Literary Theory
For Gabriel and Nathaniel
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Glossary of Terms 1581
This book began, as one might guess, in the classroom. We have been teaching courses in contemporary literary theory for the past two decades, and we have each had the familiar experience of not being able to match the design of our courses to any anthology currently available. The move from awkwardly assembled xerox packets to an actual anthology has been both a natural outgrowth of our teaching and an astonishingly complex process of research, selection, and projection. For although the germ of the book was our own classroom(s), its destination has always been many classrooms, courses no doubt much different than any we ourselves might teach, and yet ones that our selections would ideally work both to accommodate and to enrich.

The scale of the volume is one expression of its projected flexibility; we felt that an anthology of literary theory needed not only to cover the range of theoretical perspectives or approaches that characterize the era “after the New Criticism,” the era that we take to be that of contemporary literary theory, but also to represent those perspectives with reasonable depth and range. The effect of such a decision, we hope, is that many kinds of courses will find a home in these selections, that a course that takes as its focus Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Post-Colonialism, or Psychoanalysis and Gender Studies will find this anthology as useful as one that makes a more extensive survey of theoretical perspectives.

The anthology opens with formalisms – both Russian and American – in a gesture that marks its organization as partly chronological and partly heuristic. That is, we take formalism – at least in its American avatar of New Criticism – to mark the condition of students’ theoretical awareness before beginning the journey into “theory.” To the degree that they have been taught a form of “close reading” as the basic task of literary analysis, they are practicing formalists, though the practice may be, like that of the prose-speaking M. Jourdain in Molière’s *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, an unself-conscious one. Exploring the theoretical premises of a New Critical practice, placing those in conjunction with a historically unrelated yet theoretically cognate predecessor, Russian Formalism, seems like an appropriate way to initiate an exposure to “theory” in its less familiar guises.

The parts themselves have undergone many evolutions; the issue of where to draw the lines, what denomination to use, and where to locate certain selections has been as theoretically complex as it has been practically consequential. While “Deconstruction,” for example, enjoyed a separate life in literary critical history in the US in the 1970s and 1980s, we felt it more appropriate to place it within its historical and intellectual French context, and so you will find Derrida amongst Deleuze and Guattari, and Baudrillard under “Post-Structuralism.” The question of how to categorize some kinds of theory,
regarding gender, for example, was also difficult, and we opted for a big tent: A separate section could easily have been devoted to any number of theoretical projects, each of which has already produced its own “classic” texts, and while attending to these developments has been one goal of the anthology, we wished as well to embrace both the heterodox and the newly canonical. Some of the names in our table of contents may not be readily recognizable for this reason, and our inclusion of these texts is less a sign of presumption regarding future canonicity than it is an indicator of our desire to locate the anthology as much in the contemporary realm as possible. That has meant guessing, and we based our guesses on what we felt would be exciting or helpful in the classroom.

In a desire both to be as inclusive as possible and to represent works not commonly anthologized, we have done a certain amount of excerpting. Our principle has been to represent the core of a given work, and if, to that end, we have sacrificed portions of texts that readers will deem necessary, we can only suggest that our selections constitute a useful beginning to a more extensive acquaintance. We apologize in advance for any such textual editing deemed brutal.

A final word about our cover illustration. The words “No Radio” refer to a sign people put in their cars in New York City. It means “don’t bother breaking into the body of this car; the radio has already been either stolen or else removed by the owner.” We asked Wiley-Blackwell to use this image because it speaks to the reservations many still feel about “theory” and about its association with the ideology of mastery through critical analysis that murders to dissect. It also speaks, of course, to our hesitations as editors engaged in the compilation and dissemination of such theories. We would not summon the image (and we would not engage in the work) if we did not feel that “theory” is itself filled with doubt regarding the objectivist ideal the image so carefully mocks. Some theories do indeed fulfill the aspirations of the man with the heart in his hand, but we hope you will feel that there are many others in this book that adopt the perspective of the woman on the table.
The first recorded human story, something that might be called “The Hunt,” appears on the walls of the caves at Lascaux, France. It was made either by children or for children, judging from the hand and feet impressions on the floor of the cave, and it represents not just a hunt but also a remarkable shift in human cognition that occurred, according to archeologist Richard Klein, around 42 ka. From this point forward, humans become more “human” in our modern sense. They invent new tools, everything from plows to currency, that expand the reach of human culture. They evidence an ability to picture abstract mental concepts and to imagine a spirit world. They slowly switch from a hunting existence to an agricultural existence. They stop living in small kin-based bands and organize large settled communities. The early human tendency to commit rampant genocide against his cousins slowly diminishes, and humans live together in relative peace. The emergence of this new way of life can be accounted for by the change in human cognition that is expressed in “The Hunt.” The mimetic ability one sees in the paintings for the first time was essential to emergent sociality. A capacity for mental representations is linked to control over rapid-fire, automatic negative emotions such as prejudice and fight-or-flight that aided survival on the savannah but were inimical to a settled social existence. That new mimetic cognitive ability was also crucial to imagining others’ lives empathetically so that communities of kin and non-kin could be built. The capacity for story-telling is thus connected in an essential way to the cognitive abilities that aided the emergence of modern human life. We did not so much begin to tell each other stories because we started living together in large communities; rather, we were able to build such communities because we were able to tell each other stories.

Story-telling likely also played a more direct role in the emergence of modern human life. Stories allowed early humans to store and to transmit information that was crucial to the social learning upon which humans’ new culturally mediated civil existence depended. Stories are memory banks that record lessons from the past and are easily transmissible. Some ethnologists believe a greater capacity for short-term memory was a key change in the human cognitive revolution around 42 ka. Early human stories were probably initially accounts of remembered events, simple documentaries. Those documentary accounts with time became fictional narratives as real characters were replaced by imaginary ones (some of whom would be taken from the surrounding nature, such as Crow or Turtle). Memory stories were also narratives that projected a future, the unknown part of the story yet to be told but anticipated in the mind. Such narrative graphing of life’s actions in terms of past, present, and future meant humans could also plan ahead and foresee events more so than before. Their lives were no longer limited to
the satisfying of physical needs in an immediate and short-term manner. “The Hunt” gave way to “The Trip to Whole Foods.”

Story-telling would have aided the building of more complex social networks, the integration of diverse people into a uniform culture, the training of minds in a communally beneficial empathy, and the evolution of common norms. Early human stories often possessed a normative dimension. One purpose of telling them was to instruct the young in the life-sustaining norms and practices of the community. Our earliest recorded verbal stories – Homer’s epics – teach norms of appropriate behavior towards others in one’s community such as hospitality and respect. And the tragedies of the fifth-century Greek enlightenment caution against norm-breaking behavior.

Literary theory came into being at a time when the normative function of story-telling was felt quite strongly. One of the first theorists, Plato, argued that literature should educate the young in good behavior. He lived and taught in Athens 2600 years ago, and he founded the first institution of higher learning in the West, the Academy. That is important because one consequence of the evolution of human cognition is the creation of a need for nurturing environments or niches to sustain the new cognitive abilities. Those nurturing environments were possible in cities and took the form of institutions such as schools and practices such as writing. Psychologists now know that the mind’s advanced cognitive abilities as well as the mind’s ability to live in a civil, sociable way with others depend on training and modeling. External prompting is required to allow full cognitive powers to emerge and full emotional abilities to grow. That humans’ ability to think in certain ways happened at the same time that nurturing institutions such as schools came into being should therefore be no surprise. The advance in human cognitive powers allowed humans to use external instruments such as writing and book-making to preserve past human cognitive achievements (as an external hard drive does today for a computer). Other tools and techniques could now also be used to train minds to replicate the achievements of the past so they would not be lost. Humans became capable of using what today we call cultural and social construction to maintain human civilization.

