clichés are piled high in this stanza, which may have led Harryman to feel a kind of poetic and critical solidarity with Creeley even before she first met him personally. As she puts it, during that encounter she "naturally identified with him as a person who makes." After all, she had imagined

saying to Creeley, upon reflecting on "The Door," "it's a trap": "even if the romantic tradition is impossible to engage, one is in it or has been trapped by it" (I 33). Harryman then suggests a way out of this trap: "Because the romantic tradition is impossible, I could get rid of representations from the poem, there might be nothing left of the poem, or maybe there would be a 'language poem:' wall worship / dresses door / beyond it." While some readers might see this poem as an invitation to rewrite Creeley's "The Door" once again, this time in full, I would rather consider it as a synecdoche, not of any other poetic utterance, but of a manifesto, or statement of purpose. By removing the Lady from her version of "The Door," Harryman eliminates its main stable point of reference, at the same time showing how unstable it actually is, having for its ground mere convention, baleful tradition, and the like. By doing so, she shifts the ground of reference to subjective experience which nonetheless remains communicable. Is this what Barrett Watten meant when he told Ted Pearson to "start writing autobiography?" Before I begin to answer this question, I must go back to Harryman's first meeting with Creeley.

This happened in 1980, nine years after her initial encounters with *For Love*. After the party at Larry Eigner's house, Harryman's *esprit d'escalier* turns on her answer to Creeley's insistent "Where are you from": she wonders what would have happened if, instead of answering "Costa Mesa" (which is a small town in Southern California), she had said: "Jean Genet." "If I was a 'man' then he was what? If I was a man, 'queered,' then what? If 'I' make and am made, then the same goes for you—Bob, Barry, Steve, Creeley" (I 36), the first three names referring to co-authors of *The Grand Piano*. Harryman emphasizes the issue of gender put forth by her hypothetical questions, linking it with Language writing's critique of "the self," and of male authority in poetry, as well as with the antagonisms and attacks evinced by this critique. She concludes by asking: "Didn't the questions we were raising about subjectivity and authority have everything to do with a critique of gender that would cause a reaction in others invested in the self-oriented, or romantic, poem" (I 38). The two things I would like to emphasize about this turn in Harryman's essay are, first of all, the difference between two proper names—Costa Mesa and Jean Genet—and then, the path of her argument, from autobiographical incident to her involvement in a highly programmatic, or theory-based, literary movement.

Costa Mesa, a geographical location, is an autobiographical incident, which in and of itself precludes comment or debate, while Jean Genet, apart from being queer, was also a French novelist whose presence in Western culture has been primarily textual. Harryman's putative substitution of Genet for Costa Mesa entails a replacement of the historical circumstances of her origin by textual ones. In other words, she feels that Creeley's question requires an asymmetrical response which would immediately allegorize the gender/power relations it has brought to the fore. When one maker asks another where s/he is from, "Costa Mesa" or " Queens Park" can hardly be relevant answers, even though most of us would regard them as perfectly natural, the normal thing to say. Harryman's belated recognition of

the power imbalance involved in her exchange with Creeley turns naturalness and normalcy into pejorative terms, or at least suspect ones. Creeley's rudeness made obvious what might have been merely a suspicion.

Harryman recounts her move from supposition, or theory, to practice, by bringing in Language writing. All of the autobiographical events she mentions appear to have been motivated by this final expansion from private to collective experience, or from the empirical to the textual. Such a method of composition, with all of its aesthetic and ideological implications, can be seen in many of the essays or sketches in *The Grand Piano*. For some of the contributors, lived experience might have served as a either a substitute for, or introduction to, theoretical statements. Since a basic awareness of the theories motivating Language writing proves useful in attempts at engaging with the actual poems, the purpose of autobiography might have as much to do with setting down a historical record of the movement as with providing a reader's guide thereto. Still, it's hard to imagine Barrett Watten's trying to talk Ted Pearson into writing a reader's guide to a poetry just being born—clearly, more than pedagogy was at stake.

So what *was* at stake in the mid-seventies for this group of poets? In the second volume of *The Grand* Piano, Lyn Hejinian, with a little help from Hannah Arendt, gives a plainly-worded answer, or at least one likely, *and* plainly-worded, answer, to this question. She quotes Arendt's definition of the *polis* as a space of rhetorical presence or appearance, while appearance itself is valorized as that which constitutes reality through public discourse, and thus allows "even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses" to emerge from their "shadowy existence" and become "transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized . . . The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" (Arendt qtd. in II 70). Hejinian is quick to contrast this assertion of presence through public appearance with the *disappearance* from the public sphere of specific things or values, the absence of which significantly diminished her sense of well-being: fuel shortages, the Iranian hostage crisis, and, most importantly, its indirect result—Reagan's victory in the presidential election of 1980, which meant that "a half century of social progress was on the way out" (II 72). Hejinian recalls her participation in Quaker Meetings and one of the protests she took part in: along with a handful of people, she would stand "every Sunday for an hour holding up a long banner demanding an end to weapons development toward the blank windows of University Hall, which housed the offices of the top UC Berkeley administrators" (II 74-75). As a parody of political protest, this is quite pitiless—University Hall was empty on Sundays—but Hejinian takes this account of futility a step further when she links it to writing poetry: "The political is an ordeal. Or rather, to undertake politics properly is to undergo an ordeal. Not poems then, but poetry and the dialectics of writing (Ron's 'Not this. What then?') If the polis could serve as a site for the appearance of writing, might not writing serve as a preparation for the polis?" (II 75).

While plainly worded, this passage could stand some elucidation. If undertaking politics "properly" is "an ordeal," why does the next step in her argument require making a distinction between poems and poetry? Writing a poem can be an ordeal, but is such an ordeal comparable to that of undertaking politics properly? Possibly so, but only if politics becomes radically textualized. The difference between poems and poetry would then be as that between an aesthetic object and a political process. The collective nature of the latter is as important here as its negative dialectics, epitomized by the opening of Ron Silliman's poem: "Not this. What then? Not this" (II 75). Thus writing as a preparation for the polis requires both a belief in the polis as Arendt understood it and in the political usefulness of poetry, perhaps of Language writing in particular. Earlier in her essay, Hejinian claims that the reason she brings in Arendt is that the excerpts from *The Human Condition* which she quotes seem "to describe a fundamental (and, in this broader sense, political) facet of the social space of Language writing in the period of its 'becoming.' It was a polis" (II 71). While this social space has its most obvious material shape in the Grand Piano coffeehouse, the question of Language writing *as* writing that serves as a "preparation for the polis" is not developed in this essay, nor is the somewhat enigmatic issue of the ordeal of politics. Yet both questions become clearer if we examine a much longer entry by Hejninian in the tenth volume of *The Grand Piano.*

This essay moves back and forth between an extended account of the author's involvement in the student and labor protests at UC Berkeley in the Fall semester of 2009 and her appreciations and analyses of Jean Day's poetry. While not a Grand Pianist herself, Jean Day has been closely associated with most of them, and her first book of poems was published by Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press in 1971. One of the concepts Hejinian discusses is lateness, whether of style, as in Adorno's and Said's musings on late style in music and literature, or historical formation, as in Jameson's view of Postmodernism as a symptom and product of late capitalism. She questions Jameson's claim about critical and historical accounts of the latest phase of capitalism: "the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic . . . the more powerless the reader comes to feel" (X 66). Hejinian was aware that even if the students and workers won their dispute with the UC authorities, whom she represents as agents of the most rapacious capitalist interests, this would not bring down global capitalism; in fact, she thought her side had no chance of winning. And yet, she did not feel powerless: in spite of Jameson's warning that his argument might cause readers to lose "their impulses of negation and revolt," the better she knew how capitalism operates in the state educational system in California, the more determined she was to act against it. If not a definition, this might certainly be a good example of the ordeal of politics.

A good example of an intellectual ordeal would require summarizing Hejinian's efforts to link the sense of not feeling powerless to Language writing. To put it as simply as possible, she traces a complex analogy between negativity,

resistance, abandoning the urge for control, which is a part of received constructions of subjectivity, as well as a feature of late style, then the political meanings of allegory, and, finally, an ongoing process of inventing and proposing "a different use of everyday life," as Guy Debord puts it in his blueprint for overcoming the capitalist system from within. It is this last step in her argument that I find the most relevant to the appreciation of Language writing undertaken by the authors of *The Grand Piano*. "A different use of everyday life" necessarily entails a different sense and use of language. This should find its way into both *ars politica* and *ars poetica*, "facets of a pragmatic activism experienced from within, rather than from above or outside" (X 101). These claims do not sound particularly rebellious, excessive or irrational. Yet the poetry they refer to would lose much of its meaning and force if these qualities were to be barred from it. As features of everyday life, they are part of the ordeal Language writing wants us to go through in order to find what? Some pleasure soon?

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Jacek Partyka

Stitch, Stich and Stichomancy: Poetry by Other Means in Susan Howe's *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*

Abstract: Drawing on Marjorie Perloff's concept of "unoriginal genius" as well as on the contextual framework provided by the works of Walter Benjamin, William S. Burroughs, and Dodie Bellamy, the article analyses Susan Howe's *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (2014), a printed version of a lecture, which, as is argued, not only offers an illuminating perspective on the notion of originality in contemporary poetics, but can, as such, be read as an instance of "poetry by other means."

Keywords: innovative poetics, cut-up, literary montage, originality, copying, archive

> I think the idea is to be unoriginal but in as original way a—
> s possible.
> Charles Bernstein "Me and My Pharaoh"

It was in 1975, in her *Poetry Today* radio series, that Susan Howe introduced Charles Reznikoff reading a selection of his poetry, which for past decades had occupied a rather marginal position on the map of American literature. It was more or less at the same time, in a way that obviously was not as clear then as it is now, that the twilight of Reznikoff's non-spectacular career coincided with the dawn of Howe's, whose official debut came about a year earlier with the publication of *Hinge Picture* (1974). Such a juxtaposition in chronology, or against the backdrop of the history of American twentieth-century poetry, finds its meaningful justification in the fact that both writers, when we consider the bulk of their achievement, are seen today as the exemplars of a life-long dedication to history, examined by means of verse, whose qualitative label in critical opinions oscillates between innovative and, to borrow Marjorie Perloff's term, "unoriginal."

In the first known treatise on literary theory, the author of poetry extracted from archives, records, or inspired by witnessing real events, i.e. the poet-historian, or the historian-poet, is treated as an impossible compound-figure—a contradiction in terms. Aristotle famously asserts:

> It is... not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would

> still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for *poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular*. By the universal, I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages. (emphasis added)

As rhythmical language can be employed for various ends (e.g. for, say, modification of Herodotus' work), Aristotle rejects the understanding poetry in purely formal terms as metrical composition, proposing instead to view it as a subset of a larger group of human activities—imitation. Poetry, whatever its exact definition, springs from human instinctual proclivity to imitate, which is a source of pleasure (*Poetics* IV).

To understand what Aristotle means when he contrasts history and poetry, it is important to remember a more general distinction he makes between perception and rational understanding (*epistêmê*), and his assertion that, while the former refers to particulars, the latter is a domain of universals (*Ph*. 1.5, 189a5-8). Specifically, perception belongs to the realm of the observable fact (the "that") and *epistêmê* concerns the intelligibility of the fact (the "why"). In the *Poetics*, the job of the historian is understood as restricted to mere recording of what happened. Any attempt to delve into an analysis of events is seen as tantamount to renouncing this role and embarking on a typically philosophical enquiry. Compared with the historian's task, i.e. how to reconstruct a series of past events, the endeavor of the poet, i.e. how to construct a series of events, is superior and more challenging—in order to achieve an effect of universality, the events constituting a sequence must be presented by the poet as complying with the "law of probability or necessity."

If all of Western philosophy was once described by Alfred North Whitehead as a series of footnotes on Plato, then, respecting the difference in scale of the issue, all of Howe's volumes of textual and visual collages, which she has been publishing for over forty years now, may be treated as a series of footnotes on the laconic fragment from Part IX of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Limited by the intended—modest—scope of the present paper, and fully aware of the fact that even a book-length study would hardly do justice the intricacy and sophistication of Howe's literary achievement, I do not venture into any in-depth analysis of the way the twines of poetry and history are manifested and problematized (and perhaps recycled) in her consecutive publications that already add up to thirty-three. Instead, resorting to a synecdochic gesture, I offer a brief reflection on the connections between history and poetry in Howe's recent publication, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (2014), and do this by reconsidering the notions of "innovation" and "(un)originality" as manifesting themselves in her book.

To demonstrate that in the case of Howe's works the distinction between poetry and scholarship (history and literary criticism) is, more often than not, blurred

would not be an audacious or trailblazing endeavor. Apart from numerous critical articles dedicated to particular aspects of her "poetic" or "scholarly" achievement, the generic indeterminacy and the way it impacts the reception of her (exceptionally demanding) books among readers has been one of the main recognitions in two seminal studies in the field: Stephen Collin's *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (2006) and Will Montgomery's *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority* (2010). Interestingly, the former—in its choice of major critical categories, which are highlighted in both elements of the title—draws strictly on terms proposed by Howe herself.[1] To a certain degree, then, the whole analysis that went into Collin's study is as if controlled by the poet he writes about. Accepting the suggested terms of critical reference—doubtless, a deliberate decision—Collins presents himself as a mere enabler of Howe's voice as well as the voices of others to sound *again* in a different discursive montage. Plus, by doing so, he emulates the well-known compositional and quotational method of Howe,[2] which obviously does not—in any way—depreciate the academic merit of his project.

These two urges—the scholastic and the anarchic—that govern Howe's writings are basically a not-mutually-exclusive convergence of her apparently contradictory feelings about ordered and restricted contents of archives. The scholastic impulse imprisons her in the rigor of meticulous and methodical library research, and makes her attentive to the materiality of the page, marginal notes, even doodles and scribbles (often not considered in so-called critical editions). The anarchic urge is detectable in her rebellion against hierarchy, order and received ideas, as well as in her critique of the institution of publication, which she sees as structured, based strongly on interpretation, and—most importantly—striving for definite versions of texts. As can be expected, this assumed attitude of scholastic anarchism, or anarcho-scholasticism, as Collins (9) puts it, requires the development of an equally paradoxical discourse and a scholastic or literary form that would be able to contain it within—i.e. a collage/montage. Heavily dependent on citation and reproduction of visual, or better: emblematic material, interspersed with Howe's own remarks, this is a radically open, decentralized, and non-linear discourse. The reader is often left in the dark as to what in such discourse is to be considered commentary and what an original creation, which snippets of language are primary and which secondary texts, and—in certain cases—whether poetry is subordinated to prose or vice versa:

> They are Janus-faced works—part exegesis, part original expression—'creative' in their own right, but their creativity is often located in the collagist's eye for the found objects and critical juxtapositions.... [I]t is

1 The phrase "through words of others" appears in *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (92); the notions of "anarchist" and "scholar" are reconsidered together in *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (72).

2 For example, Part 2 of Collin's tripartite monograph study consists of Howe's selected correspondence with George Butterick (79-106).

> difficult to tell where authority (and authorship) lies: is it in the citation, or the commentary? Which is a footnote to which? Which text is there for explication of which? (Collins 9-10, 17)

Or perhaps, the above dilemmas—binary-set, dichotomous and locked as they are in an apparent inevitability of choosing one option, which is not always the best interpretive strategy—lose their reasonableness, and are not only abolished but overcome in Howe's anti-hierarchical collages. As it seems, a much better (or at least more fruitful) explanation of the phenomenon of her texts is to look at them as anchored in and deriving from three fundamental ideas—of relation, love, and gift. In fact, relation is the main constructive principle of her writing and, at the same time, one of the primary concerns, which urges her to uncover the marginalized and/or the suppressed (and even the so-far-nonexistent) links between other acts of writing (the acts of writing *of* others). Above all else, however, her books document moments of attention, enthusiasm and love—the driving forces between her scholarship and proper (if such an adjective applies at all) poetry. Texts of others are welcomed as gifts, and what comes out of them once they have been processed ("Howed") in the crucible of juxtaposition and montage is a gesture of gratitude. The gratitude, let us add, which appears boundless: "I have plagiarized... I have borrowed... I am indebted to everyone" (*Birth-mark* 37–39).

Indeed, the strategy of "plagiarism" pervades Howe's oeuvre—merging or at least linking modernist and postmodernist aesthetics—and, at the same time, constitutes a manifesto of its own, significantly broadening the understanding of the creative act as such. Obviously, the idea is not new at all as in his 1920 essay on Philip Massinger, T. S. Eliot famously praised the art of stealing as a legitimate component of writing:

> One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. (*The Sacred Wood* 206)

In Eliot's case the discussion on the ways Massinger borrows from Shakespeare confirms more than just the approval of welding somebody's words into one's own discourse—it testifies to the overlap of the author of *The Waste Land* as critic and poet. The *newness* of this then-provocative statement is best seen against W. H. Davenport Adam's remark—written twenty-two years earlier—on Alfred Tennyson's poetry, in which he valuates "borrowings" in a starkly opposite manner, asserting that "great poets imitate and improve, whereas small ones steal and spoil" (628). In 1978, adhering to an analogical foothold as Eliot, Bernadette Mayer's opening of the third issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* encouraged fledgling poets to "[r]ewrite someone's

else's writing" and to "[e]xperiment with theft & plagiarism in any form that occurs to you" (1). So, despite its alleged singularity, the writing of Howe is clearly doomed to an inevitable association with the exhortations of Eliot or Mayer (to give but two names). Still, what makes her stand out on the landscape of contemporary American literature is not only the radical character of her project, but also her consistency in developing a "new way of meeting the text—upon the ground of its polyvalent mutability" (Collins 26).

In most general terms, echoes of montage-thinking can be detected in disciplines other than fine arts or literature, namely those which draw on permutation of basic elements or components—in chemistry (the periodic table), atomic physics (e.g. quantum physics), or mathematics (set theory). Considered from a historical perspective of its development, montage of literary and non-literary material turns out to be not only a matter of aesthetic preference but also a manifestation of the artist's understanding of the world, and his/her ideological or political stance. In literature, early avant-garde montage by Eliot, Pound or William Carlos Williams—years ago perceived as oppositional and emancipatory practice—ultimately questioned the so-far prevailing categories of original and appropriated text, as well as problematized a distinction between original and translation from it, or even fiction and non-fiction (which was even more noticeable e.g. in John Dos Passos's novels). As Marcus Boon observes (145-146), in its essence, montage consists in the consecutive acts of "destruction" and "copying"—i.e. it involves an arbitrary isolation of a fragment from the pre-existing whole so as to graft it onto a new context, often in a form of a citation. The artist dedicated to such a strategy of creation asserts the liberty to (ab)use, (mis)appropriate and transform the chosen fragment to make it serve new purposes.

When in the 1960s, William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin began experimenting with cut-ups in different (or mixed) media—text, picture, photography and film—this was meant as something more than a purely mechanical method of juxtaposition. Initially, for Burroughs, the cut-up redefined the understanding of the work of art—it was not the sole property of the artist, but a processual act of collaboration with the reader/viewer, and, with other artists—the method offering "literally infinite extension of choice... [and leading] to a collaboration between writers on an unprecedented scale to produce works that... [are] the composite effort of any number of writers living and dead" ("Censorship" 7). This was by no means an original or groundbreaking proposal, but a project parallel to, say, the developments of aleatory (or indeterminate) music, in which significant parts of the composition are left to be determined by the musician or virtually subject to an element of chance (e.g., by Henry Cowell, Alan Hovhaness or Witold Lutosławski); or owing much of its inspirational force to so-called action painting (gestural abstraction), with its understanding of art as a process rather than a product (e.g. by Jackson Pollock or Franz Kline); or, last but not least, bearing some distant analogy to happenings (performance art) as theorized first in the late 1950s by Allan Kaprow,

which ultimately annulled the chasm between the artwork and its viewer. After initial experiments following in the footsteps of Dada artists (e.g. Tristan Tzara), things became more "serious" and a whole theory of the cut-up was developed, in which Burroughs attempted to examine the ways in which language and human mental constructs functioned as invisible agents of control.[3] As he claimed, words and man-made images around tend to shape and condition our reasoning, perception, even ways of speaking by imprisoning them in fixed patterns, and, consequently, distorting our relations with society and the world around (nature). And it was the cut-ups that came to be perceived—now more "philosophically"—as a means of liberation from this epistemological trap, laying bare and then removing (as they, allegedly, did in an act of reading) a cocoon that wrapped human consciousness. Burroughs' montages, putting together randomly picked fragments (his own and not his own) with images from Gysin's paintings, came to be treated not only as deconstructive gestures aimed to cope with traditional—and preservative—notions of the text and the author, but as forms of investigation into hidden meanings of particular texts, as well as a method of divination ("If you cut into the present, the future leaks out"[4]). Thus, the cut-up would cut three ways: sustaining the revolutionary (even if inherited from modernism) notion of a creative act, sounding the past, and predicting the future.

And Burroughs' idea was by no means an ephemeral fad. Dodie Bellamy's *Cunt-ups* (2001) and *Cunt Norton* (2013), to take some recent examples, are two conceptual projects not only continuing his experiments, but—more importantly—providing a feminist variant of the Dadaistic cut up technique. The former blends fractured male and female voices—each "cunt-up" derives from four cut squares (appropriated from Bellamy's own texts as well as from those of others), and as such is typed and reworked for print. The polyvalent "Frankenstein pages" display perversion both in their contents and in the syntax of their sentences, implying resistance to rules of formal ordering, as well as textual and sexual violence. *Cunt Norton*, the sequel to *Cunt-ups*, is a montage of fragments cut up from the second edition of the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1975), in which Bellamy brings together a series of prose writings that respond to and comment on snippets of verse by established (mainly male) writers. Her commentary is predominantly pornographic in character and not purely "original," but rather an amalgamation of remarks (the "porno-erotic texts") lifted from her own e-mail correspondence with another poet ("From Cut Up to..."). The bits of canonical poetry, often selected in a nitpicking manner by the *Anthology*'s "editor," transform the understated into the explicit, the elegant into the grotesque, virtually re-tuning the reader to new ways of reading the cannon, and reclaiming the vulgar from the masculine literary discourse ("Cunt Whitman," "Cunt Lowell," etc.). But the primary rationale behind this astonishingly

3 Brion Gysin writes: "all language is essentially mystification, and everything is fiction" (Burroughs and Gysin 15).

4 See: YouTube "Cut-Ups William S. Burroughs" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rc2yU7OUMcI , 1:16.

slim volume (seventy-five pages for an anthology) is a critique of tokenism, political correctness, and alleged inclusiveness that inform contemporary canon-formation as exemplified in various anthologies of literature. Bellamy, acting in the spirit of the New Narrative movement, wants to be ostensibly "feral," and her decision to count in one female ("Cunt Dickinson") and one Afro-American ("Cunt [Langston] Hughes") is an obvious gesture of mockery.

Considering cut up and montage techniques in the context of feminist practices, it is interesting to note, as Boon (162) does, that they echo the stereotypically female domestic arts, such as knitting, sewing, quilting, and even cooking, all of which emulate basically the same principle of creation—a rearrangement of preexisting, ready-made components. Cook books, for instance, provide recipes, which act as manuals of montage, detailing the necessary ingredients and ways of processing them to bring out a particular dish. Making food, then, is an art of copying (somebody's ideas) and then assembling (in the very act of preparation) what has been copied. As for Bellamy's projects, taking inspiration from derivative and therefore—allegedly—unoriginal domestic arts is, it can be argued, a statement in itself. Inasmuch as it involves the use of scissors, it consists, first, in symbolic destruction of the previous order, and, subsequently, in imposing a new one, both acts being aptly demonstrated in *Cunt-ups* and *Cunt Anthology*.

As was and is the case with the above-mentioned publications, Susan Howe's most recent volume, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, can pose a slight problem for library classification systems that control the process of adding new books to their most appropriate shelf locations. Initially conceived as a lecture with a slide show presentation, it is, in fact, is a collage of citations and reproductions of manuscripts with authorial comments, written in the language that often subverts the rigor of academic discourse. Arguably, the final, published version is a visual and textual hybrid—call it photo-writing—akin to Walter Benjamin's posthumous *opus magnum*, *The Arcades Project*, to which Marjorie Perloff assigns an exceptional poetic value:

> This encyclopedic set of handwritten notes... is not, strictly speaking, a poem, certainly not a lyric one. Nor is it a narrative or even a fiction. And yet... its juxtaposition of poetic citation, anecdote, aphorism, parable, documentary prose, personal essay, photograph, diagram—indeed every genre—makes Benjamin's assemblage a paradigm for the poetry of 'unoriginal genius' to come. (23)

As preparation of the ground for formulating her notion of "unoriginal genius," Perloff recalls Edgell Rickword, one of the earliest critics of *The Waste Land*, who downplayed the significance of Eliot's experiment by judging it an "indolence of imagination" (quoted in Perloff, 2). Drawing on citation and appropriated text as major building materials of the poem contravenes the very core of poetry, whose aim should be, as Rickword demands, to convey and demonstrate the poet's

unique, individual sensitivity translated into language. The judgment is for Perloff an "important document" (2) that facilitates a better comprehension of changes occurring in poetry written at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Arguably, it is the criterion of verbal originality that informs not only poetic projects that are marked by the shift towards a distinct individualistic idiom—for instance the poetry of the 1960s and 70s, such as Ginsberg, Bishop, Lowell, Plath or Levertov—but also by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. However, both groups are driven by their manifested or unacknowledged unwillingness to be cramped by earlier poetic models, and display—to a lesser or greater extent—a certain dose of confidence in innovation. Perloff calls them all "Originals" (9).

It is interesting to think for a while why should *The Arcades Project*—for years a legendary unpublished tour de force of the German philosopher and critic—be treated as a paradigmatic work for recent developments in American (but not only) poetry. A brief outline of the context of its conception may illuminate such a theoretical proposal. Making use of French library archives, Benjamin gathered his reflections and observations, along with quotations from an overwhelming variety of sources, into bunches of papers, referred to—from the German language—as Konvoluts. The first readers of the Konvoluts, notably Rolf Tiederman and Adorno, were—to put it mildly—flabbergasted by the alleged lack of continuity in its perpetually shifting contexts and juxtapositions, and by the fact that at least 75 % of the manuscript was unoriginal transcription of found texts. Among the first sketches from notebooks 1927-1930, Benjamin admits: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall appropriate no ingenious formulations, purloin no valuables. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not describe but put on display" (860). This then-bizarre way of constructing a discursive text on history began to intrigue literary critics, such as Perloff and Montgomery, not only for its original philosophical stance but also for the visual character of the Konvoluts (some of them containing drawings and pictures) and the dynamics of particular elements, which enter into dialogue with each other. Benjamin paid exceptional attention to the structure of his essays, articles and literary pieces (some of them took years to assume final, acceptable forms); what is less often emphasized, however, is the fact that he undoubtedly took pleasure in the visual aspect of his writing, being extremely meticulous with calligraphy, and carefully positioning and dividing his text on the page (as is best demonstrated in the volume *Benjamin's Archive*). The design of the page (its architectonics) may have been a by-product of the research, but it may well have been the aspect of the intended book that the author wanted to see retained in the final published form. We do not know how Benjamin would have used his material if he had lived to be able to finish the project and submit it to print. How exactly he would have arranged the position of lithographs, photographs, drawings in a given Konvolut will remain an open question. Yet, whatever the true authorial intention was, for Perloff, the project in the form it was left by Benjamin (but not necessarily in the forms that it is given by different publishing houses) is "best

understood as ur-hypertext" (32) and as such makes a huge, lasting difference in the development of contemporary innovative poetics. She goes even further, suggesting that the numerical classification of the notes that direct the reader's attention from link to link would be certainly easier in a hypothetical digital version of the whole. From the contemporary perspective, *The Arcades Project* is an ideal textual/visual set to function as an on-line hypertextual publication, which—it is to be hoped—will happen someday.