The new cognitive power of abstraction that began to emerge around 42 ka divided knowledge between sense impressions and the abstract ideas the new cognition made possible. Plato built his philosophy around this distinction. He felt the abstract ideas the mind could now imagine were more true than sense impressions. The world around one did not offer many examples of perfectly formed beautiful things, but in one’s mind one could imagine an ideal beauty. Plato mistakenly thought these abstract concepts – Beauty, Truth, Justice – were actual things in the world, a kind of spirit realm of pure forms or ideas. We now know that he was simply describing the new cognitive ability of the human brain, its new capacity to picture non-sensory objects in the mind’s eye. All around Plato in his world, that new cognitive ability was helping his human companions to build a new civilization using new cultural tools such as currency, laws, and rhetoric. He felt, correctly, that the new cultural forms such as the enactment of fictional human events would serve an important function in the building of that new civilization. Empathy, an ability to live together in peace by imagining others’ lives and feeling them as similar to one’s own, was crucial to the new human capacity for sociality and civility, and literature and theater fostered it by obliging audiences to imagine others’ lives as if they were their own. Only a few hundred thousand years earlier, members of the *Homo* line had been hunting each other for food. Athens was clearly an improvement, but getting there required a new way of thinking whose normative function Plato correctly saw.
Plato: If the prospective guardians of our community are to loathe casual quarrels with one another, we must take good care that battles between gods and giants and all the other various tales of gods and heroes coming to blows with their relatives and friends don’t occur in the stories they hear and the pictures they see. No, if we’re somehow to convince them that fellow citizens never fall out with one another, that this is wrong, then that is the kind of story they must hear, from childhood onwards, from the community’s elders of both sexes; and the poets they’ll hear when they’re older must be forced to tell equivalent stories in their poetry…. All things considered then, that is why a very great deal of importance should be placed upon ensuring that the first stories they hear are best adapted for their moral improvement.

If Plato’s belief in rational ideas such as Justice, Beauty, and Truth that existed in a purely ideal or rational realm apart from sensory experience reflects the emergence of a brain capable of abstraction, of separating mental concepts from sensory data, the ability to construct mental representations also made possible more refined observation of sensory objects by separating the adaptively evolved mind from the world around it. Prior to this point, the human brain, in order to help preserve life, needed to be vigilant and keenly focused on sense impressions for signs of danger. Living in the emerging civil communities allowed the brain to evolve further and to adapt to social life by developing new communicative and emotional skills that required less immersion in or fusion with the sensory world around it. With the diminishment of danger and the growth of sociality came a greater separation of mind from world through the development of a capacity for mental representation that allowed the world to be perceived and studied more like an object. Civil existence and science became possible at the same time.

Plato’s student Aristotle studied the structure of literature and its effects in this manner, treating literature as an object in the world that is as worthy of study as geology. He therefore described the structure of stories and noticed, for example, that the sequence of events in narrative is organized around moments of reversal and recognition. He differentiated between narrative perspectives and examined the traits that distinguish one genre like comedy from another like tragedy. He also analyzed the way literature provokes reactions in audiences. Tragedy inspires empathetic suffering with the fictional characters. His focus on empathy is especially important given how essential that emotion now was to the sustaining of human civilization. Without an ability to empathize with others grounded in the new power to imagine mental objects, humans would not have been able to form the newly complex societies that had come into being.

Aristotle: Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements used separately in the various parts of the play; represented by people acting and not by narration, accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions….

Clearly, each of the kinds of representation we mentioned will contain these differences and will vary by representing objects which vary in this manner…. Tragedy too is distinguished from comedy by precisely this difference: comedy prefers to represent people who are worse than those who exist, tragedy people who are better. Again, a third difference among these kinds is the manner in which one can represent each of these things. For one can use the same media to represent the very same things, sometimes by narrating (either by becoming another person as Homer does or remaining the same person and not changing or by representing everyone as in action and activity). Representation, then, has these three points of difference, as we said at the beginning, its media, its objects, and its manner.
The Greek example suggests how important the feedback loop from mind to culture to mind had become in human life. The new sociality and the new civility one sees in Greece during its Enlightenment were dependent on a nurturing environment, and schools played a prominent role in Athenian life. The early cognitive abilities of the Athenians were sustained by that cultural niche. It is no wonder, then, that the conquest of Greece by Rome 2100 ka interrupted the progress of human culture and of human cognition at least in the West. With the disappearance of the nurturing niche the Greeks had built, the cognition it sustained also declined. Authoritarianism, brutality, and pillage – versions of the primitive automatic instincts the mind’s new capacity for mental representations helps regulate – became the norm in political and social life for six centuries. After the fall of Rome, the cultural ecosystem the Greeks evolved disappeared almost entirely. But the capacity for symbolic thought did not wane entirely. In the West, the Catholic Church preserved some of the cognitive abilities that emerged in Greece, especially the ability to think in abstract mental representations that stood apart from sensory experience or perception. Church thinkers became fascinated with allegory, the idea that religious texts especially contained hidden meanings. A biblical story about a man’s treatment of his wife or children would be interpreted to have a second, other meaning having to do with religious doctrine.

Church thinkers also retained the Platonic idea of a culture that instilled norms of good behavior. Even without Aristotle’s texts to serve as examples, some Church thinkers such as Augustine continued the analytic tradition and examined how logic and language worked. They developed a theory of language as signs that would prove important for future cultural analysts.

**Augustine:** There are two reasons why written texts fail to be understood: their meaning may be veiled either by unknown signs or by ambiguous signs. Signs are either literal or metaphorical. They are called literal when used to signify the things for which they were invented: as, for example, when we say *bovem* [ox], meaning the animal which we and all speakers of Latin call by that name. They are metaphorical when the actual things which we signify by the particular words are used to signify something else: when, for example, we say *bovem* and not only interpret the two syllables to mean the animal normally referred to by that name but also understand, by that animal, “worker in the gospel,” which is what scripture, as interpreted by the apostle Paul, means when it says, “You shall not muzzle the ox that treads out the grain.” …

As well as this rule, which warns us not to pursue a figurative (that is, metaphorical) expression as if it were literal, we must add a further one: not to accept a literal one as if it were figurative. Generally speaking, it is this: anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related either to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative. Good morals have to do with our love of God and our neighbor, the true faith with our understanding of God and our neighbor. The hope that each person has within his own conscience is directly related to the progress that he feels himself to be making towards the love and understanding of God and his neighbor.

Around 700 ka humans began to relaunch the Greek project as they rediscovered lost Greek texts. With the return of a secular culture during the Renaissance, thinkers could once again study literature as a form of moral instruction and as a cultural object with many dimensions meriting analysis. Dante Alighieri was both a leading poet of the Renaissance and an astute theorist of literature who described the different kinds of meaning a literary text could possess. This emphasis on interpretation or hermeneutics
derived from the allegorical study of religious texts, but it soon would acquire a secular use in literary analysis.

**Dante Alighieri:** [W]ritings can be understood and ought to be expounded principally in four senses. The first is called the literal, and this is the sense that does not go beyond the surface of the letter, as in the fables of the poets. The next is called the allegorical, and this is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction. Thus Ovid says that with his lyre Orpheus tamed wild beasts and made trees and rocks move toward him, which is to say that the wise man with the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow tender and humble and moves to his will those who do not devote their lives to knowledge and art; and those who have no rational life whatsoever are almost like stones. Why this kind of concealment was devised by the wise will be shown in the penultimate book. Indeed the theologians take this sense otherwise than do the poets; but since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets.

The third sense is called moral, and this is the sense that teachers should intently seek to discover throughout the scriptures, for their own profit and that of their pupils; as, for example, in the Gospel we may discover that when Christ ascended the mountain to be transfigured, of the twelve Apostles he took with him but three, the moral meaning of which is that in matters of great secrecy we should have few companions.

The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is to say, beyond the senses; and this occurs, when a scripture is expounded in a spiritual sense which, although it is true also in the literal sense, signifies by means of the things signified a part of the supernal things of eternal glory, as may be seen in the song of the Prophet which says that when the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made whole and free. For although it is manifestly true according to the letter, that which is spiritually intended is no less true, namely, that when the soul departs from sin it is made whole and free in its power. In this kind of explication, the literal should always come first, as being the sense in whose meaning the others are enclosed, and without which it would be impossible and illogical to attend to the other senses, and especially the allegorical.

With a vibrant secular educational system, Italy in the Renaissance was an ideal niche environment for the development of human cognitive skills and for the reemergence of several branches of speculative thought, from literary theory to political theory. Renaissance discussions of literature down through the eighteenth century were dominated by Greek ideas, however, since the educational system favored those texts in the education of young women and men. Religious authorities did not smile on the Humanist argument that the reading of literature constituted a form of moral instruction. Writers such as Philip Sydney responded by arguing that literature portrays a second more ideal nature to the existing one and therefore suggests how things should be. It teaches by imaginative example.

Another debate regarding aesthetics during this period concerned what was called Classicism – the idea that art should follow the rules set down by Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle’s notion of mimesis – that art imitates life – became the injunction that art must imitate life or “Nature.” The writer should follow Nature and write as simply as possible, without self-aggrandizing artifice.

One of the most innovative thinkers of the Humanist era was Giambattista Vico. His *New Science* foreshadows twentieth-century linguistic philosophy in its recognition of the essentially metaphoric character of all language.

In the eighteenth century, a new way of thinking emerged, and that often is called rationalism because it emphasized the conceptualizing operations of the mind (or “Reason”).
Rational ideas are transcendental (they stand outside the ordinary world of everyday perceptions) and universal (they concern what is general to all tulips rather than just to the specific one before our eyes). Theorists of literature such as Samuel Johnson therefore began to argue that literature is important not for how it portrays individual events or characters but rather for how it “rises to general and transcendent truths, which will always be the same.”

Germany’s educational system became quite sophisticated during this period, and a group of German thinkers were especially important in advancing rationalist literary theory: Gotthold Lessing, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Hegel. Writing at a time when the ideal of the classical examples of Greek and Roman art still was influential, Lessing focused on the essential characteristics of poetry and painting. Many assumed poetry should resemble painting, but Lessing differed. He noticed that poetry is consecutive in execution and emphasizes time, while painting favors simultaneity and is more a work based in space.

**Gotthold Lessing:** I reason thus: if it is true that in its imitations painting uses completely different means or signs than does poetry, namely figures and colors in space rather than articulated sounds in time, and if these signs must indisputably bear a suitable relation to the thing signified, then signs existing in space can express only objects whose wholes or parts coexist, while signs that follow one another can express only objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive.

Objects or part of objects which exist in space are called bodies. Accordingly, bodies with their visible properties are the true subjects of painting.

Objects or parts of objects which follow one another are called actions. Accordingly, actions are the true subjects of poetry. . . .

But the objection will be raised that the symbols of poetry are not only successive but are also arbitrary; and, as arbitrary symbols, they are of course able to represent bodies as they exist in space. Examples of this might be taken from Homer himself. We need only to recall his shield of Achilles to have the most decisive instance of how discursively and yet at the same time poetically a single object may be described by presenting its coexistent parts. . . .

[But] Homer does not paint the shield as finished and complete, but as a shield that is being made. Thus, here too he has made use of that admirable artistic device: transforming what is coexistent in his subject into what is consecutive, and thereby making the living picture of an action out of the tedious painting of an object. We do not see the shield, but the divine master as he is making it. He steps up to the anvil with hammer and tongs, and after he has forged the plates out of the rough, the pictures which he destines for the shield’s ornamentation rise before our eyes out of the bronze, one after the other beneath the finer blows of his hammer.

Kant distinguished between higher and lower mental faculties. The higher are capable of abstraction, of thinking in pure ideas. The lower were more practical and sensory, tied to specific judgments or perceptions. The best human behavior accorded with a universal idea of higher reason. The concepts of reason must, for Kant, be disinterested and law-like. To regulate human affairs impartially, they must serve no particular end or interest, such as the enrichment of an individual or the pursuit of sensory pleasure alone. Art, because it works on the senses rather than pure reason, is not capable of attaining such a high standard of disinterestedness. The most it can offer is “purposiveness without purpose,” a semblance of universality. Kant also noticed something one might have expected to be the case, given how the human brain evolved, and that is an overlap of
faculties, especially of the faculty for appreciating beauty and the moral faculty for knowing what is good. To judge something beautiful is to claim it resembles a moral that should be valid for all.

Immanuel Kant: Now I say that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, and also only in this respect (that of a relation that is natural to everyone, and that is also expected of everyone else as a duty) does it please with a claim to the assent of everyone else, in which the mind is at the time aware of a certain ennoblement and elevation above the mere receptivity for a pleasure from sensible impressions, and also esteems the value of others in accordance with a similar maxim of their power of judgment…. 1) The beautiful pleases immediately (but only in reflecting intuition, not, like morality, in the concept). 2) It pleases without any interest … 3) The freedom of the imagination (thus of the sensibility of our faculty) is represented in the judging of the beautiful as in accord with the lawfulness of the understanding (in the moral judgment the freedom of the will is conceived as the agreement of the latter with itself in accordance with universal laws of reason). 4) The subjective principle for judging of the beautiful is represented as universal, i.e. valid for everyone.

Georg Hegel believed the mental and the physical or natural worlds were one. The logical processes of the mind, which he called “dialectic” after the logic of the Greeks, could be found at work in human history and human society as well as in nature. The natural and social world followed the same course of development as the mental world of logic. In a logical dialectical process, one moves from simple concrete observation (“Socrates is a man”) to universal idea (“All men are mortal”) to a conclusion that unifies concrete instance and universal idea in a single synthetic proposition (“Therefore, Socrates is mortal”). In human history, the idea of a just society is at first only partly fulfilled; it takes the form of simple rules without any coherent idea of justice informing them. Justice at this stage of human history resembles a simple concrete proposition in the dialectic. But as history progresses, the universal idea is integrated increasingly into juridical institutions until, after a long process of combined sociohistorical and logical development, the universal idea of justice and the concrete institutions that embody it are merged completely in an ideal government of law that is informed by universal principles that apply equally to all. In such a government or state, the practical concrete institutions are saturated with the ideas of reason or mind.

Something similar happens in art. Early art consists of simple sensory images without universal meaning. They are merely mimetic pictures of actual objects. They have no idea in them. But over time, as art evolves, following a logical process of development, art achieves a complex totality in which universally valid idea and sensory object, mind and concrete worldly form are merged and are one.

G. W. F. Hegel: Because the universal idea is in this way a concrete unity, this unity can enter art-consciousness only through the unfolding and the reunification of the particularizations of the universal idea, and, through this process, artistic beauty acquires a totality of particular stages and forms. Therefore, after studying artistic beauty in itself and as itself, we must see how beauty as a totality decomposes into its specific forms. This is the second part of our study, the doctrine of the forms of art. These forms find their origin in the different ways of grasping the universal idea as content…. Thus the forms of art are nothing more than the different relations of meaning and form, relations that proceed from the universal idea and therefore provide the true basis for the different forms of this sphere.
The ideas of Kant and Hegel – especially the distinction between the world of sensory experience and the ideal world of Reason – influenced the Romantic movement and writers such as Friedrich Schiller, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Schiller, artistic accounts of the rational spirit realm educated the mind and made it more civil. Art had a broad public purpose. While that idea may seem odd to modern secular ears, there is a way of understanding its accuracy, and that is to think of the spirit realm as a projection of the mind’s capacity for abstraction. That capacity is connected to the mind’s ability to use mental representation to control negative emotions, and reading fiction is now known to increase empathy. Writers like Schiller may have been correct, then, to think a literary education might make humans more civil.

The idea that literature might “elevate” the mind remains popular with literary theorists down through Matthew Arnold in the late nineteenth century. Arnold believed literature served an educational purpose. It elevated the mind to a higher rational realm above and separate from practical consciousness and natural emotional impulses.

Matthew Arnold: At first sight it seems strange that out of the immense stir of the French Revolution and its age should not have come a crop of works of genius equal to that which came out of the stir of the great productive time of Greece, or out of that of the Renascence, with its powerful episode the Reformation. But the truth is that the stir of the French Revolution took a character which essentially distinguished it from such movements as these. These were, in the main, disinterestedly intellectual and spiritual movements; movement in which the human spirit looked for its satisfaction in itself and in the increased play of its own activity. The French Revolution took a political, practical character. The movement which went on in France under the old regime, from 1700 to 1789, was far more really akin than that of the Revolution itself to the movement of the Renascence; the France of Voltaire and Rousseau told far more powerfully upon the mind of Europe than the France of the Revolution. Goethe reproached this last expressly with having “thrown quiet culture back.” Nay, and the true key to how much in our Byron, even in our Wordsworth, is this! – that they had their source in a great movement of feeling, not in a great movement of mind. The French Revolution, however, – that object of so much blind hatred, – found undoubtedly its motive-power in the intelligence of men, and not in their practical sense; this is what distinguishes it from the English Revolution of Charles the First’s time. This is what makes it a more spiritual event than our Revolution, an event of much more powerful and worldwide interest, though practically less successful; it appeals to an order of ideas which are universal, certain permanent. 1789 asked of a thing, Is it rational? 1642 asked of a thing, Is it legal? … But what is law in one place is not law in another … [T]he prescriptions of reason are absolute, unchanging, of universal validity….

It is of the last importance that English criticism should clearly discern what rule for its course, in order to avail itself of the field now opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, it ought to take. The rule may be summed up in one word – disinterestedness. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called “the practical view of things”; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas…. Its business is, as I have said, simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world.