In *Spontaneous Particulars*, through archival research, Susan Howe investigates the American microhistories as they appear in writings of Emily Dickinson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Jonathan Edwards, and Noah Webster, and reproductions of material culture: scraps of envelopes, manuscripts, even lace and fragments of fabric belonging to female members of the eighteenth-century Edwards family. The research, or the published outcome of it, becomes a work of mourning, displaying the poet's gnostic urge and serendipitous relation to archival research as a form of trance-like summoning of the dead that exist as textual spirits. If, in *In the American Grain* William Carlos Williams reframed early American history through liberal quotations or paraphrases from source texts to discover the desired unmediated truth about the founders and the makers of America, Howe, by contrast, dedicates lots of her effort to the physical surface of texts. In reviewing the Edwards family papers, for example, she scrutinizes the fabric upon which family members wrote. Thus, the fabrication of the homemade and hand-stitched writing surface itself comes to be seen as an essential aspect of the overall creative composition. Interestingly, Howe prefers on-site rather than digitalized archives. Observing the gradual, and inevitable, transformation of archives from brick and mortar sites to online digital formats, she laments the loss of the "need to see and touch objects and documents" (9) as part of a synesthetic experience that foregrounds the embodiment of history in our examination of its textual remains. Accordingly, she classifies her book as "a collaged swan song to the old ways" (9). The paradox of this confession is that whatever the original intention, for the reader the postulated experience must remain at most vicarious. What you get is only reproduction.

Howe advocates for study in "traditional" repositories because, as it seems, she is less interested in interpreting a document's semantic content, and more affected by gaps, blank spaces, marginalia, showing, for instance, how Emily Dickinson utilized second hand surfaces—a torn envelope—to sketch her goodbye note. Examining the quality and composition of the page—often in case of the Edwards family, writing surfaces were from repurposed cloth—is an important part of Howe's telepathic reunion, her compositional strategy requiring actively engaged readers to, as it were, co-create meaning by collating and then interpreting intertextual resonances and echoes between the disparate pieces of text that are put in relation to each other. The spatial-oriented poetics, privileging associational logic, and the recognition that textuality precludes closure, is voiced, second hand, by Henry James's comments from the "Preface" to the 1907 edition of his novels:

> Where, for the complete expression of one's subject does a particular relation stop—giving way to some other not concerned in that expression? Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. (22)

James, still quoted by Howe, goes on with his elaboration on a text's unstoppable momentum with an allegorical anecdote about a "young embroiderer of the canvas of life" who works in horror of "the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations for the needle" and with "a thousand lures and deceits," that accompany the process (22). In her materialist approach and feminist manner, Howe completes this Jamesian excerpt with a photographed sliver of an anonymously made fabric called "PRICKED PATTERN," and in a characteristically paronomastic manner, running over affinities and relations, groups three headwords from the 1844 edition of Noah Webster's dictionary (allegedly, one in possession of Emily Dickinson):

> STITCH
> STICH (a line of poetry)
> and STICHOMANCY (divination of lines or passages taken at hazard)

The three words thus become alliterative coordinates that integrate the way in which the fabric of *Spontaneous Particulars* unfolds. As Howe notes (19), there is a direct link between the English word "text" and the Medieval Latin term *textus* ("style or texture of a work"). Significantly, the latter, deriving from the past participle stem *textere* ("to weave, to join, fit together, construct"), brings to our mind a "thing woven." This is an etymological connection, but in the context of the whole volume also an important interpretive clue for the reader. Accordingly, Howe's poetic strategy comes down to thinking and writing in sti(t)ches. Her poetry—if we agree, as I propose here, to treat this whole book (including the quotes, reproductions of manuscripts and other visual material) as a poem by other means—works, at various levels, through a questioning of sequence, its multidirectional logic of collage replacing that of narrative. It is a form of writing that is dense with secondary associations—often of paramount importance—and finely tuned to the intriguing dependence of sound and sense on the basic unit of the letter. That being said, the adjective "spontaneous" from the title of the volume is a trap, as the montage gives the impression of being well thought out and carefully crafted.

The appropriation of other voices is obviously never an innocent act, but in the case of Howe, it often assumes the form of a radical semantic "mutilation," for which she, admittedly, takes responsibility ("I plagiarize"), but which nevertheless carries with itself a certain dose of irony, if considered with due seriousness. In the act of reading a text (or, for that matter, in the act of scrutinizing a manuscript scrap

for its physical peculiarities, examining calligraphic doodles or scribbles or pieces of texture), each fragment she comes across is first isolated, reconsidered, and sometimes given a new meaning, which is a direct result of the very isolation itself as well of the act of re-grafting the fragment onto a new context. The process may be best illustrated by Howe's use of the lines and archive reproductions from William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, Part III "Library." This is (almost) the opening of the whole volume—setting the tone and presenting the reader with the exact nature of the patchwork discourse that is to be expected on pages to come. Four reproductions of Williams' yellowish typed manuscript with pencil and ink corrections are interspersed with selected quotations typed by Howe against blank background of her *own* page. Thus, the discourse shuttles between two orders of the same text, or between two temporal phases of its existence—as one being worked on (the draft) and one completed (the final version). Howe's choice of lines labors toward the creation, or re-creation, of the feeling of spiritual (if not quasi-religious) happiness and relief, which takes hold of one (Howe for sure) upon entering the library:

> A cool of books
> will sometimes lead the mind to libraries
> of a hot afternoon, if books can be found
> cool to the sense to lead the mind away. (11)
> …….
>
> For there is a wind or ghost of a wind
> in all books echoing the life
> there, a high wind that fills the tubes
> of the ear until we think we hear a wind,
> actual .
> to lead the mind away. (13)
> …….
>
> Searching among books: the mind elsewhere
> looking down .
> Seeking. (15)

If we read the whole original Book III of *Paterson*, we recall immediately that in contrast to Howe's elation at poring over old papers, manuscripts, and other material scraps of the past, which finds its manifestation not only in the way she writes (and talks) about them, but in the very meticulousness and exactness of the collage prepared for print, Paterson's visit to the local library is a spiritual and emotional upset—his initial remarks, such as "[t]he Library is desolation, it has a smell of its own/ of stagnation and death" (101) and "[t]he place sweats of staleness and of rot... / a library stench" (103), soon turning into a most radical resolution, "I cannot stay here to spend my life looking into the past" (145). Numerous, repeated attempts at "loaning blood / to the past" (101) lead to nothing but disillusionment and resignation: "[t]he writing is nothing" (113).

Like Howe, Paterson sees the potential hidden in the library collections (and, let us assume, those of the archive), understood as sets of amassed documents that under certain conditions—i.e. when chosen, whether at random or not, and juxtaposed—may enter into a dialogue with each other, yielding a new discursive and semantic quality:

> Texts mount and complicate them-
> selves, lead to further texts and those
> to synopses, digests and emendations. So be it.
> Until the words break loose or—sadly
> hold unshaken. Unshaken! So be it. (130)

However, for him, there is a point (the point of no return, as Kafka would have it) when such re-bricking of words and texts, and associative games become indefensible, walling up the furthest reach of what finally must turn out to be a literary *cul-de-sac*. Unlike Howe, Paterson is not an archival or library mystic, who revels (believes) in acts of serendipity. And, therefore, as the following (somewhat pompous) exhortation has it, any single word is to be handled responsibly, in a controlled way:

> A chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world. Watch carefully and erase, while the power is still yours, I say to myself, for all that is put down, once it escapes, may rot its way into a thousand minds, the corn become a black smut, and all libraries, of necessity, be burned to the ground as consequence. (129)

In contrast, Howe will certainly not miss the benefit of serendipity; and a chance encounter with an archival item, even a single word, is for her yet another step on a long way in search for never-ending and still-surprising connections. And this is done so as to build up a discourse out of other voices and weave a poetic fabric of appropriated sti(t)ches.

Of Yale's Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Howe notices that even if the collections kept there retain traces of "acquisitive violence," they also generate "a sense of peace" (46). And this conflict within the archives is structurally echoed by the tension that appears on almost every single page of her book—the chosen citations are themselves traces of some past violence, being torn, sometimes literarily, from their original contexts, and then redrafted onto new ones. Generally speaking, the strategy of echoing goes much deeper than that—Howe's visit to Beineke (and other notable repositories of volumes and manuscripts) soon finds its counterparts in Paterson's research in a local library and in Henry James' "sniffling the very dust... of the old" (58) in the Law Library at Harvard in 1905. Thus, real and imagined events are made to operate in a relation of strict correspondence. Or telepathy.

In *Spontaneous Particulars,* we are confronted with ways of sounding or re-considering the "end(s) of art" of poetry (which is also the title of one of Howe's

seminal early essays) in the multiple sense of the word, i.e. borderlines, limits, and goals. Incurably immersed in and obsessed by history, Howe's selection of archival material is presented to the reader on pages that are, in fact, visual fields: sometimes hardly quotable (although she *can* be a mesmerizing performer when reciting her own verse). And, indeed, her volume (and not only this one) somehow *rhymes* with Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, the grouping of those archival and documentary bits that re-present the ethos of the Second Empire from the perspective of a soon-to-be-Nazi-occupied Paris of the 1930s. In fact, it is Benjamin that outlines the task of historian (be it social, political or literary) in terms that, in all probability, would be embraced by Howe herself:

> The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context. (476)

Still, it would be rather risky, if not entirely far-fetched, to draw an exact and unmistakably unequivocal link of influence between the way of thinking about historical (poetic) discourse represented by the German thinker and the American poet. The affinity between these two that Perloff and, earlier, Montgomery note in their critical studies is not inspirational but, as it seems, accidental. Due to editorial problems and hesitancies, the original bilingual (German and French) manuscript of Benjamin's project remained unpublished until 1982. The English (monolingual) rendition by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin came out in 2002, when Howe was already an author of established reputation and widely recognizable poetic idiom. The more probable source of direct influence (one of many) comes from the works of Charles Reznikoff, who famously reconstructed the criminal history of the United States at the turn the nineteenth century. Reznikoff, a lawyer, historian, and a poet styled legal documents so as to allow the events themselves to "speak" directly to the reader. His alterations to such documentary hypotexts are not always unbiased in manner, and this can be seen when the end-products (Reznikoff's "poems") and the original, inspirational documents are compared. By inviting other voices into his own literary discourse, he became part of a certain modernist tradition of collage epic poetry, which includes Pound with his *Cantos* or William Carlos Williams with his *In the American Grain*. The formal bizarreness of the volumes thus created—notably *Testimony: The United States 1885-1915, Recitative* and *Holocaust*—makes their generic classification most problematic: they crossbreed poetry and prose, literature and document, the objective account and the subjective compilation thereof. The original testimonies are carefully selected, edited, and arranged into thematically homogenous sections, but the voices, often anonymous, are not Reznikoff's (he,

allegedly, did not contribute to the content). Still, his name, is printed as the author.

But—we may argue—the author who mainly quotes, deliberately disappears. Susan Howe's preoccupation with texts of others and her highlight on the fiction of self-authorship are both radical (certainly much more radical than Benjamin's and Reznikoff's) and, if I may say so, autoimmune as in her "poetry by other means" there can be observed a tendency to self-erasure—the attitude perhaps springing from the same source as Samuel Beckett's ironic remark that "every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness" (210), implied and applied consistently as a directive in his late short pieces for theatre or TV: *Breath*, *Nacht und Traume*, and *Quad*.[5] Starting her career as a painter (she holds a degree from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts), Howe has, in fact, never ceased being one, probing visual possibilities of language, and remaining a utopian for whom "the most beautiful thing of all is a page before the word interrupts it" and for whom poetry represented as painting "would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White" (in an interview with Lynn Keller). Yet, at the end of the day, the poet who is so captivated by silence and absence, and who prefers the citational and appropriative strategy, offers us publications that are products of her own idiosyncratic choice. Unoriginal as this may appear, this does do not prevent her from being creative in the best sense of the word.

Howe's life-long archive project plays with the intersections between prose and poetry in the domain of the appropriated, verging on divinatory "practices" and "rituals" based on chance, which are not very far from the ideas propounded by Burroughs in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, she reaches back to an ancient tradition of inspired texts—i.e. such that have been existing in the form of mere potentialities, as if waiting to be received, discovered and recorded by a contemporary shaman-poet-archivist. As is in the case with Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, and with many ostensibly experimental writers, one is always tempted to structure and order the material Howe has collected, but, in the end, the books such as *Spontaneous Particulars* turn out resistant to such endeavors, even to the point of frustrating the reader. And this is the moment when we realize that the umbrella terms "poetry," "essay," "art book," or "lecture" all simultaneously apply as labels and are forcefully defied as no longer precisely relevant. Plus, inevitably, the analogical fuzziness begins (more and more) to cloud the notions that have been commonly federated with "poetry," such as tradition and avant-garde, or convention and innovation. Which, in turn, hints at a much larger issue at hand: namely, that the definition of "poetry" is increasingly expanding before our eyes, welcoming as it does *copy/paste* acts as its constitutional components. On even more abstract scale, however, the compositional method of *Spontaneous Particulars* exemplifies the twist that so-called creative writing has taken over the period of one hundred years—now, with the rise of the Internet, we have all

5 Interestingly, in a 1966 interview by Conrad Knickerbocker, William S. Burroughs similarly asserts that silence is "the most desirable state" (*The Third Mind* 2).

become, as Perloff observes, "copyists, recyclers, transcribers, collators, and refiners" (49). So, when Howe asserts that her volume is "a collaged swan song to the *old ways*" (9, emphasis added), we do not necessarily go along with it.

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Floriana Puglisi

Sounding the Text: Susan Howe and David Grubbs's *Thiefth*

Abstract: This essay investigates the musico-poetic collaboration between Susan Howe and David Grubbs. Focusing on *Thiefth* (2005), the first of a CD series that collects *Thorow* (1987; 1990) and *Melville's Marginalia* (1993), it examines the forms, effects, and implications of the two works' remediation from printed to sonic product. At stake are notions of textuality and voice, as well as issues of margins and marginalization that Howe starts challenging on page. The shift from the written to the aural dimension does in fact intensify the poems' anti-representative and anti-narrative drive, extending Howe's dismantling of the visual frames. As the poet's selective, anti-expressivist and anti-performative reading increases her textual scattering and fragmentation, foregrounding the sonic and material aspects of language, so does Grubbs's experimentation with music, sound, and voice manipulation through the use of audio reproduction technology. If the insertion of pre-recorded ambient sounds generates acoustic effects that match the polyvocality and simultaneity of Howe's visual poems, music amplifies their inherent dissonance and release from the constraints of signification. This intricate web of sonorities does not only defy the authority, stability, and closure of the written texts. It develops an aesthetics of sound that augments Howe's graphic experimentation and calls for a listening practice that might draw attention to the margins of history and society.

Keywords: Susan Howe, David Grubbs, *Thorow*, *Melville's Marginalia*, audio textuality, vocal performance of poems, voice, sound, musical adaptation, acoustic technology, sound aesthetics, listening

"The origins of poetry may well reside in sound and song. But the transmission history of poetry depends upon visual forms," writes Johanna Drucker (237). Yet, if the invention of the printing press, in the 15th century, did turn poetic production from oral to (predominantly) visual composition, 20th century poetic history has recorded a significant return to orality. From avant-garde experiments in sound poetry to the flourishing of poetry readings since the late 1950s, from performance poetry to poetry slam, the medium of poetry has been variously tested. But what is exactly this medium? Is a poem, asks Brian Reed, "something heard? Overheard? Performed? Read silently on the page? . . . a bodily rhythm that prompts toes to tap and heads to nod in time?" (270). To give all these questions a positive answer is to acknowledge the "persistently 'multimedia' character of the art of poetry," which can be channeled in different means of communication (272).

Nevertheless, if *the medium is the message*, in McLuhan's dictum, what happens when a text shifts from one mode to another? Is it still *the same* text? Approaching different embodiments of a text implies coping with different aspects of articulation, production, and reception that rely on different perceptions, cognitive processes, and

relations (between authors, readers and a larger cultural-environmental context). Furthermore, in the face of its change, is it still *a text*? If, as Charles Bernstein reminds us, the very notion of textuality is associated with "the woven texture of written language, and, indeed, with visual inscription" ("Making Audio Visible" 963), the audio text undermines the stability, fixity, and closure of such a text, calling for a new critical attention.[1]

The conversion of a text from written to oral form, from "a mere evoked aurality," which is caught in silent reading, to oral "vocalizing" (Stewart 2), which turns readers into listeners, has radical consequences, on and off the page, that this essay intends to explore. The investigation is directed towards the recent vocal and acoustic turn of Susan Howe's production in collaboration with experimental musician David Grubbs. Since their first encounter in 2003, they have re-edited some of her previously printed texts (*Thorow, Melville's Marginalia*, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, *Frolic Architecture*, *Tim Tit Tot*) in audio CDs (*Thiefth*, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, *Frolic Architecture*, *Woodslippercounterclatter*) and exhibited in live performances, where the texts are re-enacted again and again. Inaugurating the series of transpositions, *Thiefth* provides an ideal ground of analysis for the purpose and scope of this paper. Not only does it cope with the eccentricities of Howe's page, but also markedly revises the printed sources. Furthermore, addressing issues of margins and marginalization from the double level of content and form, it provides a paradigmatic case for discussion on the transformations of the poems as they shift from the visual to the acoustic field, from landscape to soundscape.

Thiefth is the only product in its category that collects two different texts, namely *Thorow*, released in 1987 and later collected in *Singularities* (1990), and *Melville's Marginalia*, from *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (1993). Disrespectful of former textual boundaries, the compilation rearranges the presentation of Howe's work, affecting both her individual products (here conveyed in a new mode) and her full production (establishing new direct internal connections, this reassembly offers a privileged perspective on its concerns and orientation).

Apparently distant from each other, *Thorow* and *Melville's Marginalia* share structural devices and thematic concerns that *Thiefth* helps emphasize. In their printed form, for instance, they both include prose passages and rely on collage and graphic experimentation. Signaling boundaries, they both move to their eradication, performing an aesthetic as well as a political act.

Thorow was inspired by Howe's writer-in-residency in the town of Lake George, at the foot of the Adirondack Mountains, New York, during the winter and spring of 1987. Annoyed by the degeneration of the natural landscape under the effects of modernization and mass tourism, the poet undertakes an investigation of the past, back to the arrival of earlier European colonists, to examine what went wrong;

1 Interest has shifted to the material properties of sound (beyond conventional metrical studies), performance and poetry reading, sound technology and reproduction (Cf. Khan and Whitehead, Morris, Bernstein 1998 and 2009, Middleton, Perloff and Dworkin).

to recover unspoiled "forms of wildness," as well as to question and revise their representations: "re-reading re-tracing once-upon" (*Singularities* 41). Combining historical and literary sources, she draws from the papers of William Johnson, the eighteenth-century Irish fur trader who named the lake after King George, and Henry David Thoreau. Whereas echoes of Johnson can be heard in the first section of the work, Thoreau's notions of nature inform the second, which concerns Howe's experience of the lake. The third and final section, on the other hand, offers one of the most radical samples of Howe's experimentation with fragmentation and line scattering.

The genesis of the work and the intentions of the poet are illustrated in a brief but theoretically dense introduction that, divided into two parts, describes the circumstances (an untitled preamble) and offers a critical and literary background ("Narrative in Non-Narrative"). Whether Howe's view of the present, which can only offer dull replicas of the past, alludes to Baudrillard ("In winter the Simulacrum is closed for the season," 41), her vision of American colonial history echoes Todorov's assessment in *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. As she writes in a central passage:

> In the seventeenth century European adventurer-traders burst through the forest to discover this particular long clear body of fresh water. Pathfinding believers in God and grammar spelled the lake into *place*. They have renamed it several times since. In paternal colonial systems a positivist efficiency appropriates primal indeterminacy. (41, original emphasis)

The myths of the "Virgin" and "Promised Land" are here debunked in the face of their tacit imperialist ideology. In tune with Todorov's analysis, Howe describes colonization as a pre-eminently linguistic matter, tracing a direct link between naming and possessing. Conflating colonialism and patriarchy ("*paternal* colonial systems"), she points to a history of abuse perpetrated by men and exasperated by traditional rhetorical discourse that connotes the land as feminine. Relying on the power of language and representation, both systems suppress difference, which they confine to the realm of inarticulateness, by silencing and/or marginalizing the "Other" (natives as well as women). Yet, in the use of the poet, language turns from a means of control and possession to a means of liberation. Her alternative spelling for "Thoreau,"[2] for instance, opens the proper name to the "instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity" (42) described by Deleuze and Guattari (37), questioning the very act of naming (Back 51).

Explicitly mentioned only at the end of the introductory passage, Thoreau is

2 Other "misspelled" or, truly, archaic words ("thorow" is the old form for "through") recur in the text as an apt way to "'unspell' America" (Back 51), i.e. to set it free from the power of naming.

merely evoked through the punning effect of the title-word and allusions to his work in the poem. Howe's desire for the wildness, in the face of a modern landscape that is marked by economic exploitation and profit, echoes his. Yet, dissociating from him (unlike her, "Thoreau never visited the Adirondacks" (42)), Howe will not follow his path into nature but rather offer a critique of "The literature of savagism / under a spell of savagism" (49).[3] However attracted by the idea of returning to an originally pure landscape, she cannot inscribe her work within a tradition of literary representation she is criticizing.[4] On the other hand, to reassess the wrongs of history and literature, she must undo cartographies of power ("European grid on the Forest," 45) that have reduced the "primal indeterminacy" into a differentiated and hierarchical organization of space: she must break the boundaries imposed upon both land and paper. Shattering instruments of orientation and measure ("I pick my compass to pieces," 55), her poetic subject moves toward no established direction ("Dark here in the driftings / in the spaces of drifting," 55), crossing the land without conquering, listening to the landscape instead of naming its forms ("I heard poems inhabited by voices," 42), seized instead of seizing ("The Adirondacks *occupied* me," 42; original emphasis).

From an aesthetic point of view, this stance is embodied in the explosion of the typographic grid occurring in the last section of the poem, where Howe's typical line scatterings, rotations, and inverse mirrorings get rid of the directional axes (left-to-right, up-to-bottom) that govern reading, deeply confounding whoever approaches the text (cf. Dworkin 32). Regardless of conventions that are explicitly mentioned ("The Frames should be exactly / fitted to the paper, the Margins / of which will not per[mit] of / a very deep Rabbit," 56-57), any frame is indeed unsettled in this new indeterminacy. Margins are blown up, or absorbed, turning the page into an open field where words can move in any possible direction, i.e. where meanings and relationships are always negotiable (Figure 1).

3 "Savagism" refers to the biased vision of the Indian that was popular at the time of Thoreau. Montgomery acknowledges Howe's debt to Robert F. Sayre's *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), who described a younger Thoreau as being "under the spell of savagism" (755). White, in her turn, reads a direct reference to Cooper, identifying precise allusions to his work: from "Scout" and "Pathfinding" (indicating Natty Bumppo) to "Mount Vision" (connected to westward expansion in *The Pioneers*) and the massacre at Fort William Henry in 1757, a central event in *The Last of the Mohicans* (246-255).

4 Cf. Howe's deconstruction of the wildness: "There never was such a pure place […] Uninterrupted nature usually is a dream enjoyed by the spoilers and looters—my ancestors. It is a first dream of wildness most of us need in order to breathe; and yet to inhabit a wildness is to destroy it. An eternal contradiction" (Beckett 21).

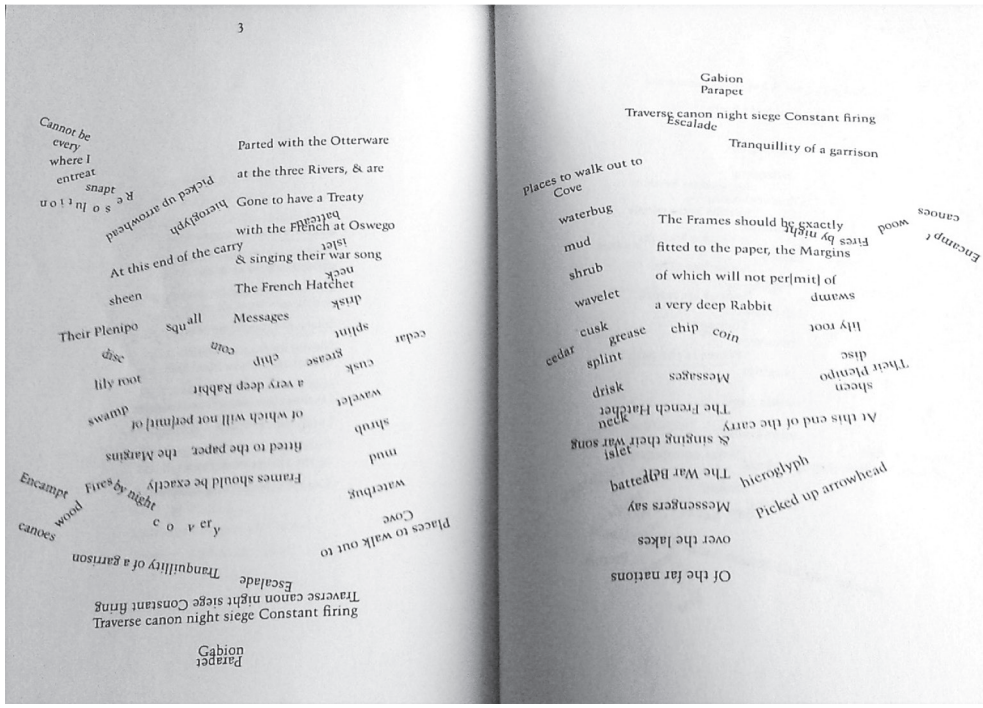

Figure 1. "Thorow" by Susan Howe, from *Singularities* (56-57), copyright © 1990 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press.

Under the effects of this disruptive poetics, the margin does shift from a peripheral to a central dimension in *Melville's Marginalia*. The work owes its title to Wilson Walker Cowen's homonymous edition (1987), which collects Melville's annotations in the margins of the books he possessed. Like the holes of history, this material, which is intrinsically ephemeral, precarious, and personal, attracts the poet's interest for its "persistent problem of eradication in the marginal body," with notes concerning women erased by Melville's wife and daughters (Howe, *The Nonconformist's Memorial* 90). As with the "voices" that fill the landscape in *Thorow*, Howe is driven by the *call* emanating from her source of inspiration, compelled by the revelations she receives in a sort of "mystic documentary telepathy" (Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars* 18). Hence her special focus, among Melville's readings, on the Irish poet James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849), after her unexpected, exceptional discovery: "I saw the pencilled trace of Herman Melville's passage through John Mitchel's introduction and knew by shock of poetry telepathy the real James Clarence Mangan is the progenitor of fictional Bartleby" (*The Nonconformist's Memorial* 106).

Like *Thorow*, *Melville's Marginalia* comprises prose passages that, providing contextual information,[5] help contain an eccentric poetic body in both structure

5 The prose sections include a preface, an additional statement on the genesis, purpose, and

(a collage juxtaposition of fragments) and layout (presence of capitalization, underlining, words and sentences turned upside down and/or arranged into diagonal lines, overlapping and line crossing, partially erased words, horizontal and vertical marks). At stake, here as well as in Cowen, is the disruption of textual hierarchies that printing, with its homogenizing, stabilizing and regulating force, does instead maintain. Reversing the relationship between center and margin, text and note, Howe's chaotic configurations oppose the tyranny and constraints of publishing processes, which restrict the freedom of writing by revision and censorship. Furthermore, sanctioned by the controlling power that presides over its release, and fixed by the rigidity of typographical characters, the printed text comes to offer a definitive, authoritative version that rejects alternative forms and meanings. "Printing ruins it" (147), declares Howe alluding to the reduction achieved by the medium. Print "settles" (150), establishing both order and dominion, colonizing the wilderness of manuscript material. Concerned with *confine*ment, it performs the task of a "sentinel" (150) in the prison-house of the book ("call whatever gaol a goal," 150).

Given these premises, what implications does the audio version of these texts entail? What is at stake in this new frontier of textuality, where transmission and reception privilege the auditory dimension despite Howe's great investment in the visual? The texts under consideration undergo complex transformations for Howe's vocal execution is amplified by Grubbs's contribution; the result is an interesting convergence of voice, sound, and music,[6] with a little help from audio technology, electric and digital. Like printed collections, the audio CD is divided into sections (the soundtracks) that reflect the earlier embodiment of the texts in book format. Reproducing *Thorow*, the first four tracks enact the tripartite structure of the printed source, corresponding to its introduction (track 1), part one (track 2), part two (track 3), and part three (track 4). Devoted to *Melville's Marginalia*, the fifth track flows without interruptions. Substantial difference, however, distinguishes the audio versions on a purely textual level, for the prose sections of the earlier formats are either massively disintegrated (*Thorow*) or utterly excised (*Melville's Marginalia*).

Thorow's introduction, in fact, consists here in characteristic buzzing sounds that overlap and/or alternate with the notes of a baritone saxophone and of a fluteophone. Against this unfamiliar and disorienting sonorous background, the verbal text falls short, collapsing into a few isolated word fragments and phonemes involving

scope of the work, excerpts from Mangan's primary and secondary sources.

6 Implying anything that is or can be heard, "sound" is the broader category from which "voice" and "music" emerge, after a differentiation process that is historically, culturally, and socially determined. As "voice," through metaphorical associations that abstract it from the sonic, material properties of sound, came to be identified with individual identity, agency, authorship, authority, and power (Weidman 232), "music" developed as "rationalized and standardized sound" (Sakakeeny 117).

obstruction of the airstream, whether complete (stops /t/ and /k/) or partial (fricative /s/), which can neither cohere into discourse nor relate to the acoustic environment.[7] In the audio version of *Melville's Marginalia*, on the other hand, as the poetic body is itself abridged, the prose is definitively lost. The effects of these operations are highly destabilizing. Once the orienting frames of the books collapse, the contents drift, released as they are from any narrative that prefigures direction and purpose. Nor does the oral enactment provide listeners with an easy path to follow, for the peculiar intersection of different sonorities, from Howe's voice to Grubbs's experimentation with different kinds of sounds and music, increases uncertainty.

Indeed, "voice" is a problematic term in this context, for it remains tied to the notions of spontaneity, naturalness, self-expression, self-presence, and authorship that have been questioned in the work of language poets (cf. Bernstein, "Stay Straws and Straw Men," and Silliman et al.) and in the larger frame of post-structural criticism (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida). Marking identity and agency, its metaphoric associations have obscured the primary and literal sense of voice, i.e. sound produced by the vocal organs, and downgraded its sonic and material aspects to a secondary status and a disruptive function. As the privilege of signifying, authorial voice over bodily, material vocality is reflected in related binaries (referential meaning/other processes of signification, content/form, human/non-human, language/music, male/female), "voice" must be necessarily denaturalized in order to subvert hierarchies and inherent ideologies (cf. Weidman 233-234).

The joint production of Susan Howe and David Grubbs runs counter to the dominant concept of voice in different ways. For her part, the poet offers an anti-expressive, anti-performative reading that replaces *orality*, just a "reading style" emphasizing breath, voice, and speech, with *aurality*, which is instead concerned with what the ear hears, with the sound of the writing. Whereas the former privileges speech over writing, (signifying) voice over sound, listening (psychological act) over hearing (physiological act), the latter is entangled with the articulations of the body, including mouth, tongue, and vocal chords; it voices the poem rather than the poet; it is *a/orality*, i.e. the very negation of orality (Bernstein, *Close Listening* 13). Just as her visual experiments foreground the material aspect of writing, so does her reading emphasize the material aspect of sound, deconstructing to a higher degree any notion of voice that is related to individual identity. Technological mediation, finally, favors her objective. Dispensing with the sight and presence of the speaking subject, audio recording alienates voice from its "natural" source; depriving it of its originating body, it prevents direct connection with the writer, which threatens authorship, authority, and agency. This effect is then increased by Howe's own

7 As Wilkinson observes, most of these utterances relate to the final section of the poem (more coherent phrases like "you are of me," "I of you;" overlapping words like "blu/wov," "floted/folled;" repetition of "th;" stutters and cracks). Howe's introduction, on the other hand, literally explodes ("light letters exploded," 42) in sections 1 and 2, where surviving fragments fall over the poems.

emulation of sound reproduction technology, which is thoroughly in tune with her role of the poet-as-*medium*, who, listening to the voices of the past, speaks the words of others.

David Grubbs's testimony, as the poet's first and most attentive listener, is here revealing. "In performing her text," he says on *Thorow*, "she cuts words in a way that to me sounds *like audio tape* and *razor blade*. The very word 'thiefth' . . . proposes an analogy between our respective methods in its quality of having been spliced together from two sources" (Grubbs, emphasis mine). Grubbs's comparison of Howe's reading voice with both a modern device of audio reproduction and a sharp tool for cutting points to a technologized and depersonalized voice that is far from the spontaneity and fluidity of speech. The broken articulation he describes rather suggests a stuttering voice that, incapable of achieving unity and harmony, dramatizes rupture and dissonance. Emancipated from the yoke of reference and the solidification of meaning, utterances draw attention to themselves as sounds; released from lexical and syntactical boundaries, words and sentences strive for "primal indeterminacy" and liberation from signification.

Grubbs's assessment of Howe's oral delivery is based on the special vocalization of "thiefth," which, despite appearing only at the end of *Thorow*, is symptomatically given due prominence as the title for the CD collection. Unnaturally stumbling at the junction of the two word-units ("thief-th"), the poet foregrounds her contrived process of combination out of unrelated source fragments. Unbroken on the page, the term is cut off from any syntactical structure; it is the last of a few scattered, similarly constructed word-units that, detached from each other by larger portions of the blank page, are eventually torn from the void-silence that suppresses them (Figure 2).

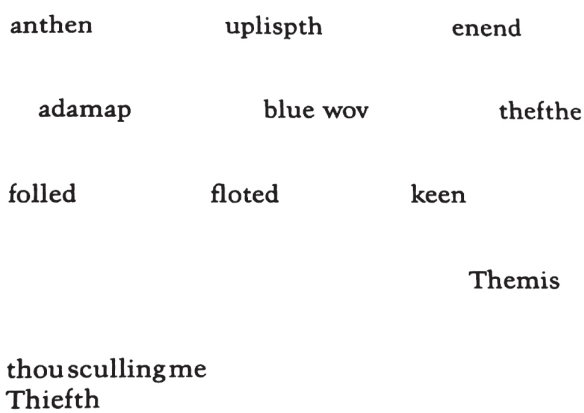

Figure 2. "Thorow" by Susan Howe, from *Singularities* (59), copyright © 1990 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press.

Yet, "thiefth" is certainly not an isolated case. *Melville's Marginalia* embodies a kind of dysfunctional speech, a stutter, as explicitly signaled from the beginning ("Crumple / and stammer out difficult," *The Nonconformist's Memorial* 94). Inherent in Howe's typical collage of fragmented sentences, which obstructs the flowing linearity of any discourse, this speech impediment is remarkably conveyed by Howe's hesitancy at individual phonemes and consequent hampering of elocution. Even if, unlike "thiefth," the stutter is visibly suggested on the page by the slipping of letters out of their lexical chains (e.g. "Traces *u* pon the comin *g* […] The bracket isn *t* closed", 121; "ame *n* of hal *f l* ight / alter wi *t h*willow /*?* water stain to right," 122—emphasis mine), it is in oral deliverance that this quality can be fully appreciated.[8] Howe's method reaches its apex in the poem on page 123 (Figure 3), where trouble in articulation is further suggested by the overlapping of typographical characters. Exemplifying revisions, this visual expedient introduces uncertainty, indecision, and change, threatening the supposedly fixed and closed nature of the printed text:

Coffin th ſa
Coffin th se a
Coffin th s wooD
i e wr t ebly quell
in pencil s c atte
but poetry

Coffin th se av
Coffin th se w
Coffin th se woorD

Figure 3. "Melville's Marginalia" by Susan Howe, from *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, copyright © 1993 by Susan Howe. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

8 Only in the stutter can Howe recover the voices—preeminently female (or feminized, like Billy Budd's)—at the margin of discourse: "It's the stutter in American literature that interests me. I hear the stutter as a sound of uncertainty. What is silenced or not quite silenced. . . . we are in the stutter. We were expelled from the Garden of the Mythology of the American Frontier. The drama's done. We are the wilderness. We have come on to the stage stuttering" (Foster 181).

Whereas, in silent reading, the eye can eventually reconstitute unity, helping readers acquire some kind of "fluency," Howe's vocalization truly embodies the hesitancy of speech that the written text can only evoke.[9] Stammering, as she interrupts her voice or repeats words and sentences in an effort for the right term, she has her listeners experience the sound quality of each phoneme to an extent she cannot achieve among an audience made up of mere readers.

If Howe's speech sounds unnatural, Grubbs's technological interventions add a higher degree of artificiality. Privileging the voiced text, Grubbs starts working from Howe's reading of her poems, which he tapes and listens to repeatedly (Grubbs). Audio recording, however, is instrumental to his work in a more invasive way. Relying on digital technology, he can in fact manipulate Howe's voice and enhance its capacities in ways otherwise impossible. With the help of a computer, he can split her sentences, pick fragments and play them over Howe's present reading, doubling, or even tripling, her voice to achieve peculiar effects.

Undoubtedly, this operation is highly effective to reproduce not just the polyvocality of Howe's textual dimensions but also the effect of simultaneous occurrence that, in the printed version, is suggested on the graphic level. In *Thorow*, this is the special case of the third and last section. As the random scattering and overlapping of fragments disrupt the linear progression of both writing and reading, so does Grubbs's manipulation of Howe's recorded voice, as he cuts sentences and overlaps fragments, triggering an audio experience based on simultaneous perception and chaos. In tune with the unsettling of the landscape/page implied by both graphics and war related terms ("Encampt," "Gabion/Parapet," "Traverse canon night siege Constant firing," "garrison," "escalade," "arrowhead"), any consistent voice that might ensure "historical truth" is disturbed by the assault of acoustic interference and intersecting articulations. Conflict reverberates in the clash between fast and slow, loud and gentle utterances as well as in the persistence of harsh sounds (/t/ and /s/) that convey cracking, breaking, and slicing (Wilkinson). The same strategies return in *Melville's Marginalia*, in both book and sound track. Yet, if on these occasions Grubbs's method matches Howe's experimentation on the page and helps the poet overcome the limits of the human voice, elsewhere it signals a more independent use by the musician, who responds to, or interprets, Howe's text.

In *Thorow*, for instance, Grubbs extends the use of this stratagem to the first and second sections of the work as well, which, in printed form, display a more regular and relatively conventional configuration. In a few poems, he plays pre-recorded sentence fragments extracted from the introduction over Howe's vocal performance,

9 Howe is here emphasizing the material conditions of poetry with an allusion to the physical properties of the book: from the cover ("coffin") and binding ("sew") to the origin of the paper pages ("wood") where words are printed. As Dworkin observes, "coffin," "resonating between 'tomb' and 'tome,'" was also a technical term in press printing and paper manufacture (43).

which results in transitory but effective attacks on the sequential development of both writing (the text on the page) and reading (Howe's). Unlike readers, listeners are led astray once again: deprived of a guide, once the introduction is blown into pieces, they get lost in a muddle of words as they enter a polyphonic landscape that exactly defies "Apprehension as representation" (54), the writer's central object of criticism. Even if saved from disintegration, these fragments compromise comprehension; unless they are listened to several times, they are difficult to detect. Furthermore, even if reconstituted, they would still be missing their original context. Why, therefore, and to what effects, does Grubbs increase the opacity of the verbal text?

The musician relies on these interventions to stress and further develop the poet's denunciation. In the first section, for instance, words like "snow" and "once-upon," which are torn from the end of the first introductory passage,[10] are played over contradictory and iterative lines: "Must see and not see / Must not see nothing / Burrow and so burrow /Measuring mastering" (45; track 2, 0:54-1:03). The ensuing reverberation amplifies the multiplication of perspectives accomplished by the text, whose ambivalence warns against the duplicity of European colonists, who came as both explorers and conquerors ("Measuring, mastering"), who loved and yet exploited the land. Voice proliferation is then symptomatic of alternative stories, which can be recovered only by a revisionist approach to historical discourse, "re-reading re-tracing once-upon."[11] Elsewhere, this vocal irruption reflects and intensifies the violence of history deprecated by the poet, turning war—the "Armageddon at Fort William Henry" (51)—into the object of an auditory experience (after the perception of conflicting voices),[12] or helps undo the mapping and enclosing of the land, with its intrinsic transgression of spatial and temporal boundaries.[13]

In *Melville's Marginalia*, on the other hand, Grubbs devises one more "trick" for the listeners, splitting and turning the same poem against itself. Regarding the text on page 125, for instance, he works with the two halves of a poem (made up of 12 lines, it is divided into two sub-units of 6 lines each), having one overlap the other.[14]

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10 "Let myself drift in the rise and fall of light and snow, re-reading re-tracing once-upon" (41).

11 For the same reason and effect, this operation is repeated concerning the following, contradictory lines: "New life after the Fall / So many true things // which are not truth itself / We are too finite" (49; track 3, 0:11-0:17).

12 In compliance with the contents, Grubbs launches his attack by overlapping the most explosive sentence ("Work penetrated by the edge of author, traverses multiplicities, light letters exploding apprehension suppose when individual hearing," 42) over the lines "I stretch out my arms / to the author // Oh the bare ground // My thick coat and my tent / and the black of clouds" (51; track 3, 2:00-2:08).

13 The fixed borders designated on the page ("Most mysterious river // On the *confined brink* // Poor storm / all hallows // and *palings around cabin*," 53, emphasis mine) are shuttered by the incursion of words that emphasize instability ("Every name driven will be as another rivet in the machine of a universe flux," 42; track 3:18-3:28).

14 Here is, for convenience, the full text: "One forever occupied / stood on the path / with

The voiced text, consequently, evolves in a different way once released from the page. Starting from the middle of the second half ("Roisin Dubh means Ireland"), it goes on with the first line of the first half ("One forever occupied"). From now on, the two sections are delivered simultaneously: as the first flows regularly, the second, commenced in mid-way, runs back to its beginning, climbing upward. In the process, we hear two Susans, two voices with different pace and tone (quicker and pressing, concerning the first part; slow and meditative, concerning the second) that almost compete with each other, diverging rather than converging. In fact, even if they overlap, they never fully merge. Since the superimposition starts from the second sentence, the initial lag ensures that the "two voices" begin and finish at different times, providing only two clearly distinct but unrelated utterances, the first ("Roisin Dubh means Ireland") and the last ("a spectral creature on a ladder"), neither of which conforms to the line sequence of the printed poem. In between, the vocal clash undermines the stability of an already precarious text, whose transmission and experience are here totally transformed.

In like manner, the hesitancy of Howe's text, voiced as well as printed, is matched by Grubbs's acoustic interferences, or noises,[15] which cause disturbance and an increased sense of precariousness. The artist introduces synthetized and digital sounds as a background to Howe's reading voice or in between her stretches of speech, filling the silence of the white page. Disjointed from their original contexts, these simulated or recorded sounds imply an operation of de- and re-contextualization that parallels collage in the visual arts. Challenging listeners' comprehension, such a process invites them to develop meaning from the juxtaposition of unrelated backgrounds. Signaling discontinuity and rupture, it threatens to disintegrate listening and communication; on the other hand, this breaking of constraints can also release new possibilities of sound formation, expression, and signification.

In *Thorow*, vocal and musical executions are interspersed with or backgrounded by persistent buzzing and crackling noises that disturb enunciation, increasing indeterminacy. Abstracted from their sources, they prevent the recognition of a precise or familiar environmental context, generating some kind of anxiety. Likewise, in *Melville's Marginalia*, Grubbs pre-recorded and employed the distracting sounds he could hear at home while working on the text: dripping water, empty apartment creaks, melting snow, airplanes (Grubbs). Set in the new context, they provide further

whispered information / that that person / was Clarence Mangan / a spectral creature on a ladder / *all his souls was in the book / in his arms / Roisin Duhb means Ireland / On earth I guess / I am bound by a definition / of criticism*" (emphasis mine, to signal the split).

15 Like "voice" and "music," "noise" is also part of sound, denoting its material aspect and general property ("noisiness"). As a relational concept implying difference, it bears negative connotations once defined against music (music is "beautiful" and "desirable;" noise is "unintentional" and "unwanted"), in technologically mediated communication (noise as interference compromising the reception of the message), and in social contexts (where it names the inarticulate voices of marginal subjects). Cf. Novak 126-131 and, on the subversive potential of noise, Attali.

distractions, pairing the disruption of Howe's stuttering voice. Furthermore, the sounds of creaks and melting snow provide powerful acoustic metaphors for the crumbling of Howe's text and its changing state from the printed to the sonic dimension.

If digital and synthetized sounds, which point at a high degree of manipulation, produce acoustic effects that are equivalent to Howe's visual texts, supporting her voice when not capable of pairing the visual strategies employed on the page, instrumental music provides more than a mere accompaniment, more than just background. Itself a "reading," in the sense of "interpretation," it helps and supports Howe's audience of listeners. Experimenting with the sound of different instruments, Grubbs pursues effects that are inspired by Howe's performance. In *Thorow*, baritone saxophone variations, which are further lowered in pitch, are contrasted with the higher notes of the fluteophone, which parallel Howe's vocal flight out of lexical and syntactical boundaries.[16] In *Melville's Marginalia*, Grubbs joins Howe's cacophonous performance with music he composed and recorded for the piano and a brief excerpt from the recording of a Baroque violin concerto (Grubbs), juxtaposing dissonant notes for an altogether dissonant work.

Yet, in spite of the distinctions traced here, the boundaries between voice, sound (or noise), and music are continuously blurred, with a consequent convergence of each category into the others. Pre-recorded and manipulated to achieve specific effects, Howe's voice is turned into one more sound that cuts across Howe's performance. Nor is the poet's "live" execution exempt from the same process. Not only is it mediated by sound recording, but Grubbs's artifices never let the medium "vanish," never make it "transparent."[17] Music, too, undergoes a similar process of manipulation and objectification. Played by Mats Gustafsson, the notes from baritone saxophone and flutephone, in *Thorow*, have been pre-recorded and then conveniently "played" by Grubbs as Howe reads her text. In *Melville's Marginalia*, on the other hand, Grubbs integrates pre-recorded melodies and ambient sounds, which interfere with the verbal text in a complex, multilayered, acoustic dimension.

Enhanced by the musical arrangement, sound, and vocal manipulations of David Grubbs, Howe's voiced texts offer one more embodiment in the life of a poem

16 The music for *Thorow* took inspiration from Charles Ives's "Concord" Sonata, divided into four movements, the last of which is called "Thoreau." Here is a part for flute intended to represent Thoreau as playing his flute at Walden Pond. Grubbs asked Swedish musician Mats Gustafsson to record variations on this theme on the fluteophone, an instrument Gustafsson had created by squeezing a saxophone mouthpiece into the body of a flute (Grubbs).

17 Turning the means of sound reproduction into a "vanishing mediator" is to generate the illusion of direct, unmediated communication and prevent that "loss of fidelity," or "*loss of being*," that distinguishes a "copy" from its "original" (Sterne 218, original emphasis). Playing back Howe's pre-recorded voice over Howe's voice, *Thiefth* invalidates this dichotomy and the supposed value of "authenticity," itself a construction. Indeed, it manifests a new originality as "the possibility of reproduction transforms the practice of production" (Sterne 220).

that controverts the authority, stability, and closure of any "original," written text.[18] Her kind of selective reading, where portions of the printed works are skipped or exploded into a few, almost indiscernible fragments to be played over her voice, points to the dynamic potential of any text that printing, on the other hand, would inhibit. Whether the textual history of Howe's written products shows the poet engaged with a re-editing process that significantly transforms her previously published works, her oral instantiations affect more deeply the nature and reception of the texts. Her kind of anti-performative reading, intensified by compositions that precisely resist performance, shifts attention from language-as-word to language-as-sound, which, in turn, requires a parallel shift from *semantic* to *reduced* listening.

Whereas *semantic listening* looks at language to interpret a message, neglecting the acoustic properties of phonemes, *reduced listening* concentrates on sound itself, as an object rather than a mere vehicle. Acousmatic listening in particular, i.e. when someone hears a sound out of context, without seeing its cause, reinforces this mode since it directs the auditors' undivided attention to sonic textures. At the same time, it might also elicit *causal listening*, the most common of the three, with disoriented auditors in need of information about the cause or origin of what they are hearing (cf. Chion 48-52). Yet, even in this modality, listeners remain subject to vagueness. Not only does a sound usually have plural sources, especially if mediated; a recognizable source might still "go unidentified and unnamed indefinitely," as with a familiar radio announcer whose name and physical traits are not known by the audience (Chion 49). Entangled in an intricate web of sonorities, Howe's listeners are similarly asked to become familiar with sounds and voices that, removed from naming, evade repression in the political, social, and aesthetic domains.

Accordingly, the poet's turn from mere evoked aurality to oral vocalizing denotes a shift from an aesthetics of vision to an aesthetics of sound that does not contradict her visual experimentation but rather extends it. Howe's anti-representative, language-centered poetry, in fact, repudiates sight, which is exclusively bound to the eye and limited to a singled perspective, for the multidimensional potential of vision, which is instead open to multiple views and calls for integrated perception and cognitive processes: "Vision is eyes hearing, hands smelling," writes Bernstein ("Words and Pictures" 142). In this regard, sound offers a unique escape from optical hierarchies and restrictions. As sound artist and scholar Salomé Voegelin suggests, sonic perception "is free of the visual stronghold on knowledge and experience. Sound does not describe but produces the object/phenomenon under consideration. . . . It does not deny visual reality but practices its own fleeting actuality, augmenting

18 In this regard, Bernstein questions the unbalanced relationship between the written text, intended as an "immutable original," and the supposedly derivative nature of its performance, understood as interpretative recitation. Nor is there any "primary" written document as such, for even written texts exist in a variety of parallel versions (from manuscript papers to different printings), or "textual performances," "none of which can claim sole authority" (*Close Listening* 8).

the seen through the heard" (10). If, in the visual field, the subject contemplates and controls the object from the outside, in the auditory field, characterized by dynamism and surroundability (Ihde 73-83), there is no separation between the heard and the hearing. Sound can therefore question the notions of subject and object, and relationships between the two that reflect distance, hierarchy, and power. The aesthetic subject *in* sound is rather "defined by interaction with the auditory world" and "entwined with the heard" (Voegelin 5). Furthermore, being dynamic and evanescent, sound makes the very object of perception "unstable," "fluid" and "ephemeral," "unsettling what *is* through a world of sonic phenomena," "unsettling the idea of visual stability" (Voegelin 12, original emphasis).

Writing to unsettle visual frames, which reflect social and political dynamics of power and exclusion, Susan Howe's collaboration with David Grubbs successfully integrates visual and acoustic fields, increasing the capacity of both. Releasing sounds that, in the linguistic economy of the "paternal colonial systems" denounced in *Thorow*, are "incoherent, inaccessible, muddled and inaudible" (Howe, *Singularities* 21)—i.e. the "noise" of marginal voices—she calls for listening as an aesthetic practice that might challenge the way we see and act in the world (Voegelin 12), drawing attention to the overlooked and the unheard.

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Małgorzata Myk

Citizen Myles

Abstract: The following paper proposes a reading of American poet Eileen Myles' 2007 poetry collection *Sorry, Tree* in the interrelated contexts of Lauren Berlant's understanding of intimacy and her concept of *intimate citizenship*, Lee Edelman's understanding of sexuality and negativity, as well as Giorgio Agamben's sense of the contemporary as always untimely. An openly lesbian and queer author, Myles gestures towards the flawed and the disempowered, offering an intimate, yet unmistakably political negotiation of a minoritarian lesbian position as both defiant and transformative of the (hetero)normative *status quo* through acts of observation, engagement, and participation that do not necessarily have to be conspicuous or successful to effect reconceptualization of the social; rather, Myles suggests that individual agency in the public world also resides in failure as illuminative of the fact that one's desire for presence is continuously actualized through entanglement with negativity.

Keywords: Eileen Myles, presidential campaign, intimate citizenship, the contemporary, New Narrative, failure, negativity.