Yet equally influential during this period was an aesthetic philosophy that privileges sensory experiences and the impressions of the mind as it contemplates art. Writers such
as Charles Baudelaire and Walter Pater emphasized the value of the surface of experience, the physical pleasures of the world, and a concept of artistic experience as an end in itself. Art should be enjoyed for art’s sake alone; there is no need to refer to a spiritual meaning, an ideal rational realm, or a moral purpose. Baudelaire also rejected the Romantic ideal of Nature and celebrated instead the pleasures of artifice.

**Charles Baudelaire:** In the window of a coffee-house there sits a convalescent, pleasurably absorbed in gazing at the crowd, and mingling, through the medium of thought, in the turmoil of thought that surrounds him. But lately returned from the valley of the shadow of death, he is rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life; as he has been on the brink of total oblivion, he remembers, and fervently desires to remember, everything. Finally, he hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, on an instant, bewitched him. Curiosity has become a fatal, irresistible passion!

Imagine an artist who was always, spiritually, in the condition of that convalescent, and you will have the key to the nature of [the ideal artist].

Now, convalescence is like a return towards childhood. The convalescent, like the child, is possessed in the highest degree of the faculty of being keenly interested in all things, be they apparently of the most trivial. Let us go back, if we can, by a retrospective effort of the imagination, towards our most youthful, our earliest, impressions, and we will recognize that they had a strange kinship with those brightly coloured impressions which we were later to receive in the aftermath of a physical illness, always provided that that illness had left our spiritual capacities pure and unharmed. The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always drunk. Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs from color and form. I am prepared to go even further and assert that sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less violent shock which has its repercussion in the very core of the brain. The man of genius has sound nerves, while those of the child are weak. With the one, Reason has taken up a considerable position; with the other, Sensibility is almost the whole being. But genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will – a childhood now equipped for self-expression with manhood’s capacities and a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated.

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite…. Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. He is an “I” with an insatiable appetite for the “non-I”, at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive….

Everything beautiful and good is the result of reason and calculation. Crime, of which the human animal has learned the taste in his mother’s womb, is natural by origin. Virtue, on the other hand, is artificial, supernatural, since at all times and in all places gods and prophets have been needed to teach it to animalized humanity, man being powerless to discover it by himself. Evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art. All that I am saying about Nature as a bad counsellor in moral matters, and about Reason as true redeemer and reformer, can be applied to the realm of Beauty. I am thus led to regard external finery as one of the signs of the primitive nobility of the human soul. Those races which our confused and perverted civilization is pleased to treat
as savage, with an altogether ludicrous pride and complacency, understand, just as the child understands, the lofty price and complacency of make-up. In their naive adoration of what is brilliant – man-colored feathers, iridescent fabrics, the incomparable majesty of artificial forms – the baby and the savage bear witness to their disgust of the real, and thus give proof, without knowing it, of the immateriality of their souls…

Fashion should thus be considered as a symptom of the taste for the ideal which floats on the surface of all the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-a-brac that the natural life accumulates in the human brain: as a sublime deformation of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her reformation. And so it has been sensibly pointed out (though the reason has not been discovered) that every fashion is charming, relatively speaking, each one bearing a new and more or less happy effort in the direction of Beauty, some kind of approximation to an ideal for which the restless human mind feels a constant, titillating hunger.

Walter Pater was a professor of aesthetics at Oxford University who influenced a generation of artists and writers through his scholarly publications. The “Conclusion” to his Studies in the Renaissance caused a scandal by urging good Victorians to enjoy life and art as ends in themselves. No need for a “higher” spiritual meaning or a moral purpose. The experience of art itself was a sufficient reward.

Walter Pater: The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit, is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, – for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike. While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist’s hands, or the face of one’s friend. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their way, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own…

One of the most beautiful passages of Rousseau is that in the sixth book of the Confessions, where he describes the awakening in him of the literary sense. An undefinable taint of death had clung always about him, and now in early manhood he believed himself smitten by mortal disease. He asked himself how he might make as much as possible of the interval that remained; and he was not biased by anything in his previous life when he decided that it must be by intellectual excitement, which he found just then in the clear, fresh writings of Voltaire. Well! we are all condamnés, as Victor Hugo says: we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve …; we have an interval, and then our place knows us
no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among “the children of this world,” in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion – that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.

In the nineteenth century, revolutions occurred against the reactionary monarchies that ruled much of the Continent. Only some succeeded, but the thinking of those concerned with literature turned to thoughts of the social and political role of literature. The realist and naturalist writers such as Émile Zola felt literature, using the new tools of science, should seek to promote change by questioning existing norms and established patterns. Russian critics such as Vissarion Belinsky felt literature should play a role in making their country more modern.

Karl Marx began as a philosopher, but he was moved to radical politics by the revolutions in Europe in the 1840s. Europe was awash in the ideas of utopian socialism, and those merged with the uprisings against monarchy across Europe and eventually gave rise to the communist and anarchist movements, which sought to create a post-capitalist democratic society in which workers would no longer be the slaves of capitalists and wealth would be shared equally. Forced into exile, Marx ended up in England, where he was able to analyze the emerging social order created by industrialization and capitalist free market economics. He saw literature as immersed in its social, historical, political, and economic context. One could not know the meaning of a work of literature without knowing the world in which it was made and the social forces out of which it emerged. Often literature served a political purpose and gave expression to the “ruling ideas of the ruling class.”

Karl Marx: The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life… In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises.

Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. In the first method of approach the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time
over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. For instance, in an age and in a country where royal power, aristocracy, and bourgeoisie are contending for mastery and where, therefore, mastery is shared, the doctrine of the separation of powers proves to be the dominant idea and is expressed as an “eternal law”…. [W]e can say, for instance, that during the time that the aristocracy was dominant, the concepts honour, loyalty, etc. were dominant, during the dominance of the bourgeoisie the concepts freedom, equality, etc. The ruling class itself on the whole imagines this to be so.

Taking literary theory in the opposed direction were the French Symbolists led by Stéphane Mallarmé. These writers believed that poetry especially provided access to an ideal spiritual truth. Poetry served no moral purpose and had no social use. It was instead a privileged way of capturing the Ideal. Attention in literature should be on technique, language, and meaning. Instead of real natural flowers, the poet writes of “the flower that is absent from all bouquets.”

Friedrich Nietzsche is now better known for his radically perspectival epistemology than for his theory of art, but in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) he advanced a theory of tragedy that foreshadowed in certain ways the emphasis in twentieth-century philosophy on discontinuity and contingency. Most philosophers believe Being is something easily known using the categories of Reason, but Nietzsche saw Being as becoming, as a process more akin to a fiery flow that had no knowable unity. Traditional philosophy suppresses this radical becoming by manufacturing lies to cover up the instability of the world. Nietzsche reached back to an alternative tradition that originated in Greece and that emphasized the ungraspable flow of life and conceived of Being as active becoming that eluded conceptual stabilization.

He makes a theme of that philosophic distinction in *The Birth of Tragedy* where he describes the Apollonian principle in art in terms of the philosophic quest for a knowable Being behind the play of appearances, a ground of unity and coherence. This principle of stability and unity is opposed by the Dionysian principle, which he defines in terms of play, mutability, and becoming.

Friedrich Nietzsche: The Dionysiac, with the primal pleasure it perceives even in pain, is the common womb from which both music and the tragic myth are born.

Could it be that with the assistance of musical dissonance, we have eased significantly the difficult problem of the effect of tragedy? After all, we do now understand the meaning of our desire to look, and yet to long to go beyond looking when we are watching tragedy; when applied to our response to the artistic use of dissonance, this state of mind would have to be described in similar terms: we want to listen, but at the same time we long to go beyond listening. That striving towards infinity, that wing-beat of longing even as we feel supreme delight in a clearly perceived reality, these things indicate that in both these states of mind we are to recognize a Dionysiac phenomenon, one which reveals to us the playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality as an outpouring of
primal pleasure and delight, a process quite similar to Heraclitus the Obscure’s comparison of the force that shapes the world to a playing child who sets down stones, here, there, and the next place, and who builds up piles of sand only to knock them down again….