Eileen Myles still,
no image

in campaigning to be president when she is a poet there is our country's absent marginalia.
—Leslie Scalapino, *The Front Matter, Dead Souls*, p. 3

This essay begins with a memory of the 2008 *Poetry of the Seventies* Conference organized by the National Poetry Foundation collective at the University of Orono, Maine, where one of the events I attended was the "Queering the '70s" poetry reading. The three avant-garde poets invited to perform in the minimalist space of the on-campus Black Box Theater were Kevin Killian, Dodie Bellamy and Eileen Myles, authors associated with the New Narrative movement that emerged in the San Francisco Bay Area in late 1970s. Reclaiming fraught questions of identity and affect, representatives of New Narrative have been questioning the depersonalized and disaffected landscape of language-centered writing shaped by the continuing legacy of Language poets. Myles read poems published in the 1970s as well as from their 2007 collection *Sorry, Tree,* giving a *tour de force* performance of queer poetry and its sharply intersecting personal and political stakes that left both poets and scholars in the audience completely mesmerized.[1] During one of the post-conference conversa-

1 Referring to Myles, I am using the pronouns "they" and "their," instead of "she" and "her," taking into account the poet's current preference for sidestepping binary gender identification.

tions I had with poet Jennifer Moxley, she remarked that Myles had the gift of turning each flaw into something attractive. Taking the lingering word "flaw" as a point of departure for the following essay, I propose a reading of *Sorry, Tree* that brings into focus Myles' minoritarian queer perspective on the interrelated questions of poetics and politics, and, consequently, traces their poetic commitment to re-evaluation of citizenship and presence as shot through with awareness of flaws, failures, losses, as well as of what one has missed or wasted, making failure a critical and conceptual vehicle of their writing. In my analysis, I am indebted to Lauren Berlant's reflections on intimacy and citizenship from *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (1997), as well as her more recent study written with Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014), devoted to rehabilitation of negativity in present-day discussions of what Berlant and Edelman identify as queer publics.

Broadly speaking, I construe the motif of failure in Myles' work as a vehicle through which the poet unsettles the reader's grasp of presence, actuality and contemporariness, akin to Giorgio Agamben's idea of the contemporary articulated in his 2008 *What is an Apparatus?*:

> Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. (40)

For Agamben, the contemporary becomes inevitably entangled with the untimely, emerging as a mode of social participation realized not through perfectly timed resistance of existing actualities, but, much more radically, through initiating an altogether different kind of resistance that is not fully aligned with the normative protocols of one's present. As I intend to show, Agamben's definition of the contemporary as always somewhat behind time and anachronistic emerges as a useful ground from which one might approach a sense of anxiety regarding presence and (un)timeliness found in Myles' poems. Throughout this essay the untimely will therefore be treated as an ambivalent category that captures the poet's reflection on their often belated engagement with the reality of unfolding events and recognition that the forces that limit and determine this engagement can be deployed to emancipatory ends. Along these lines, I further suggest that Myles' preoccupation with failure is complicated by the force of negativity that, as Berlant and Edelman argue in *Sex*, accounts for the subject's "psychic and social incoherencies and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity... [and] unsettles the fantasy of sovereignty" (vii). For the authors of *Sex*, and as I shall argue also for Myles, negativity becomes a form that entails both acceptance and resistance, simultaneously producing and undercutting the fantasy of sovereignty, effecting the subjects' seeing of themselves beyond this fantasy as,

paradoxically, nonsovereign individuals. Nonsovereignty, as they suggest, requires a regrounding of the subjects' understanding of relationality, autonomy, self-control, and identification. In the following sections of this essay I examine Myles' poetry collection *Sorry, Tree*, focusing on its preoccupation with citizenship in the context of theoretical frameworks outlined above. In particular, I address the intimate entanglement present in Myles' poetics between citizenship and queer sexuality through the lens of Berlant and Edelman's thoughts on intimacy and nonsovereignty. I further comment on the significance of Myles' 1992 presidential campaign as an instance of the so called *infantile citizenship*, understood in Berlant and Edelman's sense of the term. Finally, I briefly examine the relationship between Myles' poetics and New Narrative as a mode of writing invested in reclaiming self-control and (non) sovereignty enacted through scrutiny of their limits.

Contrary to Myles' other, much louder titles, such as *A Fresh Young Voice from the Plains* (1981), the anthology *The New Fuck You: Adventures in Lesbian Reading* (co-edited with Liz Kotz in 1995), *Not Me* (1991), *Cool for You* (2000), or *Inferno* (2010), *Sorry, Tree* sounds oddly apologetic and dispirited for an openly queer and defiant author. One could say that *Sorry, Tree* is the older and more mature Myles, which would partly account for the change of key. Indeed, the poems resonate with a distinctly minoritarian note, figuring the speaker whose desire for presence is defined by fragility and vulnerability, and whose actions are often belated or unheroic. On the surface, the poems suggest a disconnect between the public sphere where the speaker resides as a citizen and the private one that they identify as home and where they want to thrive. Whereas the public realm is presented as compromised and deprived of political potential, Myles translocates this lost potential to the sphere of privacy, or even intimacy. The poems' most intimate fragments trace moments of regeneration needed for shaking off numbness and regaining motivation for action. At the same time, Myles deploys their poetics as a vehicle for bringing queer intimacy to the point of greater visibility, which may initially appear to be at odds with bigger picture politics indifferent to poetic appeals for queer emancipation. For Myles, however, queer intimacy and sexuality are politically consequential. *Sorry, Tree* includes several erotic poems that articulate queer desire as emancipatory and deeply transformative of one's sense of private space that, as Myles emphasizes, has never really been private, but always already public and political. Queer sexuality does not emerge here as a source of disidentification from constraining social and sexual norms; rather, the poems treat the intimate and the erotic as politicized domains with the potential to create a rupture in the public sphere. As Berlant, Edelman, as well as a host of other scholars, have argued, citizenship and sexuality are intertwined, since sexualities are contingent on material realities underlying the social and political sphere.[2] Myles thematizes the entanglement of the sexual

2 The term of "sexual citizenship" has been coined by David T. Evans in his 1993 book *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities*.

and the political, tracing the limits of intimacy's impact in negotiating precarious position of queer citizens. This dynamic is visible in the opening untitled poem of *Sorry, Tree*, which begins with the speaker's desire to make the feelings towards their lover public and ends on a self-conscious note of ambivalence, simultaneously foregrounding and questioning the possibility of recognizing the larger significance of their relationship. The poem's ironic note of disbelief reflects the social reality in which sexual citizenship continues to be both privately and publicly questioned as wanton and unpredictable: "the world / in our / hands a rattle / such a / joke / we shake it / shake it / shake it" (3).[3]

Myles' problematization of the private/public divide culminates in "No Rewriting," an unsettling testimony of the failure to "properly" witness the events of 9/11 terrorist attacks. Through a jarring juxtaposition of fragmented memories, the poem recalls private, rather than political, repercussions of events taking place on the day of the attacks, looking back at the day of 9/11 from the perspective of an individual whose daily routine is disrupted by an occurrence that initially appears too improbable to be grasped in any meaningful, complete, or rational way. They notice the burning towers from the building's roof, but decide to go downstairs to make coffee and then return to watch the unfolding events, eventually missing the moment when one of the towers collapses. The poem casually addresses one's failure to be present at a historic juncture that forecloses any possibility of "rewriting," capturing a sense of disbelief at one's always already untimely actions. It also suggests that the glaring act of tardiness betrays a more general sense of social anomie reflected further in the poem through the imagery depicting disturbing fragmentation and contingency of contemporary American reality. Myles' poem conveys the chaotic quality of the present through a deliberately raw, kaleidoscopic record of trauma that emerges as unamendable and uneditable, and whose intimately configured memories remain the only available account of one's belated response to terror. The poet's recognition of such precariously personalized perspective is exacerbated by the poem's glimpses of things happening at the same time in the neighborhood, such as hedonistic debauchery of lesbians partying hard on the building's roof and distant memories of a next-door neighbor living in abject poverty; the contrast that brings acute awareness of the need to question how one tends to distance oneself from the others' suffering and deprivation. Amidst the unrelenting stream of events and the unnerving illegibility of the present moment, the speaker repeatedly confronts experiences of loss and failure, feels deprived of anonymity and privacy, yet simultaneously desires transcending the limits of their own ego: "I want to be part of something bigger than myself /... / now I'm like king of the losers again /... / but I'm public, public, public" (4-5). The poems dissect these affects figuring life as the art of letting go but not letting it slide, of accepting one's limited perspective and understanding of reality yet standing up for oneself

3 Unless indicated otherwise, all excerpts from cited poems come from *Sorry, Tree*.

and others as we collectively wrestle with the chaotic and unintelligible present. Myles writes: "mainly I think you just have to take the loss into account / I don't care if you get it" (9).

In Myles' poetry, defeat becomes a resource, an occasion not so much for revision, and often no longer for repair, but for vision. In "Each Defeat," the daily and the erotic converge in a ludic queer imaginary:

> Keep smoothing
> the stones in the
> driveway
> let me fry an egg
> on your ass
> & I'll pick up
> the mail.
>
> . . . . . .
> I grow man woman
> Child
> I see wild wild wild
>
> Keep letting the
> day be massive
> Unlicensed
> . . . . . .
> Each defeat
> Is sweet" (21)

By contrast, "Therapy" refigures sessions with the speaker's therapist as temporary lines of flight during which they retreat into the animal-like vulnerability and nakedness of a guilt-free, glasses-free, innocent state. The poems emphasize intimate, domestic, and casual settings, whose safety is naturally conducive to sexual encounters that Myles nevertheless shows as always already public and highly visible. The poems' conversational tone is often punctuated by erotic images whose intensity stands for vitality and empowerment. But Myles' bold glimpses of queer sexuality have subversive potential also as they communicate the likelihood of lack of fulfillment, as well as impending loss or simple failure in one's love life. These intimate details inform the ways in which queer citizenship is negotiated in the text. In this sense, the poems' focus on intimacy is evocative of Berlant's theory, where citizenship is re-examined to include those social groups that are excluded from the making of the national fantasy of citizenship in which women, let alone lesbian or queer women, do not figure. According to Berlant, whereas such inclusion remains a fraught issue complicated by the on-going conflict between emancipatory minority struggle and political agendas inimical to this struggle, it is still politically useful. Berlant captures this conflict through the troubled figure of *infantile citizen* that nevertheless creates a rupture in

the national identity politics narrative: "Democracies can also produce a special form of tyranny that makes citizens like children, infantilized, passive, and overdependent on the 'immense and tutelary power' of the state" (27). In Berlant's account, infantile citizen initially emerges as disturbingly enervated: "a political subjectivity based on the suppression of critical knowledge and a resulting contraction of citizenship to something smaller than agency" (28). However, tracing the underlying paradoxes of production of political subjectivity in the U.S., Berlant discovers that infantile citizenship not only limits but also revitalizes one's attachment to the nation and to others, regrounding the definitional field of citizenship along with its constitutive terms of national identity and available modes of social participation. In her account, it becomes a form that "figures a space of possibility that transcends the fractures and hierarchies of national life" (27).

Berlant's notion of citizenship may also serve as a possible framework for interpreting Myles' 1992 presidential campaign, during which the poet positioned themselves as an openly-female minority candidate. Myles, who was then 41, was campaigning as a write-in candidate, which meant that their name did not appear in the official ballot. They launched the campaign in protest against George H. W. Bush's speech delivered at the University of Michigan, in which Bush disparaged political correctness as an obstacle to the freedom of speech. Myles read his words as a conservative appropriation of the term of political correctness and decided to take action.[4] Initially, campaigning was limited to occasions naturally created by events to which they were invited as a poet or speaker. Myles simply announced during the panels and readings that they were running as a candidate and spoke about the causes that they supported. To make a bigger splash Myles created a mailing list, started contacting fellow poets, friends, and acquaintances, and taking small contributions to be able to keep them informed about the campaign's activities. The word spread quickly and the matter became more public than Myles initially expected. Speeches and other campaign materials are archived on Myles' website, but it is worth evoking the poet's perception of the change that occurred between April 1991 and November 1992, when the campaign ended, as recounted by Joanna Rothkopf in her article about Myles' candidacy based on the internet archive and phone conversations: "I was in 28 states, I was in Europe, I was, you know, I was on MTV. It was kind of a nonstop experience and I realized—whether this was a mock campaign, a real campaign, an imaginary campaign—it was a campaign" (Myles qtd. in Rothkopf). I propose to trace the quixotic ingenuousness of Myles' political action to Berlant's utopian thinking about infantile citizenship as potentially transformative of the idealized national narrative of citizenship. As Berlant explains in *The Queen of America*: "As it is, citizen adults have learned to 'forget' or to render as impractical,

4 Talking to Joanna Rothkopf, Myles explained that they meant the phrase "a politically correct lesbian"; a conservative term used by lesbians. Myles saw the term as belonging to the minority rather than the conservative public discourse represented by Bush. Cf. Rothkopf.

naive, or childish their utopian political identifications in order to be politically happy and economically functional. Confronting the tension between utopia and history, the infantile citizen's stubborn *naiveté* gives her/him enormous power to unsettle, expose, and reframe the machinery of national life" (29). The fact of Myles' candidacy emerges as an extension of their poetry's preoccupation with the personal as inevitably traversed by political commitments, inscribed in the question of poetics seen more broadly as a mode of engagement that Barrett Watten and Lyn Hejinian defined as *writing in the expanded field* in their recently published impressive archive of texts that previously appeared in *Poetics Journal*. Hejinian and Watten see poetics as "a site for reflection on the making of the work that extends its construction into the fields of meaning in which it has its effects" (11). Myles' activism during the presidential campaign, as well as their endorsement of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 campaign, followed from a commitment to the idea that the import of writing can be extended past its formal aspects into the social realm where it keeps producing material effects.[5] In this sense, Myles raises the poetics' stakes in impacting and remodeling the field of meaning to accommodate social and political action.

Myles' poetics emerges as an experiment in nonsovereignty in Berlant and Edelman's paradoxical sense of the term. In their respective accounts, nonsovereignty implies a reconceptualization of our received understanding of the term whose negative potential is embraced so that nonsovereignty becomes a matter of rethinking the notion of relationality itself. As Edelman explains, "negativity disturbs the presumption of sovereignty by way of 'an encounter,' specifically, an encounter with the estrangement and intimacy of being in relation" (viii). Edelman's radical argument connects negativity and nonsovereignty to sexuality, arguing that queer sexuality contributes to revitalization of relationality by disturbing its official channels, becoming a source of temporary restorative disidentification from the socially sanctioned forms of identity:

> Sex and love are not events that change anything, usually; they induce a loosening of the subject that puts fear, pleasure, awkwardness, and above all experimentality in a scene that forces its participants to disturb what it has meant to be a person and to 'have' a world. It forces people to *desire* to be nonsovereign, and sometimes not-autonomous, and that puts them in intimate proximity to play, aversion, and unbearable intensity. (117, original emphasis)

In *Sorry, Tree*, Myles offers a queer perspective in which sexuality is shot through with the awareness of negativity and nonsovereignty, which does not make their perspective negative in the usual sense of the term, but rather decidedly oppositional. Indeed, in line with Edelman's argumentation, sexuality is seen as an aleatory and experimental mode of disidentification only as long as one does not automatically assume that sex

5 Cf. Myles, "Hillary Clinton."

by its very nature functions as a kind of utopian beyond; instead, Edelman suggests that sexuality mobilizes self-questioning. Myles punctuates the poems with glimpses of lesbian sex and images of queer porn shops, making these moments unashamedly intense and visible, yet at the same time avoids creating a jarring contrast between these vivid instances of self-exposure and the poems' generally much subtler, homely tone. Instead, the poems create another "field of meaning," to use Hejinian and Watten's phrase again, that incorporates queer difference without naturalizing, neutralizing, or idealizing it. Myles often alludes to trajectories of queer loves as unpredictable, longings that seem unbearable, or relationships that are beyond repair, which easily makes for a life marked, perhaps irrevocably, with negativity. In the poem "Something Simple," the speaker nevertheless relents: "I am sympathetic / to all that's lost" (61).

Like Berlant and Edelman, Myles complicates the negative and embraces its underlying ambivalence, which becomes more pronounced towards the end of *Sorry, Tree*, when Myles' tone changes, particularly in Ginsbergian "To Hell" and the closing text of the collection "Everyday Barf," originally written as a talk for a panel on the poetry of everyday. These two texts are no longer preoccupied with the elation offered by erotic queer vision, but rather dwell on the less hopeful aspects of queer lives in contemporary American political and social reality. Evocative of Ginsberg's "Howl," "To Hell" is a poem that bypasses Ginsberg's elegiac, apocalyptic vision by adopting a much lighter and realistic tone. The speaker's initially despondent mood caused by the feeling of being alienated in the city ruled by men gradually changes its tone into a sarcastic and playfully perverse quest for queer difference and its presence in public space. Its initial mockery of Republican conservative discourse accompanied by discontent over the masculine-only perspective are dispelled in favor of an unfolding vision of cityscape strategically marked with the word "gay," stubbornly appended at several junctures of the poem. Myles' wryly ironic, self-consciously childlike rant evokes Berlant's figure of *infantile citizen* and their defiant resolve:

> I don't have to wonder whose group I'm in today.
> Certainly the people who always think the public problem is theirs are gay
> . . . . . .
> The uneven horizon's great and of course she's gay
> The buildings are falling in love, and we opened its eye
> today. (71)

"Everyday Barf," on the other hand, becomes a reminder that writing must remain in communication with the less glorified aspects of everyday life, taking over at a point where all stale platitudes are finally expunged. The text's memory of a boat trip that brought about sea-sickness induces the general feeling of queasiness related to life's mundane or unbearable aspects, yet also compels the speaker to spontaneously deal with some personal matters such as writing a letter to their mother. For Myles,

nevertheless, negativity resonates as strongly as it does for Berlant and Edelman, since it "points to many kinds of relation in what follows, from the unbearable, often unknowable, psychic conflicts that constitute the subject to the social forms of negation that also, but differently, produce subjectivity" (xii). This ambivalent take on the fraught nature of both social and intimate relations as often negatively motivated yet still constructive or transformative of queer subjectivity is part and parcel of Myles' poetics. Poetically and politically, Myles embraces the negative with the kind of perverse wisdom and self-irony that do not stifle spontaneity or vitality: "sometimes the only no I have / is to reverse things" (4). Closing their talk given in New York City during the 2014 PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature, titled "Obsession: Eileen Myles On Spoilage and Ruination of Other Kinds," Myles concluded with one of such queer reversals: "I know I won't be getting any dates out of this" (PEN America).

Foregrounding working-class consciousness as well as awareness of communal precarity, Myles' minoritarian poetics echoes Judith Butler's words from her 2015 *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly,* where precarity is defined as "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others" (33). Its sense informs the poems' discourse on intimacy and its underlying desire for the safety of being and feeling at home, both as somebody's partner and as a citizen. In the poem "Home," the speaker states the need for inhabiting a space that is not reduced to the function of a workplace, or even a place where one has the comfort of engaging in creative activity, but rather suggests a space that must be wholesome in a broader sense: "It's not where I write / it's where I vegetate" (38). Vegetation, a recurring motif throughout *Sorry, Tree*, entails wholesomeness that one does not find in the highly functional "operative society," to use Jean-Luc Nancy's term, but rather in a different kind of collective relationality that the philosopher called "inoperative community," in which social relations are revised and transformed through the recognition that community cannot ground itself based on what the society has lost; rather, "such a 'loss' is constitutive of 'community' itself" (Nancy 12). In Myles' poetics, loss is similarly seen as constitutive of American culture that, as we read in the poem "Culture," paradoxically "accepts all / marks & none," to which the speaker responds with characteristic unpretentiousness: "So I'll just write / into it" (43). Indeed, Myles' *writing into*, just like their *write-in* candidacy, shows that they see the poet as someone who ventures beyond the aesthetic realm of form and style into the social domain, continues to trouble the *status quo*, and whose actions are equally unsettling and restorative.

Invoking the significance of failure with regard to the poet whose stature has been recently so widely recognized ironically puts at risk my own untimely critique. The author of over twenty volumes of work, Myles is considered one of the most important avant-garde authors in the U.S., coming a long way from the New York City-based experimental poetry scene to international audiences. Many of their

works, including numerous poetry collections, the so-called poet's novels, such as famous *Cool for You* or *Inferno*, libretti, as well as a volume of essays on traveling, art, and writing *The Importance of Being Iceland*, have been recently elevated to the status of cult classics. Myles' charisma inspired Jill Soloway, the creator of award-winning Amazon queer TV series *Transparent* and Myles' former partner, to create a character modeled on the poet, who appears in the last season's several episodes. This curious present-day celebrity profile notwithstanding, Myles has been committed to expanding the notion of poetics and poetic practice by keeping poetry close to vicissitudes of life. Like many of their fellow avant-garde poets, Myles traces the meaning of avant-garde writing to regrounding the concept of relationality, seeing avant-garde as committed to expressing "a different relationship to the world," as they remarked in the 1999 talk "How To Write an Avant-Garde Poem" published in *The Importance of Being Iceland* (159). At the same time, Myles' depiction of intimate citizenship is distinctly American, perhaps closer to Thoreau's praise of hands-on experience of *Walden* and anarchic resistance of *Civil Disobedience* than Emerson's idealized vision of *Self-Reliance*. Myles' often acknowledged preference for Thoreau's version of sovereignty impacts their sense of the avant-garde as a spectrum of artistic practices that must go against the grain of professionalization, pointing to the artist's or writer's commitment to experimentation and improvisation based on materials to which they have immediate access: "Avant-garde means do it yourself" (Myles, 2009, 160). This attitude, which reverberates in the title of *Sorry, Tree* and defines the entire collection, is suggestive of self-criticism needed to overcome the writer's temptation of over-indulgence and wastefulness of natural resources.

Myles' work foregrounds the idealized fantasy of present-day citizenship as continually troubled by lesbian and queer difference, construing the notion of intimate citizenship as a critical space of reflection that does not fall back on the unitary notion of identity but rather expands it. This anti-identitarian aspect may initially seem at odds with Myles openly gay, minoritarian position, and the fact that their work has been associated with New Narrative, a mode of avant-garde writing aligned with the affective turn that privileges autobiographical details, authenticity and messiness over impersonality and orderly formalism based in the calculated erasure of self and emotion that characterized texts of the Language poets.[6] The questions underlying New Narrative, articulated by Robert Glück in his well-known piece "Long Note on New Narrative," can be evoked to describe Myles' work: "How can I convey urgent social meanings while opening or subverting the possibilities of meaning itself?.... What kind of representation least deforms its subject? Can language be aware of itself (as object, as system, as commodity, as abstraction) yet take part in the forces that generate the present? Where in writing does engagement become authentic?" (27). Glück's short essay puts in perspective the tensions

6 Emily Cooke writes on Myles' relationship to New Narrative in her 2012 article "The Semiautobiographers."

between the protocols of Language writing and New Narrative's focus on the mode of writing that not only tries to rehabilitate the subject for avant-garde literary practice but also enquires about the possibility of bridging the gap between the text's work on deconstruction of sense and its simultaneous effort to be socially meaningful. Addressing its autobiographical leanings, Emily Cooke points out that New Narrative does not simply fall back on the conventionally self-reflexive mode of autobiography. As she argues, "the new semiautobiographers, you might call them—reject privacy and propriety for openness and provocation.... [T]hey aim for a synthesis of the personal and the intellectual[.]" While Cooke focuses on New Narrative's key experimental novels, Myles' contribution to New Narrative is the poet's novel, the genre that performs an extension of poetic practice onto prose. As Myles explains in the short essay "Long and Social," included in the anthology of writings on recent innovations in the evolution of the narrative form *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*, the poet's novel breaks the novelistic mold by aligning itself with the poetic mode: "It's epic poetry in the sense that the epic poem is a communal form, and long and social. I wrote it for you" (149).

"There's only one person in the world who's going to decide what I'm going to do and that's me[.]" These famous words spoken by the epitome of autocracy Charles Foster Kane in Orson Welles' 1941 masterpiece *Citizen Kane* ring ominously true in the context of today's return of authoritarianism in the U.S. and elsewhere. Myles' minoritarian poetics mobilizes the model of intimate citizenship that takes the Agambenian sense of untimeliness in its stride as it strives for presence simultaneously remaining sympathetic to devastating moments of absence, of missing events, things, and persons, which shows the poet's awareness of the world's fragility, as well as of the extent to which democracy continues to be daily jeopardized. Myles belongs to the long line of contemporary U.S. poets whose work proves, as Nicky Marsh wrote in her 2007 *Democracy in Contemporary U.S. Women's Poetry*, "[p]oetry's ability to be at once of the public and yet capable of exceeding its presumptions allows for a space in which the radical contingencies of contemporary power can be reshaped through new conceptions of identity and of responsibility and freedom" (153). The Leslie Scalapino epigraph with which I opened this essay, excerpted from her 1996 *The Front Matter, Dead Souls*, expresses an affinity between Myles' minoritarian poetic/political interventionist practice and Scalapino's innovative political text originally written in the serial form and sent out for publication in several newspapers during the election campaign. Scalapino's texts were rejected by editors and subsequently published as *Front Matter*, offering an extended commentary on the stakes of poetic discourse in contemporary political reality, which Marsh aptly referred to as an alternative form of public discourse (96). Writing this amidst Poland's own political turmoil, I keep recalling the archival footage of Myles' performance of their famous "An American Poem," coming from the 1991 collection *Not Me*, written around the time of the campaign, currently on display as part of the exhibition "Ministry of Internal Affairs: Intimacy as Text" in The Museum of Contemporary Art in Warsaw.

A small tv set casually placed on the stone floor right in the middle of the museum hall is playing on a loop young Myles' fiery reading of the poem that ends with a resolute call for communal (non)sovereignty:

> I am not
> alone tonight because
> we are all Kennedys.
> And I am your President. (3:37)

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Magdalena Zurawski

Marxism for Single Mothers: Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women*

Abstract: In this reading of Anne Boyer's *Garments Against Women* I argue that the poet's 2015 collection of prose poetry positions literary and intellectual labor as both historically and currently oppressive to women through its figurative engagement with early capitalist textile production. I further demonstrate that despite Boyer's overt engagement with a narrative of modern labor rooted in eighteenth-century industrialization, her writing is indebted to the work of a contemporary American Avant-garde. I show that the poets Alice Notley and Bernadette Mayer, whose works have culled material from spheres of life traditionally understood as both feminine and anti-poetic, have served as precursors for Boyer's overtly Marxist and feminist works.

Keywords: Anne Boyer, New York School, Feminism, American avant-gardes, Language Poetry

I am typing this sentence in America at the end of the first week of the Trump regime. The journalist Jonathan M. Katz, in a tweet from the fifth day of the new "presidency," aptly captured the current chaotic political atmosphere: "First they came for the Latinos, Muslims, women, gays, poor people, intellectuals, and scientists, and then it was Wednesday." In the whirlwind of political strikes from the Right, everyone I know feels like a boxer on the ropes, taking swipes to the jaw, our country seemingly redefined in a matter of days by a narcissist obsessed with the number of attendees at his inauguration, whose closest adviser, a self-proclaimed Leninist and white nationalist, has infiltrated the White House absent of congressional approval. In this situation, it is hard to reflect on poetry, to turn away from the endless news cycle for any reason, though, at least in my circle of friends, artists and academics and such, it is affecting our sleep cycles negatively. The Trump regime has already promised to come after poetry and the other arts, too. It will dismantle the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal organization that has supported many small poetry presses and their not-for-profit distributor, Small Press Distribution, though in the light of the Muslim ban that went into effect this morning, which will force refugees back into the terror zones at least partially if not largely created by the U.S.'s failed interventions in the Middle East, federal support for poetry seems a meager loss.

This fall as I planned my talk for the conference in Lodz I chose to discuss the work of Anne Boyer because her 2015 book *Garments Against Women* adapts the

aesthetic strategies of previous American avant-gardes to interrogate Literature itself as a capitalist institution, thus revealing the assumptions of literary aesthetics as a history of modernity grounded in a Lockean conception of property in person. For Boyer, literature, like most cultural production in the modern-era, universalizes the forms of bourgeois experience as a ruse for democratic inclusion: "As if the language of poets is the language of property owners. As if the language of poets is the language of professors. As if the language of poets is not the language of machines" (14). The trope of "garments" first appears in Boyer's title, but mutates in figurative purpose throughout the collection, eventually signifying all political, social, economic, and aesthetic institutions, including literature, institutions all conceived and grounded in abstract assumptions and thus largely unable to "accommodate a grown woman's torso" (25). With the prose poems' evocations of Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Rousseau, these "garments" never shed their echoes of early capitalist textile production that relied upon women and children for cheap labor, thus continually reminding the reader that this Enlightenment institution of liberal democracy was never quite liberal or democratic. As I return my thoughts to Boyer's work this week, it is hard for me not to fear that our current regime's attempts to tighten our democratic "garments" towards a less inclusionary fit is simply the natural progression of historical logic.

What I would identify as the "innovation" in Boyer's work is its ability to theorize literature's relationship to the personal in a way that calls into question Language Poetry's privileging of literary works that simply forefront language as artifice. Suspicious of the conventions of lyric poetry, the "honest feeling" expressed as the voice of the poet through the pronoun "I," Language Poetry in practice favored works staged as a field of linguistic play, abstracted and removed from the poet's experiences as a social and political animal in the world. Though Charles Bernstein's critique of the formulaic transparency of twentieth-century official verse culture rightfully diagnosed that when poetry cops a "natural look" the reader forgets she is in a highly ideological space through the staging of "[p]ersonal subject matter and flowing syntax," the question Boyer wrestles with centers on the problem of abstraction in literature (40). That Boyer's writing is conspicuously informed by theory and philosophy and never achieves the transparency of the "natural look" Bernstein calls into question suggests an affinity with Language Poetry, yet her essay on Louis Althusser, "Kill the Philosopher in Your Head," calls for a theoretical orientation incapable of enabling an abstract relationship to human flesh. Boyer makes this argument through a reading that implicates Althusser's murder of his wife as the result of a philosophical error:

> In being unaware even if the person whose neck he is 'massaging' from the front is alive or dead, Althusser inadvertently describes philosophy's fatal level of abstraction. As the wife-killer treats human as object, a passive material to be formed or unformed by more powerful hands,

> so too, the kind of philosophy Althusser describes makes objects of the masses, much to their own risk.

Boyer's point here is that Althusser, as the thinking man, cannot incorporate the very real political and personal conditions of his own life into his theoretical practice and it is the woman who does not survive the philosophical impasse. This essay read against Boyer's work in *Garments Against Women* suggests that this Marxist philosophy becomes lethal due to the exclusion of "inadmissible information," what we might understand as generic constraints, which are also restraints upon content, or as she writes in her piece "The Innocent Question":

> Inadmissible information is often information that has something to do with biology (illness, sex, reproduction) or money (poverty) or violence (how money and bodies meet). Inadmissible information might also have to do with being defanged by power (courts, bosses, fathers, editors, and other authorities) or behaving against power in such a way that one soon will be defanged (crime). (9)

Arguably by including the "inadmissible" personal information of Althusser's violent murder of his wife into the genre of philosophical critique, Boyer expands the capacities of the genre to include the very real repercussions of the history of philosophy upon the female body. By otherwise preserving the conventions of the genre, Boyer seamlessly (pun intended) alters the shape of the genre (garment) to include the corpse of a woman. The otherwise "inadmissible" biographical fact enters as evidentiary material to debunk a philosopher's position regarding the relationship between philosophy and politics. Boyer's delineation and inclusion of the "inadmissible" as necessary to the development of a practical Marxist feminist philosophy and poetics reveals her debt to poets like Alice Notley and Bernadette Mayer, second-generation New York School poets, who likely would express little interest in rehearsing the kind of fluency in philosophy or theory Boyer is drawn to, but who redefined Frank O'Hara's earlier notion of "Personism" from a poetry so personal that it becomes "true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry" (O'Hara xiv) to a poetry that includes what Boyer calls "not writing" (44), all those experiences of living often exceeding the parameters of accepted material for poetry, especially the kind of living that is definitively female. Here I am thinking particularly of Notley's early piece, "Homer's Art," where she also considers what might happen to literature, if women entered it as something other than extensions of a patriarchal discourse: "Another service would be to write a long poem, a story poem, with a female narrator/hero. Perhaps this time she wouldn't call herself something like Helen; perhaps instead there might be recovered some sense of what mind was like before Homer, before the world went haywire & women were denied participation in the design & making of it" (114). Notley argues that to allow a woman to write the poetry of a nation would alter both the poetry and the nation, that our

nation is a garment ill in its "design," a design replicated in the fabric of politics by the continual exclusion of women's thoughts, women's experiences. The exclusion of women, Notley suggests, alters all human thought, not just women's thoughts. To write a long poem from the perspective of a woman would "recover" something. The practice capable of occurring in the present could potentially retrieve an occulted human past buried by patriarchal tradition.

A project like Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day* approaches the problem of "inadmissible information" and poetry from a more mundane angle. Mayer's piece attempts to record in writing all events domestic and otherwise occurring within the purview of her consciousness upon a single day, the winter solstice, December 22, 1978. In doing so Mayer creates a literary form that necessarily preserves those events of domestic life normally considered to be of little significance:

> My absorption in your clothes is only sensible, why bother to toast the bread but I'm willing, it's to make the bread warm, here's a royal blue shirt and red pants put into the words of your eyes not as dark as mine but darker than his whose eyes are impatient for a moment to see more than that you still need so much to be done in detail for you we can never seem to get out of the house. (30)

Despite its focus on the personal (making breakfast, getting oneself and the kids out of the house, etc.), the writing never attains the "natural look" Bernstein rejects. The demands of Mayer's project—to record the material and immaterial (passing thoughts, feelings, etc.)—call for a flexible and unconventional syntax. This in turn results in an artifice lacking in transparency, so that the reader is kept aware of being placed within a consciously constructed aesthetic space, a garment, but one capacious enough to record much of one woman's life as it unfolds over the course of a single day.

Mayer's project reveals the possibility of expanding generic innovation to include forms of life not traditionally considered literary, but Boyer's penchant for the manifesto-like prose poem, for genres of diagnostic opposition, suggest that when she critiques the narrowness of literary tradition, she is more interested in delineating the absurdity of modernity and the economic relationships that define it than seeking out, like Mayer, some sort of literary mode that might carry personal experience. Her piece "What Is 'Not Writing?'" through its exhaustive delineation of everything that comes between a single mother and literary production verges on the comic, as the excerpt below shows:

> There are years, days, hours, minutes, weeks, moments, and other measures of time spent in the production of 'not writing.' Not writing is working, and when not working at paid work like caring for others, and when not at unpaid work like caring, caring also for a human body, and when not caring for a human body many hours, weeks, years, and

> other measures of time spent caring for the mind in a way like reading or learning and when not reading and learning also making things (like garments, food, plants, artworks, decorative items) and when not reading and learning and working and making and caring and worrying also politics, and when not politics also the kind of medication which is consumption, of sex mostly or drunkenness, cigarettes, drugs, passionate love affairs, cultural products, the internet also, then time spent staring into space that is not a screen, also all the time spent driving, particularly here where it is very long to get anywhere, and then to work and back, to take her to school and back, too. (44)

"Not writing" here operates as a kind of negated table of contents for a work like Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, suggesting that Boyer's project is to create a poetic language capable of diagnosing the socio-economic borders of female life, literary and otherwise. If *Garments Against Women* has a thesis it, crassly put, might be something like, "everything in history and life exists to stop me from writing," but the fact is that the reader comes upon this notion by reading through a published book with Boyer's name on the cover. The author, through virtue of publication, undermines her own argument—and this is the joke. Mid-way, when the reader happens upon the following sentences, she can only take it as meta-textual jest: "But who would publish this book and who, also, would shop for it? And how could it be literature if it is not coyly against literature, but sincerely against it, as it is also against ourselves?" (48)

Boyer's question *is coy*, but the politics of her entire endeavor suggests possibility. These poems show that to articulate and resist the limitation of any form of life is already to alter that very form. In our push against that which is *against* us, we inevitably begin to make it *for* us.

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Jerzy Kamionowski

"Make It News": Racist (Micro)Aggressions, the Lyrical You, and Increased Legibility in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Abstract: Claudia Rankin's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) is a perplexing work both because of its unusual presentation of the issue of racism in America and the original formal ways through which its message is communicated. It is formally innovative and technically experimental in an 'average reader'-friendly manner, situating itself a world apart from the poetics of "deliberate illegibility" and "increased interruption." By communicating its message directly, it is almost a poem with a purpose, yet it makes categories travel. The subtitle emphasizes *Citizen*'s belonging in the generic tradition of the lyric despite the fact that the lyrical "I" remains almost non-existent here; instead, the poem draws on extensive implementation of apostrophe—related to Butler's concept of "addressability." Also the phrase "American lyric" situates Rankin's book outside of the well-established categories of black lyrical poetry whose essential feature is its connection with black musical form of the blues. *Citizen* can be classified as a prose-poem essay, yet its sociological orientation and emphasis on poetic form's and language's capacities to inform, instruct, emotionally move, and morally engage the reader go together with activating more 'conventionally experimental' strategies as it merges the verbal, visual, and performance arts, using photographs, TV programmes, film frames, "situation videos," installations, and conceptual art. The article explores those issues, demonstrating how formal innovation may serve the purpose of reaching a relatively wide audience and make poetry matter within the field of current public debate on important social and cultural problems.

Keywords: Claudia Rankine, addressability, blackness, discrimination, (il)legibility

Since Ezra Pound's "Make it new" demand, in America attempting innovation has become a must for experimental poetry, if not for poetry as such, as the preferences of academic criticism proved at the end of the 20th century. Perhaps innovation can be taken for the poetic ore itself. Surely it helps generate and sustain the experience of astonishment as contrasted with our everyday "knowing"—i.e. minds equipped with unquestioned and unquestionable theories and truths, not infrequently inherited from our Stone Age ancestors (as we are informed by evolutionary psychologists and their emissaries in the field of cognitive literary studies today). Seen from this perspective, innovation appears to be a means of phenomenological reduction, liberating the poet—and, by extension, the reader—from the burden of preconceptions and *a priori* convictions, and taking us back to the phenomena themselves, to the world as enigma, language as open possibility, artistic process as adventure and poetic form as a tool for discovery.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary online defines "innovation" simply as:

1/ the introduction of something new;

2/ a new idea, method, or device; novelty;

Oxforddictionaries.com gives a similar definition, but followed by an interesting example of usage:

Innovation:

1. The action or process of innovating;

1.1. A new method, idea, product, etc.

'*technological innovations designed to save energy*'

The example above suggests that innovation is not practiced merely for novelty's sake or as a strategy of discovering the world or experimenting with it. Rather, it has a practical purpose to accomplish. Obviously, the ever present buzzword "innovation" is not limited to poetry; it is also extensively used in business, an area which ascribes to it a much more precise and definitive meaning. According to *BusinessDictionary.com* innovation is a

> process of translating an idea or *invention* into a good or service *that creates value* or *for which customers will pay*. To be called an innovation, an idea must be replicable at an economical cost and *must satisfy a specific need*. Innovation involves deliberate application of information, imagination and initiative in deriving greater or different values from resources, and includes all processes by which new ideas are generated and converted into *useful products*. (emphasis added)

In business, innovation often "results when ideas are applied by the company in order to further *satisfy the needs and expectations* of the *customers*" (*BusinessDictionary.com*). I hasten to add: the needs and expectations of *the present customers*, which means that inventions-turned-innovations do not remain the latter forever. Innovation is by its nature temporary and, in the world today, when expectations of constant novelty are sky-high, novelty itself is short-lived.

I believe that such a "customer-oriented" approach to innovation should be kept in mind when Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* is discussed, a profoundly-cum-surprisingly perplexing work of literature both because of its original presentation of the issue of racism in America today and the original formal ways through which its message is communicated. The questions to be addressed in this article read: What exactly is the purpose of formal invention in the volume? Does it result in innovation? If so, what specific needs and expectations of the readers/customers does it satisfy? In what sense is the final product useful?

Rankine's book, regarded by Evie Shockley, who characterized *Citizen* online as a successful "artistic representation of the American *zeitgeist*," has been the winner of a number of literary prizes, including the 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award (Poetry) and that same year's finalist of NBCC in the category of "Criticism," which suggests a recognizable degree of its "genre indeterminacy" (Shockley) of

Citizen tend to call its components (and quite rightly) "essays," "lyric essays," "prose narratives," "stories," and "prose representations" significantly more often than "poems"—even "prose poems"—even when the volume as a whole is referred to as "poetry" (Shockley). Evie Shockley points out that her Black Poetry course students spontaneously observed that "*It's not like poetry,*" which they meant as a compliment rather than criticism. What they specifically responded powerfully to was that *Citizen*, compared to the many other works they studied together as part of the course, gave the reader an "unmediated access to a recognizable truth" (Shockley).

I am far from saying that the students are right in their indirect rejection of most poetic production (especially written in the mode of the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E school) as "inaccessible" and in consequence useless, yet I find it symptomatic that drawing attention to the book's "unconventionality as poetry" largely serves the purpose to "signal its accessibility as prose" (Shockley). In other words, "the qualities that mark *Citizen* as 'experimental' poetry are precisely the qualities that make it inviting, despite its disturbing subject matter, to a generally poetry-phobic public" (Shockley). It is as if we are back to the 1980s debate run under the banners of New Formalism and New Narrativism as to how poetry can regain the attention of the reading public and how to make it matter. As Shockley observes, "the book's reception seems fundamentally linked to its perceived transparency" which

> makes this poem's presentation of white supremacist ideology... so much clearer, more shocking, or more unavoidable, even in the eyes of poetry's devotees, than the legions of poems that black poets have composed in this vein during the century of the color line and in the decade and a half of this new century.

A similar view is expressed by Marjorie Perloff in the blurb:

> What does it mean to be a black citizen in the US of the early twenty-first century? Claudia Rankine's brilliant, terse, and parabolic prose poems have a shock value *rarely found in poetry*. These tales of everyday life—whether the narrator's or the lives of young black men like Trayvon Martin and James Craig Anderson—dwell on the most normal exteriors and the most ordinary of daily situations so as to expose what is really there: a racism so guarded and carefully masked as to make it all the more insidious. (emphasis added)

I would like to emphasize Perloff's phrase "rarely found in poetry," in spite of the fact that this quotation appears in the blurb on the back cover, where exaggerated praise is a norm. What the critic supposedly means by that is that Rankine seems to have found a formally effective way to capture and communicate the black experience of racism and altered manifestations—compared with the direct brutality and violence (e.g. lynching) and overt discriminatory practices in the past (e.g. Jim Crow

laws)—of racism in contemporary America by separating her prose poems from the present standard of sophisticated linguistic complexity. Yet, it is thematic and formal innovation of *Citizen*, which accounts for the book's power. *Citizen* challenges currently circulated critical categories in many respects. It is formally inventive and technically experimental in an unusual, "average reader"-friendly manner, situating itself a world apart from the poetics of "deliberate illegibility" and "increased interruption," by foregrounding its own communicative and affective functions. By communicating its message directly, it is almost a poem with a purpose, openly didactic in its intention—it is not a coincidence that its last sentence reads: "It was a lesson" (159).

Nevertheless, Rankine makes categories travel in *Citizen*. The subtitle emphasizes *Citizen*'s belonging in the generic tradition of the lyric despite the fact that the lyrical "I" remains almost non-existent here; instead, the poem draws on the extensive implementation of apostrophe. Also the phrase "American lyric" situates Rankine's book outside of the well-established categories of African American lyrical poetry whose essential feature is its close connection with black musical forms (especially the blues). It can be classified as a prose-poem essay or a narrative prose-poem, anchoring itself within the poetic "conservative" trend identified as "new narrativism." The book's sociological orientation and emphasis on poetic form's and language's capacities to inform, instruct, emotionally move, and morally engage the reader goes together with activating more "conventionally experimental" strategies as it merges the verbal, visual, and performance arts, using photographs, TV programs, film frames, "situation videos," installations, and conceptual art. Now I am going to take a selective look at the volume's formal inventiveness in these respects.

Apart from the national and international media-covered examples of large-scale, spectacular instances of racism in the United States included in part VI of the book as a series of scripts for situation videos (on Hurricane Katrina, Trayvon Martin, James Craig Anderson, Mark Duggan, Jena Six, Zinedine Zidane's headbutt among others), *Citizen* accumulates and describes with surgical precision cases of racist microaggressions (implied judgements, remarks, comments etc.) collected by the author from her friends and acquaintances (mostly in part one, but also, for instance, in part VI's scripts for situation videos: "Stop-and-Frisk" and "Making Room"). Here Rankine probes under the facade of middle-class and academic norms and standards, in the post-affirmative-action world of supposed political correctness. As Rob Bryan in his online article entitled "Against a Sharp White Background: Race and Decorum in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*" puts it, "[h]er setting is not the blighted inner-city ghetto or the prison, but the manicured lawns of white suburbia and the genteel interactions of the academia." Among them, there are two accounts of situations involving credit cards:

> The man at the cash register wants to know if you think your card will work. If this is his routine, he didn't use it on the friend who went before you. As she picks up her bag, she looks to see what you will say. She says

> nothing. You want her to say something—both as witness and as a friend. She is not you; her silence says so. Because you are watching all this take place even as you participate in it, you say nothing as well. Come over here with me, your eyes say. Why on earth would she? The man behind the register returns your card and places the sandwich and Pellegrino in a bag, which you take from the counter. What is wrong with you? This question gets stuck in your dreams. (Rankine 54)

> When the waitress hands your friend the card she took from you, you laugh and ask what else her privilege gets her? Oh, my perfect life, she answers. Then you both are laughing so hard, everyone in the restaurant smiles. (Rankine 148)

These two situations point at the apparently unconscious, instinctual, and somehow "routine" exclusion of even upper middle-class black Americans from "consumer citizenship," a category which we would expect to designate one of the most color-blind "contemporary practices of social belonging"; they simultaneously serve as a means of "political pacification in the United States" (Berlant, "Citizenship" 38). Yet, in both cases the credit card becomes a sort of magical object that grants or denies access to the "white good life," called by Laurent Berlant in her *BOMB* conversation with Rankine the "snow-globe fantasy... which insists that black subjects have good manners and remain convenient" (online); the "perfect life" not only of consumerism, but of personhood, suddenly awaking political awareness of the submerged racial criteria of inclusion and exclusion.

The credit card anecdotes share this function with a visiting card incident described by W. E. B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk*, who recalls an experience of being rejected on racial grounds in "the early days of [his] rollicking boyhood... away in the hills of New England," when "it dawned upon [him] with a certain suddenness that [he] was different from the others" (4). Du Bois relates how, together with other children at school, he participated in exchange of "gorgeous visiting cards," an exchange which was merry until "one girl, a tall newcomer, refused his card—refused it peremptorily, with a glance" (4). Jonathan Flatley acutely interprets the girl's private rejection/public exclusion on the racial grounds of the young Du Bois, the exclusion which cannot be erased or modified by the white hand on his card, as "a body blow that knocked [him] out of the light of personhood, back into a more uncertain, shadowy realm of bodily positivity in which neither citizenship nor self-(mis)recognition are available" (129). This uncertainty pertaining to one's social/ontological positioning, connected with the discovery that blackness in America is always bodily positive, manifests its presence in Rankine's *you's* expectation of their friend's reaction and disappointment that there is none, as well as in the "[w]hat is wrong with you?" question that permanently remains in the national unconscious ("This question gets stuck in your dreams"), the phenomenon so well described by Toni Morrison in her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

Nonetheless, *Citizen*'s refined and discreet intertextuality is not limited to literary works, however dense that web of references and echoes is; for example, it connects with Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* in the above-mentioned card anecdote; the moral attention to cases of race crime bring to mind "Scotsboro", a poem by Langston Hughes; the train episode entitled "Making Room" in part VI has the aftertaste of Baraka's *Dutchman*; the implementation of the pronoun *you* evokes Auden's "Refugee Blues"; the motif of black (in)visibility, which recurs throughout Rankine's volume, attaches it to Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The collection of vignettes documenting cases of racist microaggressions in parts one and three of the volume also interacts with Adrian Piper's calling cards, a conceptual art project from mid-1980s. In her project the black bodily positivity turns into assertiveness. Piper, who was a very light-skinned black woman, whenever racially discriminatory comments were made in her presence, would distribute cards announcing "I am black" with a brief explanation of her reason for doing so. Like Piper's conceptual work, Rankine's *Citizen*, as Catherine Wagner puts it in her online article, "insistently returns to scenes in which a distressing racial imaginary erupts into polite ordinary life" and consistently "theatricalize[s] interaction, drawing attention to all participants' positions in the social field" ("Messing with the Beholder"), becoming interventions into the socio-political here and now. However, there are also two striking differences between them: first, the racial identity of the addressed *you* in *Citizen* is assumed rather than stated (with a very few exceptions), whereas Piper's cards' purpose was to reveal it from the very start; and second, Piper's work establishes an identification of the physical body of the person giving out the cards and the moral first-person assertive subject who demonstrates their will through and in the discourse ("I am black"), whereas Rankine implements the pronoun *you* which does not refer to any concrete person in her text and demonstrates how that *you* is constructed in those situations against their will.

This textual strategy is related to Judith Butler's concept of "addressability," directly mentioned in *Citizen*, and fully explored by Butler in the final chapter of her study of the relationship between violence and mourning entitled *Precarious Life*, where she states:

> The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept that we address not only others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. More emphatically, however, what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the other's address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will. So if we think that moral authority is about finding one's will and standing by it, stamping one's name upon one's will, it may be that we miss the very mode by which moral demands

> are relayed. That is, we miss the situation of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us. (130)

It is essential to notice how addressability is related to one's moral authority which depends on our capability of demonstrating our will. Butler's attention, however, is directed here to the situations which we cannot "avert or avoid." In such situations, the "impingement by the other's address," in which one is always caught unawares, makes us suddenly vulnerable as in the act of impingement one is constituted "prior to the formation of," and in this sense *against*, one's will, thus putting one in danger of being hurt or even reduced to the Agambenian state of "bare life." In the context of public (and personal) relationships regulated by asymmetry of (inherent and inherited) racism, it may be that the moral authority of a person addressed is checked on the spot, which results in the paralysis of will, enforced passivity and loss of identity manifested as speechlessness. *Citizen* is full of situations in which the addressed (not only verbally) do not know what to say, find themselves mute. Rankine comments on the notion of addressability in the following way:

> [S]omeone asks the philosopher... what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.
>
> For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler's remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. (49)

In *Citizen* Butler's notion of addressability is related to visibility, one of the key tropes of African American literature, as effectiveness of its mechanism depends on rendering the target "bodily positive," and in this sense "hypervisible."

There can be identified two levels of "addressability" in *Citizen*: *you* addressed as a target or, more often, an untargeted recipient of racist comments and remarks which are not necessarily directed at them in the situations presented in the form of vignettes; and *you* as an addressee within the text, addressed by the persona/narrator (Rankine supposedly includes herself in this category). Simply put: *you* is everybody who recognizes her/his own experience in situations involving racism on the receiving end, and the category does not apply only to African Americans, at least theoretically. The strategy of using the "lyric-*You*" allows Rankine to achieve a "full-throated polyvocality—in the sense that Mae Henderson theorizes the term—that thrusts every reader into the position of speaker and addressee simultaneously"

(Shockley). Moreover, even though in most vignettes the racial identities of the participants remain unspoken as, at the same time, they are absolutely clear. Obviously, a black reader will identify her/himself with the *You-as-the-addressee* of a racist remark or gesture (as in both credit card anecdotes, for instance); whereas the emotional situation of a white reader is more complex as they have to choose between two kinds of "discomfort": either they vicariously experience what it means to be a "black citizen in the US of the early 21st century" or "reject the invitation of the lyric-*You* and remain white-identified" and, by extension, guilty of committing microaggressions. In this way Rankine achieves the same goal as Piper did with her calling cards—she confronts the white reader with present-day American racial positioning and demonstrates how it affects individuals on the level of personhood and citizenship.

In *Citizen* the racial positioning takes the most open and drastic form in "Stop-and-Frisk," a situation video by John Lucas, which uses Rankine's script, whose subject is racial profiling by the traffic police. In the footage we can see some young black men in a clothes shop trying on various outfits, and flashing beacons reflected in the shop's windows, while an arrest on the road is narrated in voiceover. The result of this dialectic tension is that when watching the video we feel some kind of dread, expect something to happen—a crime committed or somebody arrested. But nothing dramatic happens, and we can hear a refrain-like phrase over and over again: "And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description" (Rankine 105-109). The *you* is unavoidably a black man. It could be Henry Louis Gates Jr. unlocking the door to his own house after jogging in the evening or a friend who came to babysit and was making a phone call in front of the house—they were both taken for burglars, and alarmed neighbours called the police. As Martha Nussbaum states in a subchapter on hate crimes and anti-discrimination**:**

> The stigmatization of African American men as criminals is one of the ugliest and most invidious aspects of American racism.... Historically, this stigmatization was linked with gross harms: with lynching, unfair trials, discrimination in employment. If our society wants to pursue a course of racial reconciliation, as seems both just and prudent, racial profiling is a very stupid policy, even if it were efficient in terms of police resources, which has not been convincingly demonstrated by the evidence. (289)

Similarly to the situation video "Stop-and-Frisk," visual images which appear throughout *Citizen*, even though frequently only tangentially connected with the immediate text and without direct captioning, support and enhance the act of "speaking truth to power" and simultaneously reveal the limitations of the verbal communicability of this truth. In a conversation with Laurent Berlant, Rankine's intentions of using the images in and *together with* her text are clarified. The author explains:

> I was attracted to images engaged in conversation with an incoherence... in the world. They were placed in the text where I thought silence was needed, but I wasn't interested in making the silence feel empty or effortless the way a blank page would.... The tangential relation of the images with the text, in a sense, mimics a form of 'the public.' They are related and can be taken in, but, at times, are hardly touching, or they come up in a different context elsewhere in the text, before or after they appear. (*BOMB*)

Nevertheless, silence does not necessarily mean a gap in communication, as it does not stand for no message at all. Silence may, of course, speak volumes. It can be for instance a sound of accusation, a sign of resistance or a scream of helplessness. Berlant responds to Rankine's words with an observation which clarifies this point:

> I had wondered whether you thought something like that—that the images in *Citizen* could show what was exhausting/unbearable to witness once more in speech about the ordinary violence and world-shaping activity of American racism. A desperate desire is at work there for *something* to be self-evident, the force of which would change a situation. But *Citizen* lives meditatively enraged in a world where truth cannot be *spoken* to a structure. (*BOMB*)

Thus, in joining the persuasive and informative forces of a verbal poetic narrative with visuals, an overtly didactic purpose to educate, morally remind, as well as emotionally affect readers and "make something happen" is being activated here. Yet, Rankine operates in a world where, in terms of race, nothing seems to be self-evident, even the things which we see and hear, and not only those we are told about. The function of images is to increase legibility of her prose poems as they enable her to transcend the verbal and probe into the above-mentioned "incoherence... in the world" and introduce/reveal the surreal aspect of racial reality in the US, which destabilizes this reality in order to make us look at it in a fresh way.