Music and tragic myth both express, in the same way, the Dionysiac capacity of a people, and they cannot be separated from one another. Both originate in an artistic realm which lies beyond the Apollonian; both transfigure a region where dissonance and the terrible image of the world fade away in chords of delight; both play with the goad of disinclination, trusting to their immeasurably powerful arts of magic; both justify by their play the existence of even the “worst of all worlds”. Here the Dionysiac shows itself, in comparison to the Apollonian, to be the eternal and original power of art which summons the entire world of appearances into existence, in the midst of which a new, transfiguring semblance is needed to hold fast within life the animated world of individuation. If you could imagine dissonance assuming human form – and what else is man? – this dissonance would need, to be able to live, a magnificent illusion which would spread a veil of beauty over its own nature. This is the true artistic aim of Apollo, in whose name we gather together all those countless illusions of beautiful semblance and thereby urge us on to experience the next.

At the same time, only as much of that foundation of all existence, that Dionysiac underground of the world, can be permitted to enter an individual’s consciousness as can be overcome, in its turn, by the Apollonian power of transfiguration, so that both of these artistic drives are required to unfold their energies in strict, reciprocal proportion, according to the law of eternal justice. Where the Dionysiac powers rise up with such unbounded vigour as we are seeing at present, Apollo, too, must already have descended amongst us, concealed in a cloud, and his most abundant effects of beauty will surely be seen by a generation which comes after us.

Nietzsche claimed that all knowledge is perspectival. One sees the world from a specific located point of view; therefore, there is no “universal truth” or “objective knowledge” that exists apart from the mind. The idea of a truth that is independent of perspective is an illusion. He was right, of course. Philosophers since Plato had been mistaking the new cognitive ability for something “out there,” a realm of universal ideas that existed in the world. Those universals are indeed sharable mental representations just as the language of mathematics is a sharable representational model that acts as a cultural tool for manipulating and transforming the world. But mathematics resides in the mind or in the written symbols that embody its ideas, not in the world. The same is true of abstract ideas.

Writing at the start of the twentieth century, Edmund Husserl sought to bridge the divide between perspective and objective truth, between mental action (conceiving of abstract ideas) and true ideas (ideas whose validity would be universal). He did so by locating truth in perspective. His “phenomenology” grounded truth in the mind’s ability to formulate ideas that could transcend perspective while yet being lodged in the perspective of consciousness. Those pure ideas became formal and transcendental when purified of worldly elements. Ideas in the mind were more true when grasped by “intuition.” They were more likely to be purer ideas, unlike ideas derived from sensory data.

One of the first aestheticians to draw on phenomenology was Benedetto Croce. He held that the intuitions evident in art are different from logic and science. They constitute a purer kind of knowledge. As a European political conservative, Croce formulated this theory in terms of the ideal of individual liberty, the model of a self that has no master and that is dependent on no one. It is also an elitist conception; the “civilized man” is capable of grasping the intuitions of art but others are not. This doctrine would inform the elitism of the American New Criticism, a politically conservative movement
which also saw art as delivering intuitive truths that were difficult to grasp and that sorted the “great” from the less great.

**Benedetto Croce:** Now, the first point to be firmly fixed in the mind is that intuitive knowledge has no need of a master, nor to lean upon any one; she does not need to borrow the eyes of others, for she has most excellent eyes of her own. Doubtless it is possible to find concepts mingled with intuitions. But in many other intuitions there is no trace of such a mixture, which proves that it is not necessary. The impression of a moonlight scene by a painter; the outline of a country drawn by a cartographer; a musical motive, tender or energetic; the words of a sighing lyric, or those with which we ask, command and lament in ordinary life, may well all be intuitive facts without a shadow of intellective relation. But, think what one may of these instances, and admitting further that one may maintain that the greater part of the intuitions of civilized man are impregnated with concepts, there yet remains to be observed something more important and more conclusive. Those concepts which are found mingled and fused with the intuitions, are no longer concepts, in so far as they are really mingled and fused, for they have lost all independence and autonomy. They have been concepts, but they have now become simple elements of intuition. The philosophical maxims placed in the mouth of a personage of tragedy or of comedy, perform there the function, not of concepts, but of characteristics of such personage; in the same way as the red in a painted figure does not there represent the red colour of the physicists, but is a characteristic element of the portrait. The whole it is that determines the quality of the parts. A work of art may be full of philosophical concepts; it may contain them in greater abundance and they may be there even more profound than in a philosophical dissertation, which in its turn may be rich to overflowing with descriptions and intuitions. But, notwithstanding all these concepts it may contain, the result of the work of art is an intuition; and notwithstanding all those intuitions, the result of the philosophical dissertation is a concept. The *Promessi Sposi* contains copious ethical observations and distinctions, but it does not for that reason lose in its total effect its character of simple story, of intuition. In like manner the anecdotes and satirical effusions which may be found in the works of a philosopher like Schopenhauer, do not remove from those works their character of intellective treatises. The difference between a scientific work and a work of art, that is, between an intellective fact and an intuitive fact lies in the result, in the diverse effect aimed at by their respective authors. This it is that determines and rules over the several parts of each.

As phenomenology became influential in the mid-twentieth century, the emphasis shifted from pure ideas grasped by mental intuition to the conscious awareness of the flow of everyday experience and the interpersonal aspects of the meeting of minds through the act of reading. When Georges Poulet, a Swiss phenomenologist, came to teach in the US, he influenced a number of scholars, including Stanley Fish, who repackaged phenomenology as “reader-response criticism.”

**Georges Poulet:** Such is the initial phenomenon produced whenever I take up a book and begin to read it. At the precise moment that I see surging out of the object I hold open before me, a quantity of significations which my mind grasps, I realize that what I hold in my hands is no longer just an object, or even simply a living thing. I am aware of a rational being, of a consciousness; the consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case, the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheard-of license, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels. Unheard of, I say. Unheard-of, first, is the disappearance of the “object.” Where is the book I held in my hands? It is still there, and at the same time it is there no longer, it is
nowhere. That object wholly object, that thing made of paper, as there are things made of metal or porcelain, that object is not more, or at least it is as if it no longer existed, as long as I read the book. For the book is no longer a material reality. It has become a series of words, of images, of ideas, which in their turn begin to exist. And where is this new existence? Surely not in the paper object. Nor, surely, in external space. There is only one place left for this new existence: my innermost self.

One of the major new schools of literary theory in the early twentieth century was Russian Formalism. While it sought to make the study of literature more scientific, more concerned with literature as literature and with the specifically literary techniques that distinguished literary writing from other kinds of writing, Russian Formalism was in its inception connected to the art radicalism of the period, which felt art could transform human consciousness and change the world. The radical writers of the Dada movement, which formed in 1916 in response to World War I, sought to create a new disruptive kind of art. That a supposedly civilized Europe could lapse into militarism and war shocked this group of leftwing writers. If Reason could lead to such barbarism, then poetry should be deliberately irrational. It should seek to evoke a different kind of thinking, and to do so, it must shatter the rational forms of verse. Dada would be nonsensical and anti-bourgeois. It would reject the nineteenth-century platitudes of Church and Family, what today we would called “family values.”

**Tristan Tzara**: The love of novelty is the cross of sympathy, demonstrates a naive I-don’t-give-damn-ism, it is a transitory, positive sign without a cause. But this need itself is obsolete. In documenting art on the basis of the supreme simplicity: novelty, we are human and true for the sake of amusement, impulsive, vibrant to crucify boredom. At the crossroads of the lights, alert, attentively awaiting the years, in the forest. I write a manifesto and I want nothing, yet I say certain things, and in principle I am against manifestoes, as I am also against principles (half-pints to measure the moral value of every phrase too too convenient; approximation was invented by the impressionists). I write this manifesto to show that people can perform contrary actions together while taking one fresh gulp of air; I am against action; for continuous contradiction, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense….

A work of art is never beautiful by decree, objectively and for all. Hence criticism is useless, it exists only subjectively, for each man separately, without the slightest character of universality. Does anyone think he has found a psychic base common to all mankind? The attempt of Jesus and the Bible covers with their broad benevolent wings: shit, animals, days. How can one expect to put order into the chaos that constitutes that infinite and shapeless variation: man? The principle: “love thy neighbor” is a hypocrisy. “Know thyself” is utopian but more acceptable, for it embraces wickedness…. No pity. After the carnage we still retain the hope of a purified mankind. I speak only of myself since I do not wish to convince, I have no right to drag others into my river, I oblige no one to follow me and everybody practices his art in his own way, if he knows the joy that rises like arrows to the astral layers, or that other joy that goes down into the mines of corpse-flowers and fertile spasms. Stalactites: seek them everywhere, in managers magnified by pain, eyes white as the hares of the angels. And so Dada was born of a need for independence, of a distrust toward unity. Those who are with us preserve their freedom. We recognize no theory….