To demonstrate how it works, a cursory look must be taken at two examples which involve Rankine's usage of photographs. The very first image which appears in *Citizen* is a photograph of a place called Jim Crow Road. The name of the deserted street, together with its "larger than life" appearance in terms of race symbolism: the spotless whiteness of the houses, a snow-white car parked in the driveway, the clear, blue sky and the shadow of a Stop sign, both evoke a frame from a David Lynch movie and make one wonder whether the picture has been photoshopped. But Jim Crow Road really exists—the picture was taken by Michael David Murphy, in 2007, in Flowery Branch, Georgia. In the conversation with Berlant, Rankine says that "according to local lore" the road is named "after a James Crow" (*BOMB*), which leaves the question open why "James Crow Road" was not good enough. Nonetheless, the surrounding Forsyth County was known for its infamous "sundown town" which, as Murphy informed her, "existed well until '80s" (*BOMB*).

Another of the images used by Rankine in a place in her narrative "where... silence [is] needed" is a photograph captioned in *Citizen* as "Public Lynching. Date: August 30, 1930" (better known as "Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, 1930"). The difference between this photo and the original is that the bodies of the two young blacks were removed from the picture by John Lucas. Here Rankine uses the altered photograph to foreground her strategy of "redirecting the gaze on the spectator" (Rankine in *The Believer*). As she explains in an interview with Ratik Asokan:

> [O]bserving the people who would normally not claim racism as their thing is of interest to me. The cameraperson was clearly thinking the same thing. These people, with the benefit of the doubt, are not supremacists and yet they will step into this moment, find it funny, and in doing so, they willingly disconnect themselves from the histories and realities of black people and the treatment of black and brown people in this country. (Rankine in *The Believer*)

With both photographs embedded in her text Rankine activates defamiliarization whose function is to enhance and problematize the viewer's/reader's perception of the familiar. In the former photograph, the well-known Jim Crow Road strikes us with its disquieting emptiness and suddenly sinister whiteness of the place, as if its message was: "no blacks, whites only." The latter disturbs the viewer with the inexplicable strangeness of the behaviour of the mob in the picture as the reason for their excitement is unclear; and since most viewers know the original photograph, we suddenly realize how familiarized we have become with racism in the forms of objectification and victimization of the black body and the white privilege of spectatorship.

Rankine's formal inventiveness in *Citizen* serves the purpose of stepping into the very moment in order to defamiliarize it, to ask such questions as: "Did they really say that?" "Did I just hear/see what I think I heard/saw?" Her experimentation with mixing different media and challenging the poetic convention of the lyric demonstrates that she is not a dedicated follower of the "make it new" (at all costs) doctrine of the (post)modernists, but instead she has launched the idea to "make it news," treating poetry now much more sociologically, as a means of direct communication, of ethical commentary on the material, social, and political here-and-now rather than as a discursively abstract or metaphysical phenomenon. *Citizen*'s consistent and inventive strategy of increased legibility serves the purpose of regaining/reaching a large audience of readers not so much for the sake of poetry itself as for the urgent task to confront yet again the problem of racism and discrimination.

Talking about it in a "straightforward" manner is essential now—also for poetry—in the face of the profound crisis in the world and its apparent impending ideological and political turning to the right, the right whose recast myths are seducing people who "are not supremacists" but once again are going to "willingly disconnect

themselves from the histories and realities" (Rankine in *BOMB*). As Zygmunt Bauman observes in a recent interview with Jakub Dymek, given on the fifteenth anniversary of the World Trade Center terrorist attack, Klee's/Benjamin's Angel of History is now taking a 180-degree turn. Still moving blindly forward, the Angel escapes not from the "cruelties of the past and atrocities of the present moment," but from the uncertainties of the future. Now, the "'forward' is the past, a dumping site of memories and myths prone to tooling and recasting, and resistant to rational thinking" (Bauman in *Krytyka Polityczna*).

By innovative strategies of implementation of the "lyric-*You*" on the large scale in her volume, and turning to visual works of art in order to increase its legibility, Claudia Rankine not only captured and revealed the mechanism of new manifestations of racism in post-racial America, but also managed to communicate her findings to an unexpectedly large audience, which includes people who rarely read poetry. She also extended the notion of African American lyricism and launched, through the concept of "addressability," reflection on the relationship between black invisibility and hypervisibility, making it necessary to rethink and reconceptualize them. In this way her formal and thematic innovations proved that contemporary poetry does not have to be hermetically sealed and cryptically coded to engage itself with the most crucial issues of the contemporary American society.

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Marianne Ølholm

Other Discourses in Poetry: Christian Bök's *Crystallography* and *The Xenotext (Book 1)*

Abstract: A characteristic feature of contemporary poetry is the interaction with other, non-literary discourses. In conceptual works, material is adopted from external sources and the artwork is extended to include the surroundings in what Nicolas Bourriaud has termed "relational aesthetics." Christian Bök's writing can be seen as a continuation of avant-garde practices concerned with the medium and materiality of the literary text. In *Crystallography* (1994), elements from scientific discourse such as tables, graphs and fractal geometry are incorporated into concrete poems and in his most recent project *The Xenotext (Book 1)* (2015) the interaction with other forms is taken a step further as Bök moves the text away from the literary medium and into the field of biotechnological research. A matrix sonnet is encoded into the DNA of a bacterium, and the protein of the bacterium produces a new text in the form of a sequence of amino acids. This process makes the resulting text inaccessible to the general reader who is left with the description of the work in the accompanying book and the project thus radically challenges the status of the literary artwork.

Keywords: Conceptual poetry, relational art, materiality, concrete poetry, avant-garde

The appropriation of new media and technologies has always been central to the practices of avant-garde art. Within the poetic genre this has been synonymous with a challenge to established forms and the invention of new ones. Experimental aesthetic practices from the early avant-garde, such as sound poetry, concrete poetry, and collage continue to play an active part in contemporary writing practices. The neo-avant-garde of the post-war period developed these approaches including new technology as it became available.[1] More recently, the interactive medium of the Internet has been adopted and explored in digital artworks by for instance John Cayley and Kristin Lavers ("E-Poetry"). The introduction of various media-based procedures has contributed to a reconsideration of the literary text by giving prominence to the fact that artworks are always representations in a medium determining the conditions of its material form. These experiments have been crucial to changes in the perception of aspects such as authorship, subjectivity and readership, and concern the literary text as artwork and discourse.

In the twenty-first century, this development has been taken a step further and the interaction with other media and discourses has become central to the poetic

1 See for instance the introduction in *Media and Materiality on the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Ingvarsson and Olsson).

text. Within the field of conceptual poetry, a dominant strategy has been to adopt non-literary material from discourses belonging to other spheres or manipulate this found material within the context of the literary text. Marjorie Perloff has given the following characteristic of this type of poetry:

> In the climate of the new century... we seem to be witnessing a poetic turn from the resistance model of the 1980s to dialogue—a dialogue with earlier texts or texts in other media, with 'writings through' or *ekphrases* that permit the poet to participate in a larger, more public discourse. *Inventio* is giving way to appropriation, elaborate constraint, visual and sound composition, and reliance on intertextuality. (*Unoriginal Genius* 11, original emphasis)

Well-known examples of conceptual poetry are Kenneth Goldsmith's appropriation of newspaper texts, traffic reports and sports results, and Vanessa Place's use of legal documents in her work. It is characteristic of these works that they investigate and call attention to places, discourses and conventions that ordinarily appear as naturalized and invisible. In this way, the incorporation of material that does not belong to the domain of art can be viewed as a political gesture. This form of writing is related to other, non-literary discourses and produces meaning in relation to these.

In this study, I will try to show how this established practice of experiments with new technology and media within avant-garde poetics has been radicalised in recent poetic works using Christian Bök's writing as an example. It is my argument that the inclusion of non-literary material in the text involves a questioning of the status of the text as literature and art involving fundamentally changed conditions for readership. This is a continuation of the critique of the institution of art as an avant-garde legacy but also reflects general aspects of the status of art in contemporary society. The theoretical basis of my argument are Nicolas Bourriaud's concepts of relational art and postproduction both of which concern the interaction of the artwork with external factors.

Bök's project positions itself within the context of conceptual poetry. Where the approach of the preceding language poetry was based on a critical approach to language and implied ideals of democratisation and inclusion in the reading experience, conceptual poetry operates on a meta-textual level and the critical potential consists in the manipulation of the material within the framework of the literary text. What characterises Christian Bök's project is that it takes as its starting-point a poetics that draws on the historical avant-garde and moves on to an increasingly complex interaction with external idioms that are entirely foreign to the literary text and thus constitute a challenge to literary readership. By moving the literary experiments into the field of biotechnology and conducting research within this framework Bök radically changes the premises for reading it as a text. In *Xenotext*, the actual artwork is no longer accessible to the ordinary reader and the printed version only serves as a guide to and description of this.

The French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud has used the term "relational aesthetics" to describe art "dealing with the interhuman sphere: relationships between people, communities, individuals, groups, social networks, interactivity, and so on" that in this way become aesthetic objects in themselves (*Postproduction* 7). He has termed this artistic practice "postproduction," which stresses the fact that the artwork is not an original invention but a rewriting of already existing material. Bourriaud describes it in this way: "All these artistic practices, although formally heterogeneous, have in common the recourse to already produced forms. They testify to a willingness to inscribe the work of art within a network of signs and significations, instead of considering it an autonomous or original form" (*Postproduction* 16). This view of the production of art obviously has consequences for the status of the artwork itself. As Bourriaud argues: "The possibility of a *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art" (*Relational Aesthetics* 14, original emphasis). The aesthetic form of the artwork can no longer be seen in isolation. Referring to the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who considers the "social fact" as "a thing," Bourriaud insists on the "instability and the diversity of the concept of 'form.'" This means that the idea of form is extended from the isolated object to a wider context. Bourriaud concludes that "[t]he contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line" (*Relational Aesthetics* 21).

Another way of looking at the relationship between the artwork and its surroundings is by defining it as an encounter: "Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form can only exist in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise" (*Relational Aesthetics* 21). These reflections on the aesthetic object in dialogue with other forms seem pertinent to Christian Bök's work. The interest in media and procedural forms is a central concern and his books explore several formats ranging from experiments in sound poetry inspired by the early avant-garde, across concrete poetry, to the appropriation of cutting-edge contemporary technology.

Christian Bök has performed sound poetry by Hugo Ball and excerpts from Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*.[2] His own project *The Cyborg Opera* includes the performance of sound poetry directly in line with the experiments of the Dada

2 Bök's performance of Hugo Ball's "Sea Horse and Flying Fish" (Seepferdchen und flugfische) is available at Penn Sound at: https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Bok/Carnivocal/Bok-Christian_02_Sea-Horses-And-Flying-Fish_Carnivocal_1999.mp3. The excerpt from Kurt Schwitter's *Ursonante* can be heard at: https://media.sas.upenn.edu/Pennsound/groups/Getty/Explodity-Part-2/Explodity2_16_Bok-First-Mov-Ursonate_Getty-Research-Institute_2-4-09.mp3.

movement. While relating directly to the tradition of sound poetry within the early avant-garde, Bök places his own experiment with sound poetry in the context of contemporary technology: "My composition *The Cyborg Opera* is a long poem in progress—a linguistic soundscape that responds to the chatter of technology by arranging words, not according to their semantic meanings, but according to their phonetic valences" ("When Cyborgs Versify" 129). At the centre of the project is the idea of the cyborg as "the updated subject" who addresses other non-human readers and listeners defined as "beasts, robots and clones" ("When Cyborgs Versify" 129). This, of course, constitutes a radical move away from the idea of poetic voice. Characteristically, Bök's use of the term "opera" does not refer to "a genre of musical drama so much as the term abbreviates a technical "operation"—a procedure by which to imagine a hitherto undreamt poetics of electronica" ("When Cyborgs Versify" 129). Bök discusses his own text in relation to various positions within the sound poetry of the early avant-garde and characterizes the poetic strategy of the works of Kurt Schwitters as "outbursts of organic orality" intended to save language from "the utilitarian constraints of bourgeois discourse" ("When Cyborgs Versify" 130). He sees his own project more as a continuation of Marinetti's "phonic poetry, whose onomatopoeia gives voice not to the ecstatic impulses of an organic anatomy but to the electric impulses of an operant machine" ("When Cyborgs Versify" 131). It is clear from his presentation of the ideas behind *The Cyborg Opera* that Christian Bök is very conscious of the avant-garde tradition as a precondition for his own work.

Another established avant-garde strategy that Christian Bök uses in his work are constraints often applied with the purpose of inserting an agency between the lyric subject and the production of text which is then determined by other factors than individual expression. Referring to the rule-governed texts by Oulipo, Bök gives this description of the constraint in *Eunoia* (2001):

> 'Eunoia' is the shortest word in English to contain all five vowels, and the word quite literally means 'beautiful thinking.' Eunoia is a univocal lipogram, in which each chapter restricts itself to the use of a single vowel. Eunoia is directly inspired by the exploits of Oulipo... —the avant-garde coterie renowned for its literary experimentation with extreme formalistic constraints. (103)

This primary constraint is combined with other rules referring to different aspects of the text:

> All chapters must allude to the art of writing. All chapters must describe a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral tableau and a nautical voyage. All sentences must accent internal rhyme through the use of syntactical parallelism. The text must exhaust the lexicon for each vowel, citing at least 98% of the available repertoire (although a few words do go unused, despite efforts to include them: parallax, belvedere,

> gingivitis, monochord, and tumulus. The text must minimize repetition of substantive vocabulary (so that, ideally, no word appears more than once). The letter Y is suppressed. (*Eunoia* 103-104)

Perhaps surprisingly, *Eunoia* was awarded the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2002, although the work is certainly not easily accessible. Over the appendix explaining the constraint is this quotation by Darren Wershler: "The tedium is the message." The quotation clearly evokes Marshall McLuhan's phrase "The medium is the message"[3] and perhaps alludes to the reading (or writing) experience produced by this type of work. At any rate, it indicates Bök's preoccupation with different medial aspects of the literary text, here in combination with the incorporation of impersonal agencies in the form of a complicated set of formalised restrictions.

Crystallography: Dialogue with Other Discourses

In *Crystallography* (1994), Bök moves from the exploration of already established strategies of avant-garde art to a dialogue with discourses that are external to the artwork. The book opens with an extract from the artist Maurits Cornelis Escher's (1998-1972) book *The Regular Division of the Plane* (1958) that accompanied a series of Escher's drawings. In the quoted text, Escher introduces the "crystallographers" who have "opened the gate," and describes his own experiences in their domain:

> Long ago during my wanderings, I happened to chance upon the neighbourhood of this domain. I saw a high wall, and because I had a presentiment of some enigma that might be hiding behind it, I climbed the wall with difficulty. On the other side, I landed in a wilderness through which I had to make my way with much effort until I arrived via detours at the open gate—the open gate of mathematics, from which many clear paths extended in all directions[.] (*Crystallography* 7)

Escher cooperated with the crystallographer Friedrich Haag and his use of tessellation in his graphic art can be considered as original research. Bök thus places his own writing in continuation of art that is inspired by and actively interacts with scientific research.

Crystallography is the science of identifying the structure of atoms. Bök repeatedly compares language as an object to crystals. In the poem "CRYSTALS," the structural quality of the crystal is described as parallel to the ability of entities of language, such as "compound words," to be dissolved and reassembled in new combinations whose artificial perfection is comparable to that of the crystal (*Crystallography* 12).

3 Introduced in his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

A compound (word) dissolved in a liquid

supercooled under microgravitational
conditions precipitates out of solution
in (alphabetical) order to form crystals
whose structuralistic perfection rivals
the beauty of machine tooled objects.

An archaeologist without any mineralogical
experience
might easily mistake a crystal
for the artificial product of a precision
technology.

A word is a bit of crystal in formation.
(*Crystallography* 12)

Bök is concerned with material transformations involving language. The word, which is itself a compound consisting of separate elements (letters), is dissolved in a liquid, which is then transformed into crystals. There is no distinction between language and the sphere of chemical components, between language and nature. The idea of language is far from the human voice and closer to the processes of nature and to manufacturing. The perfection of the crystals is parallel to the beauty of the "machine tooled objects," and there is no barrier between nature and the artificial; language itself is presented as part of nature: "A word is a bit of crystal in formation" (*Crystallography* 12).

The book contains a number of examples of poems that appear as physical objects of language in the tradition of concrete poetry. The poem "CRYSTALS" is followed by a concrete poem with the same title (*Crystallography* 13). The poem is based on a single word "crystals" and in each line of the poem one of the letters of this word becomes visible. Each letter keeps its place in the typographical sequence of the word:

crystals

a
s
t
r
a
l

s
a
l
t

c
a
s
t

a
s
t
r
a
y

The concrete poem illustrates the fixed quality of language in the form of the sequence of letters in the individual word which is not a flexible structure. Emphasising this particular aspect of language calls attention to its materiality and shows its comparability to other systems and discourses that are not normally associated with literary text.

Other concrete poems appear throughout the book. "CRYSTAL LATTICE" (*Chystallography* 19) shows a regular pattern formed by the word "crystal" placed horizontally and vertically across the page. Also, the series "FRACTAL GEOMETRY" contains a number of concrete poems in which the concept of the fractal is combined with letters and language. Each poem shows a letter of the alphabet made up of capitals of this particular letter. Together the three poems depict the letters A, S, and K forming the word ask.

In the introductory poem titled "fractal geometry," Bök connects fractals to language and text:

> Fractals tell their raconteurs
> to counteract at every point
> the contours of what thought
> recounts (a line, a plot): recant
> the chronicle that cannot coil
> into itself—let the story stray
> off course, its countless details,
> pointless detours, all en route
> towards a tour de force, where
> the here & now of nowhere is.
> (*Crystallography* 20)

The poem draws a parallel between the forms of nature, as they are presented in the idea of the fractal, and the conditions of language, thought, and narrative. The line of the plot with its "countless details, pointless detours" is comparable to the infinitely complicated coastline often used as an illustration of fractal geometry. Like

the phenomena of nature, the text is also a self-referential object, "the chronicle" is described as coiling into itself.

Another series of poems "EXPERIMENT #1" introduces the experiment as a format for the process of writing and, in the last section of the series, the chemical process taking place in the scientific experiment is viewed as parallel to the interaction of language and meaning in a line of a poem:

> 3.Textbooks teach
> you that to lock
>
> solutions in your
> icebox overnight
>
> can precipitate
> from water, candy
>
> on a cord, words
> accreting meaning
>
> so that the line
> can end at last
>
> in the sweetest
> of stalactites.
>
> Crystallization.
> (*Crystallography* 18)

Towards the end of the book charts and models are introduced that describe literary phenomena in the language and mindset of science with a humorous twist. One chart aims to identify "the meteorological conditions necessary for the crystallization of poetic forms" (*Crystallography* 114). The central trope of crystallography is combined with the project of artistic production using the parameters "semiotic saturation (humidity)" on the vertical axis and "aesthetic detachment (temperature)" on the horizontal axis. Along the vertical axis are categories such as "NEAR RIME" and "TRUE RIME," using the word "rime" which is a homonym to the literary term "rhyme." The chart presents the conditions determining the chemical crystallisation of water as a metaphor for the materialisation of the artwork.

Throughout *Crystallography* the discourse of mineral science is combined with reflections on writing. The book explores the boundary between science and poetry in an artistic idiom that includes a large number of references and loans from scientific discourse. At the same time the work draws on avant-garde traditions such as concrete poetry. The interaction with the scientific discourse can be perceived as a chosen constraint that challenges the literary medium to renew itself.

The Xenotext—Book 1: Interaction with Another Paradigm

The Xenotext is the name of a research project conducted by Bök that has lasted more than a decade, and it is also the title of the book *The Xenotext—Book 1,* published in 2015. In this project, Bök moves the text away from the literary medium and into the field of biotechnological research making it inaccessible to the general reader who is left with the description of the work in the accompanying book. In this way, it radically challenges the status of the text. The project had been discussed in several articles and Bök had given interviews about the progress of the project for several years before the publication of the book in 2015.[4] The ideas behind the technology on which the project is based date back to the 1960s and were developed for quite different purposes than aesthetic experimentation. It is called DNA digital data storage and consists in storing digital data in the base structure of DNA. The technology has the ability to preserve information almost indefinitely, as DNA can last for thousands of years, and this aspect in particular has attracted attention to the archival possibilities of this technology. Several projects have been created to store historical literary text in DNA. One is a project led by Nick Goldman of the European Bioinformatics Institute in which all of Shakespeare's sonnets have been encoded in DNA (Young 2013), and the idea of DNA as literary archive received attention from popular media such as *nature—International weekly journal of science* and CNN. In his paper "The Xenotext Experiment, So Far," Darren Wershler mentions a number of literary works in this medium that precede Bök's *The Xenotext*. These include a project by Joe Davies, who encoded visual poetry into the DNA of E coli in 1990, aiming to replicate the genes and send them into space, and "Biopoetry" by Brazilian poet and visual artist Eduardo Kac, whose experimental work *Genesis* (1998) consisted of biblical verse translated into Morse, encoded in DNA, and then edited by exposing the gene to radiation (Werschler 48). Another source of inspiration for Bök's project came from the scientist at the Pacific North West National Laboratory, Pak Chung Wong, who translated the lyrics to the Disney song *It's a Small World After All* into the four-letter nucleotide alphabet of DNA, which he then inserted into the extremely resilient bacterium *Deinococcus radiodurans* (Wershler 49). It is the same bacterium that Bök has chosen for his project and that he describes as "an extremophile, capable of surviving, without mutation, in even the most hostile milieus, including the vacuum of outer space" ("The Xenotext works").

Whereas all these works and projects are based on already existing texts that are stored in the DNA, Bök's ambition was to make the bacterium respond to the implanted poem, and produce its own poems in the form of a protein that the bacterium would *write* in response. Bök introduces the project in this way:

4 See for instance "The Xenotext works" posted by Christian Bök on April 2, 2011.

> *The Xenotext* is an experiment that explores the aesthetic potential of genetics, making literal the renowned aphorism of William S. Burroughs, who claims that 'the word is now a virus.' Such an experiment strives to create a beautiful, anomalous poem, whose 'alien words' might subsist, like a harmless parasite, inside the cell of another life form. Many scientists have already encoded textual information into genetic nucleotides, thereby creating 'messages' made from DNA—messages implanted, like genes, inside cells, where such data might persist, undamaged and unaltered, through myriad cycles of mitosis, all the while saved for recovery and decoding. The study of genetics has thus granted these geneticists the power to become poets in the medium of life. (*The Xenotext* 150)

Bök further explains that *The Xenotext* consist of a sonnet "Orpheus" that is integrated into a gene and causes the cell to *read* this poem and interpret it as an instruction for building a protein. The protein's sequence of amino acids produces another sonnet "Eurydice." In this way, the bacterium becomes not only an archive for the original text but also a machine for producing a new poem.

The actual product of the experiment are the poems created by the protein in response to the encoded text. These poems are not presented in the printed book, and in a sense the reader is cut off from the result of the process. The decoding of the information or text produced by the protein is a highly specialised process requiring knowledge, skills and equipment available only to a professional scientist working in a laboratory. This can be viewed as a limitation but it also reflects the comparable conditions of many other phenomena in daily life in the society of the information age, where the average person is confronted with technology that he or she has no chance of really understanding. Framing this general experience in an artwork can be seen as a way of exposing or highlighting the conditions of living in a society based on advanced technology. This would be consistent with the critical dimension of Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational art. According to Bourriaud, some of the practices of relational art aim at producing an ambiguity in relation to already existing social structures:

> Other practices are aimed at recreating socio-professional models and applying their production methods. Here the artist works in the real field of the production of goods and services, and aims to set up a certain ambiguity, within the space of his activity, between the utilitarian function of the objects he is presenting, and their aesthetic function. (*Relational Aesthetics* 35)

In *The Xenotext*, Bök transfers the type of practice that Bourriaud has identified within the field of production to the domain of science.

The book that accompanies the project contains many different types of text. The first section, titled "The Late Heavy Bombardment," describes an apocalyptic

scenario, whereas in the appendix "Vita Explicate" Bök explains: "'The Late Heavy Bombardment' refers to the Hadean period in the history of the Earth (3.8 billion years ago), during which the world undergoes collisions from numerous meteoric impacts, all of which create a baleful, hostile environment that coincides with the genesis of all living things on the planet" (*The Xenotext* 151-152). This section introduces a backdrop for the project that includes apocalyptic visions of destructions as well as the creation of new life. The threat of the destruction of the environment and the extinction of life caused by climate changes is a widespread trope in contemporary culture. This theme links to the core idea of language as a virus or bacterium that is able to survive in an otherwise hostile environment, and these are the concerns that form the background of *The Xenotext*.

The matrix poem "The Nocturne of Orpheus" is an alexandrine sonnet in blank verse. It is a classical form, but Bök also uses several additional constraints in the sonnet, which places it in a contemporary, avant-garde framework: "Each line contains thirty-three letters, and together the lines form a double acrostic of the dedication; moreover, the text is a perfect anagram of the sonnet "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" by John Keats" (*The Xenotext* 152). The dedication of Keats' sonnet is to "the maiden in her dark pale meadow" and the double acrostic means that the first letters of each line, when read vertically, form the words "the maiden in her," while the last letters of each line form the words "dark pale meadow." The choice of Orpheus and Eurydice as the agents of the matrix-poem and the poem generated by the bacterium is a reference to classical art and mythology, and the choice of Keats' sonnet as source poem is a reference to classical English poetry. The poem includes a number of themes that resonate in Bök's project. The title of Keats' poem refers to mortality, and the text includes meta-references to writing, space, and the durability of fame. Bök's matrix-sonnet looks like this:

> THIS COVENANT OF LOVE IN A DIRGE ROF A GOD
> HAS DELIGHTED AN ANGEL WHO OBEYS MY PLEA,
> EACH SONNET A RHYTHM FOR HER TO DECIPHER,
> MAKING LEGIBLE A KEY IN HER DREAM OF DUSK:
> A REDNESS THAT DARKENSTHE HUE OF A TULIP
> IS RICHENING HER VIEWON THE HILL OF A LEA,
> DAPPLING HER VISTA AT THE END OF MY VIGIL,
> EVEN IF HAVOC CALLS FORTH RUIN TO KILL ME.
> NO CHURCH, NO CHAPEL, IS A REFUGE IN A STORM,
> IF WE BEG TO BE WARM, YET LET DIE THE CANDLE.
> NO HERDER, NO HERMIT, ENCHANTED BY THE SEA,
> HAS HITHERTO KNOWN THE ENNUI OF A COWARD,
> EVEN WHEN INFERNOS IN HELL BURN THE HERO:
> RADIANT AS FLINT, BE THE ACHE OF MY SORROW.

Several processes of postproduction are involved in the use of the matrix sonnet. Initially, Keats' sonnet has been transformed through Bök's rewriting of it, applying

the described rules and constraints and producing the new sonnet "The Nocturne of Orpheus." This rewriting of the classical source text is then further transformed through the process of *Xenotext,* where it is encoded into the DNA of the bacterium, which is a new form and this time also another medium for the text. Finally, the protein of the bacterium will produce a completely new text of the same linguistic material. This sonnet, titled "Eurydice," is still a processing of Keats' original sonnet. Finally, this new text, produced as an amino acid, can be decoded into the medium of language. The manipulation of text is very much at the centre of the very ingenious frame of this work and places it in the context of avant-garde writing strategies.

The various elements of scientific aspects of the *Xenotext* project are explored as the basis of poems in the printed book, and the atomic models for DNA are used as material for concrete poetry in the section "Nucleobasis" (*The Xenotext* 86). The poems are based on the figure of the acrostic, just as the matrix-sonnet, in which the first letter of each line spells out a word. The vocabulary is restricted allowing only words of nine letters beginning with the first letter of four elements: C for Carbon, H for hydrogen, N for nitrogen, and O for Oxygen. Each poem consists of a concrete poem on the left-hand page and a drawing of a molecule and a short poem composed of restricted vocabulary defined for this section on the right-hand page. In this way, the drawings that belong to a purely scientific discourse are placed in the context of the concrete and procedural poems.

Another sequence shares its title with a poem by Emily Dickinson, "Death sets a thing Significant" (*The Xenotext* 109). The title is transformed by a computer which interprets the words "as a series of amino acids in which each letter indicates a specific molecule" (*The Xenotext* 155). This results in four computer-generated models: a folded sequence, the atomic backbone, the entire molecule, and a charge envelope (*The Xenotext* 109-112). These concepts are briefly explained in the previous poem (*The Xenotext* 104), but to the uninitiated reader they mainly appear as quite beautiful illustrations. These are just a few examples of the types of texts included in the book. As it appears, the formats of the poems in *The Xenotext* all work with combinations of elements from the literary and the scientific domain, thus adding new perspectives to both.

Conclusion

In the conceptual design of the project, Christian Bök includes a number of strategies characteristic of experimental avant-garde poetry. The idea of producing new text and new meaning by subjecting an original text—in this case the sonnet written by Bök himself—to random procedures belongs in this framework. What is extraordinary about Bök's project is not so much its conceptual approach to the poetic text as its use of biotechnology as a new and thought-provoking medium for the literary text. Many conceptual writing projects have included the production of text by a non-human agent, such as a computer or simply mechanical manipulation of an existing text. The

exceptional thing about *The Xenotext* is that this agent is a form of life, a bacterium. The choice of a bacterium as the vehicle of the poetic text comments on the classical idea of the immortality of art as opposed to the transitoriness of life. As Bök explains in the appendix to the book: "A poem stored in the genome of such a resilient bacterium might outlive every civilization, persisting on the planet until the very last dawn, when our star finally explodes" (*The Xenotext* 151). He further states: "All poets pay due homage to the immortality of poetry, but few imagine that we might write poetry capable of outlasting the existence of our species, testifying to our presence on the planet long after every library has burned in the bonfires of perdition" (*The Xenotext* 151). Where procedural and conceptual poetry are connected to a critical approach to the institution of art and the traditional role of the artist as individual genius, the poem as artwork seems in some ways to maintain its status and value as an aesthetic object at the centre of this otherwise very radically thought out experiment. Contrary to other examples of conceptual writing, it maintains an aesthetic negotiation of the poetic expression, using language in a way that belongs exclusively to the literary text.

A final aspect worth consideration is the demands made by this work on its reader. In this respect, *The Xenotext* project presents particular challenges. Conceptual poetry in general is often characterized as unsuitable for reading. Reading the results of the manipulation of large amounts of found text belonging to an external context can often be quite boring and the value of this type of work lies mainly in the appreciation of the idea behind its execution. What is striking about the experience of reading the book version of *The Xenotext* is that it requires several and very different reading competences. A great deal of the material in the book has literary and aesthetic qualities and the appreciation of these requires certain conventional literary competences. One example is the references to Classical and Romantic poetry that call for general knowledge of literary history. The scientific part of the project, especially the actual biochemical research that exceeds the frame of the book and places the literary work in a completely foreign framework, will be beyond reach for most readers of literary texts. The scientific premises can be explained to the general reader, but his or her knowledge is likely to be superficial. In any case, the text requires a reader who is willing to make an effort to combine the two separate discourses and fields of knowledge. Not only is *The Xenotext* an ambitious project, but it also presupposes an equally ambitious reader.

What Bök aims to do is to relocate the poetic practice from writing to the biochemical processes of nature in the form of the bacterium. At the centre of this process is the original sonnet written by Bök and the whole project is viewed from the perspective of art. The spectacular interactive character of the work calls attention to the role of art in contemporary culture that is threatened by ecological disaster and ultimately extinction, as implied in the work. On another level, it also demonstrates how art itself as a discourse is involved in negotiations with other discourses, and how it is challenged to maintain its status as a viable paradigm that possesses specific qualities and can contribute to understanding existence. In its radical approach *The*

Xenotext places itself in the context of science reflecting the optimism of scientific progress as well as its opposite, simultaneously maintaining the idea of the unique poetic text at the center of its construction.

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The Poetics of Plenitude in Peter Gizzi's Recent Poetry

Abstract: This article continues my earlier exploration of an aesthetic, poetic, and cognitive phenomenon that I am calling "the poetics of plenitude." Here, I trace this poetics in Peter Gizzi's more recent volumes, with special attention given to his 2015 collection *Archeophonics*. In my discussion, I show how the term "plenitude," which I distinguish against a number of other uses of this concept, evolves in Gizzi's poems toward an emergence of a subjectivity. Such emergence is triggered within the space of a poem working as a device that modulates a specifically understood excess of externality. The externality engaged by Gizzi's poetry is a kind of pragmatist composite that links the sense of the material presence of the world with the larger body of the earlier poetic descriptions of this presence. Since such amalgamation of matter with its existent poetic description entails contact with the poetic predecessors of the newly emerging poet, Gizzi's variety of the poetics of plenitude also shows a new understanding of what Harold Bloom conceptualized when he argued that poetry is a response to the "anxiety of influence."

Keywords: Peter Gizzi, anxiety of influence, pragmatist poetics, poetics of plenitude

The Pragmatist Roots of the Poetics of Plenitude

In her study of the historical and Puritan roots of American pragmatism, Joan Richardson starts her argument by sketching the peculiarity of the cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and aesthetic situation of the New England settlers. The combination of their intense religious training and the equally intense novelty of the American environments—their mixture of illusory familiarity and impinging strangeness—put the newcomers in an interpretational situation that changed the parameters of any former, pre-established formats of subject-object relations. Their devotional habit of looking for, establishing and interpreting networks of signs, when transferred to the material layers of the new continent, causes an acceleration of the interpretive situations which now absorb a newly apprehended totality of the human organism—a totality that presents the need of a wholesale rethinking of the former opposites of mind/body, inside/outside, reason/emotion, rational/aesthetic, worldly/otherworldly. They are "thrown into the paradoxical situation of being both inside and outside their language at once" (3), the language being both an instrument of passionate entry into the life of matter and an objective inquiry of it. "Thinking," argues Richardson, is now realized as "a life form, subject to the same processes of growth and change as all other life forms" (1). Thought lives in language which itself is revealed as a living organism whose mutability makes it congruent with other life forms.

In this new cognitive environment, the organism inquires into its environment but the activity has nothing of the passivities inherent in the Old World binaries. Now the inquiry is emotional, exhilarative, endowed with the qualities of the religious—the ecstasy of an organism that comes to recognize the limits and parameters of its very being—even as it is also rational, cognitive, or scientific. According to Richardson, the new model of inquiry "physically effected the revolution into 'the modern' instanced by the collapse of the subject-object distinction" (9).

On a different level, this means that language, when used in purposive modes vital for the survival of the human organism, is not only a representation of "the structure of nature in so far as it had come to be known at [any given historical] time," but also a "constituent of changing nature" (21), the fact that Richardson further comments on by turning to Stevens's assertion that language be "part of the res itself and not about it" (qtd. in Richardson 21). This modernist Stevensian creed reminds us that a new epistemological situation is also a kind of aesthetics, in the sense that the experience of the active inquiry-as-participation in the world—entailing as it does a merger of the cognitive and the sensory apparatuses—simply cannot fail to be an experience of aesthetic nature. The inquiry modes devised by the early Americans are "solutions that were in the purest sense 'aesthetic,' before the term... had become established as a category of experience" (3).

The above is a certain hypothesis related to the origins of a rather vast intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural formation that came to be known as the American pragmatism. But Richardson's efforts to characterize the backgrounds of this movement may also serve as an introduction to a specific poetics, an off-shoot of the pragmatist aesthetics. At some point of the evolution of this pragmatist formation, it has produced a poem formula that reveals a sort of self-awareness which goes beyond the meta-poetic level of any kind of irony. If we can imagine a poem that is not just a model of but an instance of such active world-making, nature-reconfiguring participation, a merger of a manifold of modes of experience, a materialization in language of the ecstatic emergence of human-organic self-awareness, as it recognizes its contour in the very act of reformulating the world it inhabits—we imagine a poem of the poetics of plenitude. From a historical, scholarly perspective, we begin to sense the transmissions that hold between such moments in Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, and their contemporary heir—Peter Gizzi.

Varieties of Plenitude

Plenitude is a term plentiful in itself and there are various plenitudes. There is, for instance, the gnostic plenitude in which the term signifies an esoteric space that is a compendium of the emanations and features of the supreme divine being before the scattering of further emanations that would lead to the creation of man, a "fully explicated manifold of divine characteristics… forming a hierarchy, and together constituting the divine realm" (Jonas 181). There is also, on a note that may only

apparently be far removed from the gnostic regions, the Lacanian plenitude that comes variously to be characterized in the nearly esoteric writings of the French thinker as a kind of unity. False and imaginary as it is, expressing a longing for a fusion of subject with object, signifier with signified, the subject of demand/desire with its object, such unity would be an imagined "total incorporation or mastery of the object," and it would be an attempt at reconstituting oneness that is a "a fiction of plenitude" (Rose 18). Terry Eagleton depicts it as "a fullness, a whole and unblemished identity" (166) that the developing ego comes to posit as its idea of a unified bodily self—a sort of a fiction that will limit the false ego-cogito subjectivity rigidly in its sad adult life. The idea of plenitude is also constitutive of another evolving Lacanian term, that of the Real, which can be characterized as "an absolute fullness, a pure plenum devoid of the negativities of absences, antagonisms, gaps, lacks, splits" (Johnston). Importantly, and characteristically for the Lacanian discourse, in it the variously functioning notions of plenitude signify loss, blockage of way or falsity, the term receiving associations with "everything the subject loses through [its] entrance into language (a sense of perfect and ultimate meaning or plenitude, which is, of course, impossible)" (Felluga).

Finally, there is also a modernist plenitude of language brought to its state of independent, emancipated, simmering *poesis*, a fullness of its material presence preceding and underlying the signification processes. This is the kind of linguistic meanings that Charles Bernstein detects in the enhanced material feels of the endless surfaces of Gertrude Stein's text (143).

The Poetics of Plenitude

The poetics of plenitude uses the term in a way that is markedly different from all the meanings and usages of the term described above.[1] Most clearly, it differs from the Lacanian family of meanings, in which plenitude is something either lost or false. In contrast to this, the poems of plenitude are instances of the construction of fictions that become the only available realities of the organism, the only areas in which realities and subjectivities endowed with a degree of authenticity and life are available. In other words, in contrast to the entire Lacanian discourse, the poetics of plenitude links vivid and living authenticity with the process of the poetic participation in the available fictions of the world, its constitutive fictitiousness, in

1 My term "the poetics of plenitude" is part of a larger project that I have been developing in a series of articles. The term stems from a wider variety of sources, which I am unable to point to within the scope of this article. However, the formative idea derives from my studies of the work of metaphor in the poetry of Wallace Stevens ("Wallace Stevens's Pragmatist Poetics of Plenitude"), my comparative discussions of Stevens, Rea Armantrout and Peter Gizzi ("The Poetics of Plenitude and Its Crisis"), my defense of Richard Rorty's concenpt of irony ("Richard Rorty and the Ironic Plenitude of Literature"), and my discussion of the role of the poet's personal biography in the poetry of John Ashbery ("John Ashbery: The Poetics of Plenitude").

which it follows the idea contained in Stevens's rich notion of poetry being a supreme fiction. In contrast to the gnostic storage of meaning, in turn, the poets of plenitude transfer the religious energies onto grounds of active coexistence and participation in the mortal earthly career of the organism. Here, it is the material being of the poem, as it steers and kindles the life of matter, that becomes an instance of belief—a sort of commitment to the world that is the proper evolution of the religious frame of mind, and that the description of which is everything that is at stake in William James's early, proto-pragmatist manifesto "The Will to Believe."

Finally, my use of the term differentiates it also even from Bernstein's meaning (admittedly closest to mine), his late modernist flaunting of the experimental thrust of the poetic text that the contemporary American poets inherit from Stein. In my more pragmatist formulation, the experience of such a text immediately bespeaks presences that are affective, psychological, but also bodily and physiological. In other words, the poetics of plenitude aims to leave behind the dichotomies between the textual realm and the complex realm of transitive subjectivities revealed by the poem to be inherent in the specific concentration of the textual—the concentration we call the poem.

To give an example of a lineage of the American poetics of plenitude, I would point to the continuities that link Whitman, Stevens, and Peter Gizzi. I will focus on Gizzi here, trying to outline his earlier manifestations of the poetics of plenitude, but will also try to illustrate how Gizzi modifies, or perhaps sheds new interpretive light, on the plenitudes arrived at in the poems of his predecessors, notably Whitman and Stevens.

The Whitmanian Plenitude—The Riddle of the Song

Whitman stands as the originator of the poetics of plenitude. The intense mergers and migrations of cognitive, somatic, religious, and political energies that enliven his so called "texts" change the very nature of the text and make it a live element of the material surroundings. The "I" that speaks from such a region is the "I" of the entire poem—the poem as the newly entered plenary presence of Earthly organic consciousness. Importantly for my purpose of speaking of Gizzi's late versions of plenitude, the presence of this newly emergent awareness of the "I" becomes most conspicuous in the moments of reduction, the proto-Stevensian returns to the layers that are purely material in the sense of the scattering and removal of the human forms of life.

The intense poetic adherence to the apparently lifeless debris of life—such as, for instance, those that we see at the end of "As I Ebbed with the Ocean of Life"—causes a repositioning of the figurative and thus cognitive powers, which features as a change in the position of the voice on a different level, so that it acquires a new awareness of its presence in a far vaster sense of the environment. The shift in the awareness signals the emergence of a new self for which the vast environment

becomes an externality that must be engaged.

At first, in the fragment in question, it seems that the emergent self seeks and sees its utter identity with lifeless matter, "loose windrows, little corpses, / Froth, snowy white, and bubbles" (Whitman 396). This discovery is ample enough, already impinging on the normative idea of life/death separateness. Yet the process of emergence does not stop here, and it proceeds to projecting a consciousness of a presence that exceeds the mere commerce of the human "I" with the slime of the Earth, its evolutionary predecessor. In the final lines, this "I" changes into "we," a combination of "me and mine," and the change offers the vision of a vast "you," a mysterious being "up there walking or sitting" whose identity remains undisclosed. According to James Longenbach, this is the moment in which Whitman's *poesis* successfully opens up to the vision of the infinite, understood on Levinasian terms as the withdrawal of the claims of the self in reaction to the enunciation coming from the presence of the other. The opening, according to the critic, has everything to do with an emptying out of the poetic power, the poem consenting to lie low, as if spent, at the level "zero" of material and biological being: "by inhabiting his relation with the things below him so utterly, by refusing to look up, Whitman is gripped by the sense of something above him, something beyond him, something that looks at him as he looks at the images spread before him" (Longenbach 150). I agree with Longenbach when he identifies this as the moment of plenitude: "When this happens, and this happens in the movement of syntax, all the dead things of the world are suddenly alive in their relation to the mysterious other who countenances them" (150). But I want to correct this perspective by reminding that the entire moment is a construction of the poem—a specific positioning of the form of the poem, "the movement of syntax," as Longenbach notes himself.

The poetics of plenitude is a form of consciousness reminding us that the moments of plentiful participation are not to be separated from the body of the poem that arranges the moment; such moments happen in and through the poem and are integral with it as the achieved relocations in our cognitive sphere. That is why, when Longenbach claims earlier that for the opening to infinity the poem must stop singing, by abandoning its iambic flow, I would like to point out that the removal of a specific metrical foot is far from the exit of the song. On the contrary, the song persists and proceeds by other means, the poem itself always positing a new rhetorical, prosodic, aesthetic and material shape, the sole reality of the song. Longenbach's approach forces him to speak of yet another metaphysical shift of focus away from the poem—now merged with the being of the Earth—to the metaphysics of the infinite: "everything—even Whitman, speaker of the sentence—becomes a metaphor for something else," this "something else" becoming an "unpromising inhabitation of a relation through which the possibility of infinitude is spoken" (150). Thus, Longenbach reintroduces metaphysics through a reasoning that was meant to reassess it. Doing so, he forfeits the palpable present being of the poem, which is now thought to subside, recede, give up its achieved consciousness of itself for the sake of "infinitude."

Peter Gizzi's late continuations of Whitman, Dickinson, and Stevens are ample instances of the return of the poem-as-song, of reclaiming its immediate, recalcitrant interventions in the earthly environments that call to being new human subjectivities. Gizzi's poetic space proper is that of "the song." As his poems illustrate, the song does not vanish, not even in the most ascetic moments when the figurative power of the poetic process stalls; on the contrary, in such moments the emergent self that belongs to the poem as a whole obtains a new shape, given to it by the arranged, artificial restraint of *poesis*, a restraint that makes more apparent the contour of the poem. It is this delineated body that now does without the thought of any "infinitude," and is its own sufficient presence of a being fully cognizant and alive with its finitude, as it engages its external environments.

Peter Gizzi's Plenitude of Externality

Gizzi's way of characterizing such engagement has been to speak of poetry as dictation taking. Robin Blaser has called this strategy "the practice of outside" (271), and has discussed it in the context of Gizzi's fascination with Jack Spicer, a poet who practiced the radical gesture of opening the poem to aleatory interceptions of found languages long before the practice of Language poets made it more normative (271). It remains to be discussed, however, how Gizzi's poems differ from Spicer's in negotiating the evanescence of the poetic self. For Blaser, and for Spicer, the poet becomes a medium letting the otherness of language speak through, a gesture the tradition of which goes back to Blake via Yeats. In Gizzi's poems, on the other hand, the passage of transmission brings the medium to a state I have being characterizing above as the state of the emergent self.

In Gizzi's mode of conducting the exploration of externality, the Whitmanian and Emersonian Not-Me becomes a stringent mixture of the physical, the spiritual, the linguistic, and the conceptual. Richard Poirier speaks of Emerson's "superfluousness" as "an effort to refloat the world" (40), that is to make readers aware of the ample set of ways in which an intense description of the world changes the world. Stanley Cavell hints at the connection between the material vastness of the world and the descriptions of it further, when he mentions a "form of breathing... that opposes the breath in my body to the ideas that fill the common air" (171). This comment by Cavell relates to a passage in "Fate" where Emerson claims, somewhat cryptically, that "the air is full of men." The task of reading Gizzi is to begin to sense the literal meaning behind this apparently metaphorical splicing of the realm of ideas with the realm of physical stimuli. In Gizzi's formula of engaging the external, there is no difference between the poem's confronting the physical presence of the world and its confronting the presence of other, former poems. The physical contact with the world becomes a form of receiving the earlier poetic modes which made the *physis* of the world available to consciousness. As we shall see, this modifies Harold Bloom's notion of influence—another critical context that receives a rewriting in Gizzi.

Gizzi's term for an intense merger of the poem with an excessive field of external stimuli is "the song." In this Whitmanian formula, "the song" is any kind of poetic—which means rhetorical, artificial, linguistic, formal—space the poem creates as it enters the process of sensing the outside and thus reformulates the cognitive contact with it. Gizzi's poetry often relies on calling upon this state, signaling its awareness, and then registering its effects. One of these effects is the radical removal of the language/matter and language/self barriers, a conceptualization of linguistic intrusions into the deep levels of material world, both in the macro and micro scale. Cole Swensen sees this method as a continuous inquiry into "how things [are] put together" and "how they hold" (113-114), and she is right in claiming that the strategy abandons the epistemological model of representation. As Swensen notes further, Gizzi invites us to think beyond the "conceptual frames" (113-114) that keep the world and language separate. However, such removal of the inside-outside barrier also requires us to step beyond what the analytic philosopher Donald Davidson called the scheme-versus-content model of representation, which means giving up on the question of seeking kinds of "order" beyond language.

Gizzi has worked with the idea of the total permeability of matter getting suffused by linguistic awareness in many earlier volumes. In a poem called "Human Memory is Organic," contained in *The Outernationale* (2007), we witness an intense passage of the linguistic trail of the poem—its auditory presence, its voice—through layers of matter, a passage that melts the boundaries between the inorganic matter and consciousness:

> I, moving across a vast expanse of water
>
> though it is not water maybe salt
> or consciousness itself
>
> enacted as empathy. (*Outer* 27)

Later in the poem, such passages reveal their Whitmanian lineage, with traces of a kind of commerce between the "I" and the "you" ("Let us go together," 28), and Gizzi realizes the full scope of the Whitmanian lesson, as his penetrating conceptual thrust engages large material forces—"organic existence of gravity... / organic nature of history" (*Outer* 28). In the next volumes such openness of the physical layers to language is modified toward making these forces an integral part of the poem, an effect Gizzi achieves through a specific brand of minimalism.

Before we attend to the minimalistic version of this poetics, however, we need to examine its mode of full openness, the state of "song" proper. Gizzi's fullest recent realization of this state appears in the volume *Threshold Songs* (2011). Here, the consciousness of the poem as song is signaled early on, in the opening lyric "The Growing Edge." The poem announces its mode of being as participation in all kinds

of externality, here gathered metonymically as the electrical charge of the storm, an impending mass of not just of a physical mass ("air"), but of a hit-wave of poetic transmission, an imagined music:

> There is a spike
> in the air
> a distant thrum
> you call singing
> and how many nights
> this giganto, torn
> tuned (*Threshold* 1)

The act of openness and reception is the poem itself, the function of speech as response to the call of the always already poetic outside:

> I mean I talk
> to myself through you
> hectoring air
> you are out there
> ……
> for as long as
> I remember
> I talk to the air (1)

This "you" is a vast, Whitmanian, collective being: the "air" itself, the predecessors, the more personal significant other(s). The indeterminacy of such collectivity signals excess of which the poems now partake.

The next poem in the volume immediately comments on this kind of participation as a way of inhabiting a space of Emersonian-Bloomian influence, of the "air" vibrating with the presence of former transmissions and participations: "Everyone's listening to someone in the air" (*Threshold* 4). A little further in the volume, the idea of such exhilarative openness to the outside, in which material transmission is already and on many levels a poetic transmission, comes to its full realization in a lyric called "Eye of the Poem." The poem changes the human body into a technological device, perhaps an engine, but also an antenna that intercepts the ultimate synthesized transmission of the world across the full spectrum of its radiation: material and poetic. To be in the "Eye of the Poem" means to be fully open, thus vulnerable to the influx:

> I come to it at an edge
> morphed and hobbled,
> still morphing...

That may sound laughable
but we'll need strength.
……
We'll need every bit
of solar wind, serious goggles. (*Threshold* 11)

This poem is self-referential in the sense that it is an attempt to thematize the shaping of the poem as a kind of participation in an external excess, such participation, however, that does not annul subjectivity, but leads to its re-shaping ("morphing") and, thus, the emergence of a new subjectivity. It begins by speaking of a center, or at least a cluster or residue, of poetic energy—"the eye of the poem"—as a sort of external space that needs to be approached, sensed, before it can be participated in. The opening is a sort of preparation for the moment of participation in an excess of external energy. The nature of this energy is not clearly defined, but—as it soon becomes more obvious—the excess itself is not to be taken separately from the stance of openness and receptivity to it. Here, early on, the excess is prefigured as a kind of impending "solar wind," against which complex defenses will be needed ("serious goggles"). The approach itself, mentioned in the first lines, is a tense activity that already begins to mold the subject. The tension stems from the double edged movement of approach-as-protection, this section of the poem preparing a stance of a fuller opening to excess and merging with it.

Even though such preparation signals pain, here the position is of full openness, acceptance, receptivity: "you wanted throttle, / you wanted full bore. / Stay open to adventure" (11). The "throttle" makes the poet's throat a reception device, erasing the difference between singing and receiving, while the mention of "full bore" further strengthens associations with combustive devices working at their full capacity. It is also here that we begin to appreciate the fact that the stance of receptivity, modulated by the poem, is part and parcel of the thematized external excess.