Every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family is Dada; a protest with the fists of its whole being engaged in destructive action: Dada; knowledge of all the means rejected up until now by the shamefaced sex of comfortable compromise and good manners: Dada; abolition of logic, which is the dance of those impotent to create: Dada; of
every social hierarchy and equation set up for the sake of values by our valets: Dada: every object, all objects, sentiments, obscurities, apparitions and the precise clash of parallel lines are weapons for the fight: Dada; abolition of memory: Dada; abolition of archaeology: Dada; abolition of prophets: Dada; abolition of the future: Dada; absolute and unquestionable faith in every god that is the immediate product of spontaneity: Dada; elegant and unprejudiced leap from a harmony to the other sphere; trajectory of a word tossed like a screeching phonograph record; to respect all individuals in their folly of the moment: whether it be serious, fearful, timid, ardent, vigorous, determined, enthusiastic; to divest one’s church of every useless cumbersome accessory; to spit out disagreeable or amorous ideas like a luminous waterfall, or coddle them – with the extreme satisfaction that it doesn’t matter in the least – with the same intensity in the thicket of core’s soul pure of insects for blood well-born, and gilded with bodies of archangels. Freedom: Dada Dada Dada, a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE.

Drawing on the same well of ideas that informed Dada, one of the leading Russian literary theorists, Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984) advanced the idea that poetry roughens up our everyday experience, which tends with time to become overly routine and habituated to the world around us. Poetry defamiliarizes that world and makes it new again.

Viktor Shklovsky: If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree with us. Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed….

Habituation devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. “If the whole complex lives of so many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.” And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important….

Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, and Juri Tinjanov shifted the emphasis in the study of literature from a theory based largely in philosophy to a study based largely in linguistics and the techniques of literary construction. Those included the procedures of narration such as delayed revelation or stepped narrative and the techniques of poetry such as alliteration and euphony.

The early twentieth century was a time of lively reflection on poetry. Ezra Pound argued that poetry should be as spare as possible. In keeping with the Modernist ethos that rejected Victorian ornamentation and sentimentalism, he contended words should be efficient and free of emotion. T. S. Eliot saw poets in terms of place within tradition. Arguing against the ideal of Romantic subjectivism, he urged instead impersonality and an elevation above emotion.

Linguistics came of age in the early twentieth century. The work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was especially influential. He studied language as a system of
signs whose interconnections allowed words to function and to have meaning. Roman Jakobsen, a member, along with Shklovsky, of the Moscow Poetry Circle, was an early proponent of the study of the link between linguistic forms such as metaphor (which characterizes poetry) and metonymy (which characterizes fictional narrative) and such cognitive processes and disorders as aphasia. He introduced French thinkers such as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to the ideas of Saussure and helped to launch the movement called Structuralism, which sought to study culture using the tools and methods of linguistics. Lévi-Strauss’s structural study of myth was especially influential. In it, he compared hundreds of myths from diverse cultures and found that they shared common structural elements. Already, Vladimir Propp had found structural similarities between folktales, all of which seem to follow a similar narrative pattern of departure, conflict, assistance, vindication, and reconciliation. Lévi-Strauss suggested that myths shared a similar structure because they dealt with the same universal human concerns. This concern with stories and with narratives would become a central concern of the Structuralist study of literature. Gerard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov led the way in developing a science of “narratology.” The emphasis in Structuralist Linguistics on signs and semiological systems also inspired French theorists such as Roland Barthes to study culture using linguistic tools. Barthes’ short “mythologies” examined aspects of popular culture such as advertisements and guide books as sign systems that communicated meaning using sign images.

While European literary theorists were aspiring to make the study of literature more scientific, theorists in America sought to determine what about literature was at odds with science. In science, words have one meaning, but in literature, New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks argued, the effect of the placement of words in the context of the literary work is to give rise to additional connotative meanings that might even have a spiritual quality. While science seeks the truth of specific things by naming them accurately, literature provides access to less easily nameable truths through the use of complex tropes such as irony and paradox that create semantically fruitful tensions between words. The new meanings generated are more like abstract ideas than sensory objects that can be named directly using a scientific vocabulary. The New Critics merged the idealist tradition (which saw art as the expression of a realm of either spirit or Mind) with the new movement towards the study of literary techniques and forms. They argued for the “close reading” or study of individual literary works for the complex ways they merged imagery and meaning in a unity. Cleanth Brooks emphasized the way poetry dislocated the ordinary uses of words to create meaning.

Cleanth Brooks: [T]here is irony of a very powerful sort in Wordsworth’s “Intimations” ode. For the thrusts and pressures exerted by the various symbols in this poem are not avoided by the poet: they are taken into account and played, one against the other. Indeed, the symbols – from a scientific point of view – are used perversely: it is the child who is the best philosopher; it is from a kind of darkness – from something that is “shadowy” – that the light proceeds; growth into manhood is viewed, not as an extrication from, but as an incarceration within, a prison.

There should be no mystery as to why this must be so. The terms of science are abstract symbols which do not change under the pressure of the context. They are pure (or aspire to be pure) denotation; they are defined in advance. They are not to be warped into new meanings. But where is the dictionary which contains the terms of a poem? It is a truism that the poet is continually forced to remake language. As Eliot has put it, his task is to “dislocate language into meaning.”
Literary theory in Europe in the mid-twentieth century also included Marxism. György Lukács theorized in *The Historical Novel* that works of literature even by reactionary royalist writers such as Balzac could, because they were realist, capture the totality of their age. Walter Benjamin developed an innovative method of historical study in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. He also suggested that new media such as film bring about new ways of experiencing the world. Some members of the so-called Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued that popular culture was a realm of delusion that sustained the power of capitalists over workers, while other thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch described utopian aspirations within even conservative or, in a Marxist sense, “ideological” cultural forms.

One positive outcome of the various formalist enterprises was the emergence of a variety of theories regarding different regions of literature. Those included genres like the novel, modes such as realism, and historical periods such as Romanticism.

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin emphasized the social linguistic character of the novel. Novels draw on multiple voices from the ambient social universe. He cites the example of Charles Dickens who mimes different kinds of speech and integrates them to his fiction. Some are mocked or parodied; some are simply cited. By integrating diverse forms of speech, Dickens novels emphasize the heteroglossic or multi-voiced character of the novel in general, the way it draws on and is sustained by the multiple forms of discourse in a society. Each strand of discourse interacts with proximate strands in the novel. Bakhtin’s term for this is dialogization.

**Mikhail Bakhtin:** The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice. In it the researcher is confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls.

We list below the basic types of compositional-stylistic unities into which the novelistic whole usually breaks down:

1. Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants);
2. Stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration [skaz];
3. Stylization of the various forms of semiliterary everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.);
4. Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth);
5. The stylistically individualized speech of character…

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even a diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. The internal stratification any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases) – this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of all the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide
variety of their links and relationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization – this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.

Erich Auerbach’s ambitious history of realism, *Mimesis*, described literary realism as evolving from purely external descriptions to the rendering of internal psychology and emotion in modern fiction. His famous first chapter examines Homer’s style of narration in the *Odyssey* and notes how Homer foregrounds events and maintains a sense of a perpetual present.

**Erich Auerbach:** Readers of the *Odyssey* will remember the well-prepared and touching scene in Book 19, when Odysseus has at last come home, the scene in which the old housekeeper Euryclea, who had been his nurse, recognizes him by a scar on his thigh…. To the word scar (v. 393) there is first attached a relative clause (“which once long ago a boar …”), which enlarges into a voluminous syntactical parenthesis; into this an independent sentence unexpectedly intrudes (v. 396: “A god himself gave him …”), which quietly disentangles itself from syntactical subordination, until, with verse 399, an equally free syntactical treatment of the new content begins a new present which continues unchallenged until, with verse 467 (“The old woman now touched it …”), the scene which had been broken off is resumed. To be sure, in the case of such long episodes as the one we are considering, a purely syntactical connection with the principal theme would hardly have been possible; but a connection with it through perspective would have been all the easier had the content been arranged with that end in view; if, that is, the entire story of the scar had been presented as a recollection which awakens in Odysseus’ mind at this particular moment. It would have been perfectly easy to do; the story of the scar had only to be inserted two verses earlier, at the first mention of the word scar, where the motifs “Odysseus” and “recollection” were already at hand. But any such subjectivistic-perspectivistic procedure, creating a foreground and background, resulting in the present lying open to the depths of the past, is entirely foreign to the Homeric style; the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present.

Perhaps the most ambitious project in literary theory during this period in the mid-twentieth century was the “anatomy” carried out by Canadian theorist Northrop Frye. Frye conceived of the genres of literature as part of a cycle that followed the seasons as well as the cycles of religious life.

The revival of Nietzsche in the 1960s in France inspired thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida to develop theories that departed from the emphasis on scientific order in Structuralism. Saussure had suggested that each element of language is given an identity by its difference from other elements. That insight opened the possibility that there existed another realm of being entirely that could not be known using the usual tools of knowledge, which tended to focus on things or objects rather than on their relations. How could one know “difference” if it was something “between” two things? And how could one say those things had “identity” or a sense of “own-ness” if they depended essentially on a relation to something other than themselves that was itself an “in-between,” a differential relation to something other? So much for certain knowledge and a knowable order of being. And so much as well for the moral normative orders humans have built upon the foundational assumption that they could use their minds to easily determine the truth of things and of ideas. Indeed, if those normative orders were built on sand, mightn’t they then have more to do with regimes of social
power than with truth, the attempt by ruling economic and political groups to impose their will on others by pretending their will represented a universal order of true ideas? Marxists denounced this new “Postmodernism” as a symptom of capitalism. Conservatives suggested it was undermining Truth and Civilization (which it was, rather jollily). But so-called “Postmodernism” also gave rise to some fruitful new literary theories, some of which have faded and some of which have proved enduring.

Deleuze pointed out that the meaning one finds in literature (or in philosophy) comes into being against a backdrop of non-meaning or non-sense. What meanings are chosen to be privileged in a culture therefore belong to a regime of knowledge that is founded on exclusions, a cutting off of semantic possibilities. If one pursues those possibilities, the borders that maintain the integrity and identity of such things as books dissolve. Even the distinction between culture and nature falls apart. All of our ideational constructs are forms of matter. These insights would help found the “New Materialism” in literary theory in the early twenty-first century.

Derrida examined the history of philosophy and noticed a persistent tendency to ignore the slipperiness of the ground knowledge was built on, a ground philosophy mistakenly assumed to be stable. Philosophy assumes the identity of meaning in literary and philosophical texts, but everywhere Derrida looked, he found signs of the difference Saussure had noticed in language. One cannot, therefore, move from a text to a meaning or to the life of an author without getting into a complex web of differential relations that added a lot more meaning than one expected.

A school of theory derived from Derrida’s work developed in the US called “deconstruction.” Its leading proponent was Paul de Man, and its leading practitioner was Barbara Johnson. De Man used Derrida’s ideas to argue that all literary texts ended up unreadable because it was impossible to locate a stable meaning that was not plagued by further reference, further relays to something other. Roland Barthes also put Derrida’s ideas to good use by noting that the study of literature should now be less concerned with an author’s life and more with the various meanings his/her text generates. Literature consisted now of complex “texts” rather than of “works.”

A major French thinker of this period in the second half of the twentieth century, Michel Foucault, was both a significant Structuralist and an influential Post-Structuralist. He first studied the “orders of discourse,” the way embedded rules and assumptions in the discourses we use to describe the world shape how we conceive of that world. His work then shifted to the analysis of power and to the way “discipline” is assured through non-governmental means in society. Finally, his attention turned to discursive regulation of the body and of sexuality over time. While he did not develop a theory of literature, Foucault provoked a renewal of the historical study of literature that focused less on political events and more on the way discourses shaped history. The “New Historicism” of Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, and others was concerned with the links across discourses in any one historical period.

Foucault’s analysis of power grew out of the social and political movements of the 1950s and 1960s, and those movements inspired a number of important schools of literary theory. The anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles lie behind the rise of Post-Colonial and Transnational Studies; the Women’s Movement for equality led to Feminist literary theory; the Civil Rights Movement inspired the various ethnic area studies; and the Gay Liberation Movement helped bring about Queer and Gender Studies.

Post-Colonial/Transnational Studies began with the study of the dynamics of colonial rule. White metropolitan culture was invariably portrayed as superior to the culture
A Short History of Theory

Edward Said noticed that a whole field of study called “orientalism” developed to account for the difference between Occident and Orient, a field invariably tainted by crude stereotypes despite its scholarly status. Theorists such as Homi Bhabha, operating in a deconstructive vein, portrayed the relation of colonizer and colonial as one of insidious subversion. Transnational Studies assumes the reality of global culture, one in which traditional models such as center and periphery no longer make sense. Even the traditional anti-colonial idea of a national culture might no longer make sense in a connected digital and mediated global world.

Ethnic theory moves between the study of the specific tropes of ethnic culture to the study of the dynamic interaction between such culture and the majority or dominant culture. While the goal for some is the realization of an ideal of diverse inclusiveness, for others it remains the preservation of the specific forms of traditional ethnic culture. For African-Americans, this has meant reestablishing a sense of connection to severed African origins, while for indigenous Native Americans it has meant producing works of literature that embody the values and ideas of Native culture.

Feminist literary theory began by demarcating a tradition of women’s writing and by studying the way male-dominated literary culture often portrayed women negatively. It then moved to an exploration of the qualities that make women’s writing different from men’s. Theorists like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous asked the question, Is there a separate realm of female experience captured in a style of writing noticeably different from that of men? A further development occurred when Judith Butler examined the “performed” character of gender identity.

What today is called Queer Theory began as Gay and Lesbian Studies. Theorists such as John d’Emilio, Lee Edelman, Bonnie Zimmerman, and others excavated a tradition of closeted writers such as Henry James and Elisabeth Bishop. Edelman portrayed the homonymic character of queer identity — that it looks straight yet was “different.” Eve Sedgwick noted the continuum between straight and gay culture. These critical evaluations of the dominant hetero-normative culture were both upsetting and exhilarating. They destroyed the standards that aligned biological gender with sexual preference while opening up a realm of mix-and-match possibilities that make gender a realm of great creativity. Kind of a drag indeed.

Post-Structuralist theory has proved enduringly helpful in these realms of theory. That theory was a critique of philosophy, but philosophy, it turns out, has a way of informing the everyday assumptions and perceptions of a culture. The same values of authenticity, nature, and reason that made a certain regime of truth seem more authoritative turned up in the realm of gender, assuring that straight men would appear more natural, authentic, and reasonable than the various “others” they feared and stigmatized.

The most recent developments in literary theory include cognitive studies, evolutionary theory, emotion studies, and the new materialism. All seek to dissolve the barrier between mind and body, between the capacity for idealizing abstraction that allowed H. sapiens to build a civilization and the actual physical activity that makes such abstract mental representation possible and in which it is anchored. Cognitive literary studies draws attention to the way the mind operates. One influential idea is that all knowledge is embodied, which is to say, it assumes the form of spatial schemas such as in/out, up/down, center/margin, et cetera. We tend to organize our thinking spatially, and often spatial schemas align with standards of evaluation (a “low” occupation is not a “high” calling). Emotion or Affect Studies takes note of the power of emotions in our lives and in literature. King Lear has many facets, but one important one, certainly, is the trajectory

of the colonial periphery in English literature.
of emotions, as Lear moves from fatuous affection to wounded anger in a space of just a few moments in Act One. Hurt, rage, sorrow, regret – the play might be characterized critically entirely in these terms. Evolutionary theory grounds itself in the Darwinian idea that humans have evolved over time through natural selection. All of our traits aided our ability to survive in harsh conditions. Those who benefited from small changes in their make-up (adaptations due to accidental yet beneficent changes wrought in our make-up by genetic mutation) survived at a greater rate than others who were not so lucky in their genetic inheritance. If eyes in front rather than on the side of the head made survival more likely, then only those with such eyes were likely to reproduce, and all subsequent iterations of the species would have that trait. What we are now, therefore, reaches far into the past, and many of our habits and dispositions, such as greed or generosity, can be understood as the fruit of past adaptations that aided survival. Courtship has attracted probably more attention than it deserves in evolutionary criticism, as scholars note how Edith Wharton or Jane Austen describe the rituals that bring about mating and successful reproduction.