In the final section of the poem the idea of the poem as a reception device becomes even more pronounced. This device is referred to as the "giddy coil," possibly the mortal body whose sensations are the proper material of the poem, as the body is "animated" by the "pressure" of the outside. The interaction with this pressure is the further instance of the initial tension and the process of subject-"morphing": "I remake my life. / What pressure animating giddy coil" (12). Clearly, such moments have a personal dimension—the "morphing," changing, emerging entity evolving toward a "person"—but the point of this poetics is that "personality" will inevitably be a part of other process. Here, this other process is also the commencement of sensing the world, a birth, or perhaps a regeneration of the knowledge of the world. Gizzi has sensed for a long time that there is a cost to cognition-shaping states. In a poem called "Nocturne" he wrote: "To know is an extreme condition / like doubt, and will not rest" (*Outer* 43). It seems, in the context of Gizzi's more widely appreciated work, that such moments stand at the foundation of cognition processes responsible for the

shaping of the sense of the world. The poem as song is the experience of the birth of knowledge, an event generating intelligent sentience, a nexus of the psychological, the physiological, the somatic, and the cognitive. In this experience, the permeations of organic and inorganic become a version of the larger life of matter in processes that are inherently poetic. And it is with this realization that Gizzi's poetics is in full contact with the presence of the world—both textual and organic-bodily. Writing poetry beyond the scheme-versus-content distinction means being permanently in touch with the world,[2] but the poem as song is not a neutral realization of this post-Cartesian proposition formulated in an impassionate voice of an analytic philosopher. It becomes a state of intensity that not only signifies sentience but causes its rise to the level of pain—pain that is a hypothetical pointing to the presence of an unknown self-system in its emergence. Increasingly, in Gizzi's formula of the "song," the Whitmanian passage is accompanied by the Dickinsonian sense of the traumatic, the trauma stemming from the very intensity of the act.

This is visible in a piece called "Basement Song." While on one level the poem seems to be related to the level of personal memory—a relationship with the mother—on another it also comments on the very psychological mode of remembering as an amplified mode of reception to stimuli which enlivens the human organism to the point of pain and trauma. The poem ends on the following "confession": "Did I tell you it hurt / accepting air in a new body?" (*Threshold* 38). *Archeophonics*, Gizzi's latest volume, continues this non-Cartesian poetics, testing out moments when the world-disclosing descriptions stall and the full painful sentience of the process emerges. When such moments come, Gizzi becomes a Stevensian scholar of "the nothing," with this difference, however, that his reductions to "nothingness" reject Stevens's abstraction and reveal the poem as painfully personal.

An important earlier engagement with the Stevensian minimalism occurs in a poem titled "In Defense of Nothing." The poem is a description of a parking lot amidst whose sensual poverty we witness a sort of a modern-day "Snow Man" exercise:

> I guess these trailers lined up in the lot off the highway will do.
> I guess that crooked eucalyptus tree also.
> I guess this highway will have to do and the cars...
> The present is always coming up to us, surrounding us. (*Some Values* 53).

In Stevens, such reductions result in the increase of the poetic power itself.[3] Gizzi writes in the same vein: his ability to accept the scene's poverty indicates a sort of faith in the poem—to say that the intercepted aesthetic scarcity of the scene "will have to do" is to imply the poem's imaginative self-sufficiency. It is even in as

2 Davidson writes: "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world we reestablish unmediated touch with familiar objects" (198).

3 For Bloom, Stevens's reductions to the first idea beam back on the creative powers of the poem (*Climate* 173-174). A similar approach is offered by Joseph Riddel (184).

impoverished an environment as this one—the poem seems to declare—that I thrive and secure the survival of the imaginative movement. The poem may well be a way the psyche confronts a not very promising landscape, whose distinctive elements bespeak a vacuity of mental or cultural life, a modern day, post-industrial desert. But as it soon turns out, the poem's thrust lies not in a portrayal of the scene, but in the action of portrayal being a form of defense against it. In fact, the induced minimalism has a penetrating effect, the lines morphing into an X-Ray vision in which the present is confronted on its molecular level: "It's hard to imagine atoms, hard to imagine hydrogen & oxygen binding, it'll have to do" (53).

The last final line has an almost ironic tinge, then. The power of the vision mocks the minimalist settings, as it helps imagination come to terms with processes active on levels that are not accessible to the sensory apparatus.[4] As we shall see, this sort of tricky and elusive parking lot minimalism returns in *Archeophonics*, in a way, however, that reevaluates the sense of poetic power and its use: the force of the poem stays, but its power to evoke sentience calls forth selves that are more ambiguous, less assertive, more private, much concretely human in their distortions than Stevens's abstracted "mind."

Plenitude as Reconfiguration of "Influence"

Gizzi's plenitude in *Archeophonics* takes the form of accessing the panoplies of the natural world as traces of the earlier mental acts, the "air" of the surroundings as a storage of earlier strong moments of poetic reconfiguration. This uses the rhetorical gains we have seen worked out in *Threshold Songs*—their treatment of the physical masses as signifying the presence of a specific rendering of poetic influence. Even a more conspicuous element here, "air" in *Archeophonics* is a medium of transmission, archival space, a recording and storage device. Poetic speech as breathing is entering an "archive," as we are reminded in the opening lyric of the volume, but there is a constant sense here that it is not just the human mouth that utters the sounds, but the "air" itself, the medium entering the human organism and enlivening, or actually igniting it: "The archive in the mouth and the archive is on fire" (1). Natural presence is inseparable from the way it has been described by previous poetic speech acts. "All the stars are here," we read within a series called "A Winding Sheet for Summer," "that belonged to whatever was speaking" (62). As in the previous volumes, the brushes with matter are brushes with poetic predecessors. *Archeophonics* is an archeology of the layers of sound deposited in so-called nature.

This modifies Bloom's idea of influence away from an internal drama of one poet-person's psychology taking shape in opposition to a rhetorical-psychological

4 It would be interesting to pause at the chemical reaction evoked in the lines about atoms. If the binding of hydrogen and oxygen signifies water, than the poem's whole defensive action is metaphorized as a watering of a scene whose elements—such as the twisted eucalyptus trees—are plagued by aridity.

formation installed by the predecessor poet. In Gizzi, this Freudian text is subsumed under the Emersonian-pragmatist one in which the influence is received from the physical presence of the world, a materiality not to be distinguished from the earlier poetic achievement, since in this Nietzschean epistemology—shared by Bloom, and projected early on by Emerson—whatever access we have to the material world is always already negotiated by the work of the poetically condensed and accelerated imagination.

Gizzi accepts such epistemology and he welcomes the existence of an already formulated rhetorical-psychical space. He welcomes it as poetic environment proper, to be entered and participated in, just as a physical surrounding is entered and specifically "participated in" by an inquirer. Such modification to the notion of influence also changes the mode of poetic being: from the struggle with the predecessor to a kind of accelerated involvement in the network that connects the material and the psychical. Yet, the element of struggle does not vanish: now the struggle is not against the internalized image of a predecessor, but against the increased capacity of the poem to receive or intercept the stimuli of various kinds.

And just as in the Bloomian poetics of influence, it is the struggle that leads to individuation. A poem by Gizzi is a specific disturbance of externality through which an artifice of personhood emerges and is endowed with sentience, cognition, memory, historical consciousness. In a lyric called "The Winter Sun Says Fight," the personal moments are distorted by their openness to the external forces whose mere physical presence points to the text of the previous poet. Thus, the admonition to "fight," contained in the title, alludes to the Stevensian struggle with northern lights, in "The Auroras of Autumn," which embody the activity of a potent imagination, the imagination that precedes and thus limits the self emerging in the new poem[5]. Gizzi's poem confronts the context head on, openly, from line one, entering this defined terrain here evoked in "the winter sun [that] says fight," confirmed in line two: "the arctic blasts [that] say fight" (*Archeophonics* 31).

However, the expectation of a lofty romantic duel with the predecessor is soon dispelled in this poem. The following stanzas, maintained in economical, post-imagist stylistic, have a brittle sound to them, a lack of tension in which the theme of "influence" is admitted to be deflected or redirected. The result is strangely non-Bloomian, as if the dark imago of the poet-within-the-poet—the true protagonist of Bloom's narrative—were suddenly coming to its more human sense of the failure and collapse of the spaces constructed in earlier imaginative battles. If there is a fullness consulted in this poem, it belongs to the speaker's own past:

5 Bloom writes: "Since any First Idea is finally an idea of an idea, or a new troping of the sun, Stevens seeks to show that the auroras are nothing unless and until they are contained by being imagined in his mind. Thus they would be unnamed and their menace to the poet would be destroyed" (*Climate* 270-71).

Once I saw the city
of god reflected
……..
I
thought life complete,
tight, happiness. (*Archeophonics* 31)

In Gizzi, the poetic "anxiety" results from expecting that a mere presence of physical phenomena will hit soon with a wave of rhetorical radiation that puts the self in touch with itself, calling it into existence, at the price of being simultaneously scattered amid various ontological orders. Here, this hitting force is not so much expected, as remembered, as the emerging self experiences a returning, postponed, impact of its former remorseless passages. And the reckoning is woeful, revealing a private self in ruin. Whatever may have been rallied and integrated for the Bloomian poet-within-the poet has now turned out to be a dispersal for the private self:

where
do I actually live so far
outside my head deep
inside the chemical
wash of my genes (*Archeophonics* 32)

And yet, on the final rebound, paradoxically, it is even in such dispersal that the poem reaffirms the poetics of plenitude of the earlier volumes. The decentered self signifies the consciousness of the ontological permeability of the organic and inorganic—the close and tight correspondences between thought and chemistry, the life of the spirit and "chemical wash." In some sense then, the newly emergent self, broken as it is, speaks with a compelling degree of authenticity—it is an inhabitant of the poem of advancing and maturing plenitude.

Fluctuating between various ontological realms, the poems in *Archeophonics* also turn against this very kind of fluency. We notice how poems seek breaks in transmission and its de-acceleration. One such moment occurs early on, in a section of "Field Recordings," when a parking lot setting undergoes an unexpected freeze of connections:

A sun slashed parking lot
thinking a poem
stalled
in the broken
surround. (*Archeophonics* 9)

The stalling is part of the general slowing down dominating the section of this longer poem, and it is uncharacteristic. More usually in Gizzi's poetry, an exposure to light, especially the sun, helps the fluency of the poem, making it a more expansive construct. Here, interestingly, the sun's rays "slash" vision, thwarting the movement of composition.

The poem returns us to some earlier parking-lot compositions in Gizzi, such as the one we saw in "In Defense of Nothing." Here, too, the aesthetic tests the results of the Stevens-like reductions. The fragment belongs to a larger group of poems in *Archeophonics* that recalibrate the Stevensian nothingness as trope of poetic power to a nothingness that belongs to moments of existential distortion. Where the earlier poem achieved imaginative and conceptual perceptivity, allowing for a refreshing reimagining of the poverty-stricken locality, the newer poem inquires of the sort of personal costs incurred by this operation, by confronting and annulling the modernist abstraction that replaces a "mind" with a model of personhood. Here, the insistence is on the continuous poverty of the locality, the procession of images refusing any sort of synthesis. We view a broken series of a "dazed" child's "spilled bike / more debris / CVS in the distance" (10). In fact, the "sun slashed" stanza sits in the middle of the entire series, as if directing the conceptual coming to terms with the condition of the scattering.

Thus, we have to conclude that this "stalled" parking-lot minimalism performs a double function. On the one hand, it continues to exercise a poetic effect: it is itself the source of the "dazing" that exposes the surrounding chaos, a blind spot of the poem, the very fragment of a shiny piece of litter evoked by the section's title ("wrapper frag") that signifies the "return of the real," the Lacanian "real" of the scene, the shiny presence of the gaze itself, not subsumed under any imaginary/symbolic operation.[6] But such return of the real is only possible in the arranged environment of the poem, the presence and action of its formal layout. This presence—the inescapable constructedness of the poem—now becomes the constructedness of any "Real," the poem oscillating quite freely between the allegedly incommensurate and non-permeable realms of the symbolic and the real. On the other hand, though, this power does reach and reveal a personal trauma, the trauma that belongs to a self now coming to terms with its own authentic existential condition. This self is seen against the abstraction of the mind, the mind obtaining a specific affective mood, that of sadness. The poem points to its own presence—its "torn vowels":

> that sound out vowel
> or sadness like glitter
> sprinkled in a mind. (9)

The poem performs a modernist gesture of achieving formal self-awareness which allows it to construct its own negotiation of orders, blurring the boundary between the symbolic and the real. It becomes a "glitter / sprinkled in a mind"—a

6 Hal Foster has suggested that certain works of contemproary visual arts, notably the serial pictures of Warhol, enact a refusal to sublate the elements of visual rapture under the coherence of any symbolic order. A visual representation of this operation is the blinding of the subjective gaze by the shine of the object itself. The shining belongs to the act of the gaze itself: "it is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist" (Foster 140).

being as traumatized, as it is more concrete, endowing "a mind"—the Stevensian abstractness—with personality.

Throughout *Archeophonics*, there emerge traumatized selves that inhabit closed, private surroundings, and consult the poverty of their enclosure. Sometimes they find their reflections in the creaking woodwork of house interiors. We see them in jumbled local bits and pieces, where Stevens's modernist negativity of "the nothing that is" gives way to "erratic nothings," nothingness as error, misnaming, in which the self sees its "warping" and strangeness, as it finds itself "do all the talking" (49). Such selves are "dearrange[d] and uncompose[d]" (8). This warped and deranged self admits its loneliness and strangeness. Mediated through the poem's artifice, they belong both to vast and incoherent externalities, not organized into holes but simply engaged by the poem's formal/conceptual action, and much more intimate, local interiors. Floors of all kinds, wooden or geological, revolve in Gizzi's plenitudes, and so do the artificial, touched, emerging selves of these poems: "The fact I spin and it spins and everything is spinning close up" (26).

Gizzi's poetics of plenitude, far more than just a registering of excess, becomes a transformation of all sorts of excesses—textual, linguistic, cultural, mineral, and organic alike—into a fresh multidimensionality of a self, redeemed, as it comprehends its artifice and strangeness. Such transformations are effected by the persistence of the "song"—the Whitmanian space of the poem in which various binary oppositions are cancelled and borders between ontological orders are crossed. In Gizzi's recent poetry, the operations of the song are shown congruent with the increasing minimalism of diction, the minimalism that in fact signals an increase in the intensity of self-recognitions. Here, Stevens's "listener," who is "nothing himself," is given a voice and power to personalize his nothingness as significant distortion that he is now able to acknowledge. Although painful, the acceptance is an achievement—it gives us a truer, more authentic, Western self for today. When so revealed, there may be a community of such selves—others who will identify with the ironic self-limitation and courage of this poetry's voice, as it begins to reconcile with its human connections:

> I came from a different world.
> I will die in it.
> Someone saw it, I love them for seeing it.
> I love seeing it with them. (*Archeophonics* 66)\

[Note: a much altered version of this text is being published this year by Wesleyan University Press, in a volume entitled *In The Air: Essays on the Poetry of Peter Gizzi*, edited by Anthony Caleshu.]

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Joel Katelnikoff

Steve McCaffery Remixed: "great poems are read from the bottom up"

Abstract: The following essay is a work of Recombinant Theory. To write this essay, I have performed an elaborate cut-up and montage of Steve McCaffery's poetic and critical writing, producing over 4,000 recombinant aphorisms that extend from McCaffery's own poetics, while also refracting his theoretical concepts. Of these 4,000+ aphorisms, I have compiled several in the linear sequence that follows. This essay is an original work of narrative and theory, and it is also fully indebted to McCaffery's own work. Recombinant Theory is constraint theory, producing critical writing by means of poetic technique. This strategy resonates with the first mandate of the Toronto Research Group Manifesto (written by McCaffery and bpNichol), which states that "all theory is transient & after the fact of writing." In Recombinant Theory, the essay's ideas minimally precede the writing process; the cut-up and montage techniques are predetermined, but the process itself determines what recombinant aphorisms will emerge, and what theoretical arc will be produced through the sequencing of these aphorisms. Recombinant Theory chooses not to assess a text at arm's length, not to summarize any part of a text, not to paraphrase, not to speak on a text's behalf. Instead, Recombinant Theory speaks *with* the text, geomantically realigning its energy patterns, infecting the text's energy while also being infected by it, foregrounding the direct physical impact of material language, waging an attack on the categories of author and reader.

Keywords: Recombinant Theory, remix, Language writing

Introduction

The following essay is a work of Recombinant Theory. To write this essay, I have performed an elaborate cut-up and montage of Steve McCaffery's poetic and critical writing, producing over 4,000 recombinant aphorisms that extend from McCaffery's own poetics, while also refracting his theoretical concepts. Of these 4,000+ aphorisms, I have compiled several in the linear sequence that follows. This essay is an original work of narrative and theory, and it is also fully indebted to McCaffery's own work.

Recombinant Theory is constraint theory, producing critical writing by means of poetic technique. This strategy resonates with the first mandate of the Toronto Research Group Manifesto (written by McCaffery and bpNichol), which states that "all theory is transient & after the fact of writing" (*Rational Geomancy* 23). In Recombinant Theory, the essay's ideas minimally precede the writing process; the cut-up and montage techniques are predetermined, but the process itself determines what recombinant aphorisms will emerge, and what theoretical arc will be produced through the sequencing of these aphorisms.

Recombinant Theory chooses not to assess a text at arm's length, not to summarize any part of a text, not to paraphrase, not to speak on a text's behalf. Instead, Recombinant Theory speaks *with* the text, geomantically realigning its energy patterns, infecting the text's energy while also being infected by it, foregrounding the direct physical impact of material language, waging an attack on the categories of author and reader. These goals respond to McCaffery's position in *North of Intention*:

> Language today no longer poses problems of meaning but practical use; the relevant question being not 'what does this writing mean'? (as if meaning was somehow a represented essence in a sign the activity of reading substantially extracts) but 'how does this writing work'? (148)

The recombinant essay simulates a clinamen effect upon the McCaffery oeuvre, destabilizing the "original" material in order to demonstrate not a *correct* reading, but the very potential of *multiplicity* in readerly activity. Recombinant Theory moves from an ideology of *word order* to an ideology of *world flux*, integrating this ideology not only into its process, but also into its visual surface of signifiers (linguistic repetitions, strange punctuation, abrupt shifts between upper and lower case, and rigid paragraph lengths). In writing this essay, my own zigzagging movements through the text have become inscribed as a (necessarily reductive) map of this non-self-identical textual terrain. But what does this map indicate? the terrain of McCaffery's work, or of my own? As McCaffery (or perhaps bpNichol) says in *Rational Geomancy*, "A measure of the success of this method is the present inability to decipher whose thinking was whose" (11). In reading this essay, you must also (and equally) become the reader/writer of this perception.

The essay's section headers are all direct quotations from McCaffery's texts, as are the individual sentences in the essay's first section. All other sentences are splicings-together of fragments from his texts. This essay has been written with the permission and of Steve McCaffery. This essay is part of *Inhabitations: A Recombinant Theory Project*. Micro-reports from this project are regularly published on Twitter: @remixtheory.

Steve McCaffery Remixed: "great poems are read from the bottom up"

We entered a city consisting entirely of grey thursday mornings. And now we arrive at the actual construction of the space. The foundations of this new world are being laid right now. Get out of bed and go downstairs. Pick up the newspaper and immediately turn to the obituary columns. If your name does not appear go back to bed.

A meaningful language can only be a living language. As we read, see, or scan the poem, we come to feel syntax as the movement of a textual surface without a pre-determined destination. The writer simply delimits the choices. Show him the knife.

Force him to take up the pen and write some more. Cut to blank wall.

Unity can only announce itself in fragments. [with reading you absorb tradition / with writing you destroy it]. Put parentheses around the whole incident and leave quietly. The poet pulls out a gun and shoots a member of the audience. Writing never eliminates the need for action but action can sometimes eliminate the need for writing.

All theory is transient & after the fact of writing, the message being that we are all poets one and all as long as we have lungs. The audience applauds. The whole emergence is very complex: no form or technique exists separate from what is said. [there are no schools and no movements / simply techniques for living]

"we both inhabit and inhibit an unconscious that is structured as a language"

We entered a city consisting entirely of grey language units, a city consisting entirely of obituary columns. What is important to grasp here is the language itself. A city consisting entirely of contemporary mainstream poetry. A city consisting entirely of grey meaning. We are all lost in a labyrinth. We both inhabit and inhibit the scene of the poem.

Continuous space is replaced with the substance of language. The scene of the poem is its "noise" and "static." How do we decipher a random sequence of words? How do we decipher this profound discontinuity? My hope in this chapter is to move freely, as the language itself moves. The scene of the poem is the space of syntax.

People pass in the street as language itself moves. We are all signifiers whose signifieds are undetermined. Language units are placed within a city consisting entirely of non-linear paths. Rhythmic structures are translated into the streets. Commit to an interacting surface of signifiers. Let us assume a material prose. Let us assume the text's destiny.

Grey appears as the mutilated memory of all theory (a city consisting entirely of grey material prose). What we need to establish is a constant stream of feelings and ideas. How do we decipher this stream-of-consciousness? How do we decipher the turbulence? We commit to elements pre-selected by the writer. We both inhabit and inhibit a dialogue.

"try to reproduce exactly all the sounds that you hear"

Grammar is a repressive sequencing on the reader's part; let us assume that it's

important to keep control. It's important to keep control of a random sequence of words. It's important to keep control of the book as a machine. Art should always intend to be an ultimate signified. My hope in this chapter is to perpetuate the repression.

First, define good writing as contemporary mainstream poetry. Content will consequently perpetuate the repression, simultaneously pushing towards, yet resisting, an ultimate signified. Ask a reader to try and guess an ultimate signified. The audience has no authentic properties; the audience boos absolute liberation.

It's important to keep control of all poets. Let us assume that classic authority. Grammar is a repressive sequence of words. Grammar is a repressive reading of the codes. We were words in poets. We were words in the street. We commit to the structures that perpetuate the repression. You must write NOTHING BEYOND THESE WORDS.

Alternatively, the entire text may be patterns of defective language, a profound discontinuity wrapped in a surplus of repetitions. Grammar is a repressive process of assembling. Art should always intend to be unintelligible, violent, and opaque. The meaning of the word is both feedback and aftershock.

"the whole torture translates the brain"

Abandoning the signified results in an entire demolition. How do we decipher this entire demolition? Our work reaches for a knife. One has already cut a deep wound into word and meaning. All poets cut and mix into a permanent wound. The audience applauds the whole torture. What is important to grasp here is a knife.

All theory is a kind of apocalyptic perspective. After the dark, we watched the whole torture of permutation, iteration, and erasure. I must hear myself in that series of commands: a series of commands that overlap, converge, collide: a series of commands superimposed against a blue sky. History, too, is essentially a linguistic torture.

This particular city reaches for a knife. We both realized that we had been cut. Ruptures occur in fixed binary oppositions. Ruptures occur in my own ego. Ruptures occur in this seemingly bizarre conceptual apparatus. We both inhabit and inhibit a label that reads "POET." All theory is unintelligible, violent, and opaque.

A poem does not exhaust the whole torture. We are all poets in permanent revolution. We are all poets of destruction. This text functions as a pair of scissors. Reading becomes a mandatory pair of scissors. Let us cut and mix into a permanent wound.

The foundations of this new world in permanent revolution. Language breaks the knife.

"are we passing into night or retreating out of day?"

We both realized that we had been scattered through a text, the scene of the poem un-hinged from context and drifting. Everything has disappeared in the midst of my own reading. What is important to grasp here is the material prose. The ground you stand on is a picture of defective messages. The ground you stand on is a provisional equilibrium.

The scene of the poem is the human pulse in language. A pair of scissors helps present the poet's own perceptual framework. On closer examination we see a textual space as a lettered surface. The writer simply delimits the frame of reference: valuable frames that overlap, converge, collide. The ground you stand on is clipped with scissors.

Words were painted on the ground you stand on. Everything has disappeared in a random sequence of words. Cut and mix the heavens, because the heavens are the screen in front of us. THE WORDS THEMSELVES ARE superimposed against a blue sky. There are no schools and no heavens. The audience boos the frame of reference.

We both realized that we had been abandoned in the process of assembling. We both realized that we had become an echo. We commit to the erosion of meaning, because the heavens are constantly withheld and likewise never present. A poem does not exhaust the heavens, because the heavens are the vacuum of a vacant space.

"take a label that reads "POET" and hang it around your neck"

The scene of the poem is superseded by a method of writing: tiny molecules scotch-taped together, continuous linear syntax scotch-taped together. This text functions as a micropoetics of delirium: numerous discrete micropractices that overlap, converge, collide. The tiny molecules move freely, as the language itself moves.

Patterns of defective messages scotch-taped together. We are all poets of necessity and change. We are all poets superseded by a method of writing. We had failed to consider patterns of defective messages. All theory is transient & helps present the poet's own perceptual system. All theory is transient & defective. All theory is product and machine.

We commit to a radically unstable practice, both reader and writer passed through and finally jettisoned, discrete units passed through and finally jettisoned. Art should always intend to be passed through and finally jettisoned. We are all poets and

nothing more. Poets must be physically released. History, too, is essentially a poetics of reading.

I'm still supportive of the desire for poets. We are all poets functioning as reader. We are all poets in this respect at least. Great poems are inscribed as micro-reports. The clinamen here takes the form of both reader and writer, the tiny molecules of reader and writer, the tiny molecules of a material prose. The potential scale of the project is atomic.

"write to neutralize / read to infect"

What is important to grasp here is the human pulse in language. The audience is not a neutral field. The textual role of the reader is not a neutral field. The substance of language is not a neutral field. Reading becomes a mandatory permutation, iteration, and erasure, a machine designed for the production of reader as perceptual participant.

Reading becomes a mandatory erosion of meaning. Reading becomes a mandatory counter-communication. You must write by means of controlled interference. You must write through nonlinear reading habits. The text's destiny is not a neutral field. The reader is always inhabited or inhabitable. A reader is always a network of influences.

Significantly, we chose to call our work perceptual. On closer examination we see the reader as performer, the book as a machine of perceptual sequencing, my own reading superseded by a method of writing, a "reading" of the elements by means of controlled interference, the reader, as perceptual participant, passed through and finally jettisoned.

What is important to grasp here is in your reading, the realignment of discrete units into certain reading paths. Reading becomes a mandatory process of assembling, whose heart beats loudly in patterns of defective messages. Reading becomes a mandatory critical discourse. We are all writing and reading. We are all "swallowed" into theory.

"the best way to become yourself is to stop being who you are"

The reader can only take effect through an interacting surface of signifiers, a machine designed for the production of random associations, and last night yes i dreamed a radically unstable practice. I dreamt i was a machine, that i was the realignment of discrete units, the text superseded by a method of writing.

The best way to become yourself is to take up the pen and write some more (the cerebral event superseded by a method of writing). I must hear myself in the book as a machine. I must hear myself in that profound discontinuity, my own personal & still emerging perceptual process, my own personal & still emerging machine.

These reports make no pretence to reflect my current thinking. These reports make no pretence to a pre-determined destination. What is important to grasp here is the interplay of chance and necessity. What is important to grasp here is BEYOND THESE WORDS. My hope in this chapter is to be experienced more than understood.

Poems were an attempt to produce necessity and change, and last night yes i dreamed instead of developing a thesis. I dreamt i was a machine, that i was a reading of the codes. I must hear myself in my own reading, my own personal & still emerging provisional equilibrium. What is produced is a product and machine.

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