The new materialism connects human life to a broad conception of biology and ecology. Where is the border between human life and ambient biological life? How might we conceive of life without such borders and boundaries – as an interdependent continuum that links humans to habitat, or animals to humans, and that sees life as gradients of matter across a variety of iterations, none more privileged or central than the others? Considered from the perspective of a post-humanist materiality, an ocean and a beach are not a line, a boundary, or even an opposition; they are different forms of matter, a contrast of thick or thin molecular states. Heterosexuals like to think of heterosexual reproduction as a social, even a moral norm, but such reproduction is a minority form in biology, which favors more variable forms of sexuality. What we consider to be “perversions” constitute life as usual for many species. This reconceptualization of human life as biology and ecology will no doubt prompt us to rethink the debates in literature between norms and deviations or models of social order and the various threats such models inevitably imagine and project.
PART ONE

Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Poetics
Introduction

Formalisms

Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan

It has become a commonplace of literary study that to study literature is to study language, yet prior to the formalist movements of the early twentieth century – Russian Formalism and American New Criticism – the study of literature was concerned with everything about literature except language, from the historical context of a literary work to the biography of its author. How literary language worked was of less importance than what a literary work was about. Two movements in early twentieth-century thought helped move literary study away from this orientation. The first movement was the attempt on the part of philosophers of science like Edmund Husserl to isolate objects of knowledge in their unmixed purity. The Russian Formalists, a group of young scholars (Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky, Boris Eichenbaum) who wrote in the teens and twenties, were influenced by this approach. For them, literature would be considered not as a window on the world but as something with specifically literary characteristics that make it literature as opposed to philosophy or sociology or biography. Literature is not a window for looking at sociological themes or philosophic ideas or biographical information; rather, it is a mural or wall painting, something with a palpability of its own which arrests the eye and merits study. The manipulation of representational devices may create a semblance of reality and allow one to have the impression of gazing through glass, but it is the devices alone that produce that impression, and they alone are what makes literature literary.

The second movement was the attempt on the part of idealist philosophers like Benedetto Croce to develop a new aesthetics, or philosophy of art, which would rebut the claim of science that all truth is grounded in empirical facts knowable through scientific methods. Art provides access to a different kind of truth than is available to science, a truth that is immune to scientific investigation because it is accessible only through connotative language (allusion, metaphor, symbolism, etc.) and cannot be rendered in the direct, denotative, fact-naming language of the sciences. The American New Critics (Cleanth Brooks, William K. Wimsett, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate) were influenced by the new aesthetic philosophies. For them, literature should be studied for the way literary language differs from ordinary practical language and for the unique truths conveyed only through such literary language.
The Russian Formalists were interested both in describing the general characteristics of literary language and in analyzing the specific devices or modes of operation of such language. Perhaps their most famous general claim is that literary language consists of an act of defamiliarization, by which they mean that such literature presents objects or experiences from such an unusual perspective or in such unconventional and self-conscious language that our habitual, ordinary, rote perceptions of those things are disturbed. We are forced to see things that had become automatic and overly familiar in new ways. Shklovsky cites the example of Tolstoy, who presents a meditation on property from the point of view of a horse, or who recounts the story of a flogging in such a blank manner that the then accepted practice seems strange and novel to the otherwise inured reader.

More specifically, the Formalists were interested in analyzing literature into its component parts and in describing its principal devices and modes of operation. This analysis took two main forms in the two major genres of prose narrative and poetry, concentrating in the first on the operations of narrative and in the second on sound in verse. The Formalists noticed that narrative literature consisted of two major components: the plot, by which they meant the story as narrated within the pages of the book (with all the attendant arrangements of chronological sequence, point of view, etc.), and the story, by which they meant the sequence of events in the order and the actual duration in which they ostensibly occurred. Once this simple distinction is made, one can begin to analyze all of the features of story-telling, the many devices such as point of view, delayed disclosure, narrative voice, and the like that go into the creation of the imaginary story through the manipulation of plot or story-telling devices. One can, for example, begin to study a novel like *The Scarlet Letter* for its narrative strategies instead of for the ways in which it depicts Puritanism.

In the analysis of poetry, the Formalist focus was on the qualities of poetic language that distinguish it from ordinary practical language, the distinction between the literary and the non-literary being more pronounced in this genre. Whereas ordinary language must subordinate its rules of operation (grammar) to the practical goal of communicating information, poetic language is distinguished by the foregrounding of such devices or motifs as euphony, rhythm, alliteration, consonance, repetition, and rhyme which obey a very different logic from that required to communicate information. A meteorologist might say that “precipitation in the Iberian peninsula is concentrated in the central plateau,” and in light of that practical use of language, the internal rhyming of “the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain” will seem impractical and unnecessary, but it is such devices that make poetry a distinct linguistic undertaking, a mode of language use with autonomous rules of operation which, unlike grammar, are not subordinated to a practical function. While practical speech facilitates access to information by making language as transparent as possible, poetic speech contorts and roughens up ordinary language and submits it to what Roman Jakobson called “organized violence,” and it is this roughening up of ordinary language into tortuous “formed speech” that makes poetry poetry rather than a weather report.

While literature for the Formalists is characterized by invariant patterns, recurring devices, and law-like relations, it also changes over time and varies from one historical epoch to another. The Formalists account for such change in two ways. They claim that literary evolution is the result of the constant attempt to disrupt existing literary conventions and to generate new ones. And they argue that literary change is the result of the autonomous evolution of literary devices.

A more traditional concept of the content/form distinction might lead one to conclude that literature changes when the world changes because literature merely gives form to ideas and realities that lie outside the literary realm and constitute its cause or
motivation. But for the Formalists, literary devices owe no debt to such motivations; they evolve autonomously of them and are motivated entirely by literary origins. For literature to be literature, it must constantly defamiliarize the familiar, constantly evolve new procedures for story-telling or poetry-making. And such change is entirely autonomous of the social and historical world from which the materials of literature are taken. Cervantes’ satiric novel *Don Quixote*, for example, makes fun of the popular romantic novels about knights and quests which constituted the dominant form of story-telling in his day. It emerged not because of changes in the world or in Cervantes’ life but rather as a result of a specifically literary evolution. The new device of the problematic hero was made possible and necessary by the development of the novel form itself.

You will find a major Russian Formalist, Roman Jakobson, placed under Structuralism in this anthology because there is a strong historical as well as methodological link between the two intellectual movements. Many of the original Formalists were linguists, with Jakobson being the most influential. He left Russia in 1920 and traveled to Czechoslovakia, where he was part of the linguistic circles that inspired French Structuralism in the 1940s and 1950s. The Structuralists, whose work was particularly influential in France through the 1960s, share a methodological interest with Formalist linguistics in that they saw culture in general as constituted by the same rules of operation that one finds in language. Although the Russian Formalists were suppressed by the Stalinist government in Russia in the 1920s, news of their work was borne West by East European émigrés such as René Wellek, Julia Kristeva, and Tzvetan Todorov, where it helped shape French Structuralism as well as such literary critical schools as poetics, stylistics, and narratology.

The impulse towards formal analysis was not limited in Russia to the group of thinkers usually clustered under the rubric Russian Formalists. Vladimir Propp was a scholar of folktales who wrote at the same time as the Formalists and who analyzed the component features of folktale narratives. A wide range of tales could be shown to share the same sequence of narrative motifs, from “the hero leaves home” to “the hero receives a magic token” to “the hero is tested in battle.” The work of Mikhail Bakhtin, while it is historically at odds with the Formalists in its emphasis on the social and ideological features of literature, shares their concern with describing those formal elements that make a literary genre such as the novel distinct from other literary forms. His work also represents an expansion of the original Formalist undertaking to include not only genres but also extra-literary uses of language such as that of the carnival, which Bakhtin saw influencing the work of certain writers such as François Rabelais.

While the Russian Formalist movement was scientific and rational, the other major formalist school – American New Criticism – was anti-scientific and interested in the non-rational dimension of art. Both critical movements nevertheless shared an interest in what it is about literary language that makes it different from the ordinary use of language, and both considered the proper object of literary study to be literary texts and how they worked rather than authors’ lives or the social and historical worlds to which literature refers. Two well-known terms that are part of a New Critical legacy – the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy – name this act of delimiting the object of literary study and separating it from biography or sociology. According to the intentional fallacy, meaning resides in the verbal design of a literary work, not in statements regarding his or her intention that the author might make. According to the affective fallacy, the subjective effects or emotional reactions a work provokes in readers are irrelevant to the study of the verbal object itself, since its objective structure alone contains the meaning of the work.
While the Russian Formalists were concerned with elucidating the modes of operation of entire genres such as the novel, the New Critics concentrated their energies on individual literary works, especially poems. “Close reading” is the term most often used to describe their method. The purpose of such close reading was not, however, the analysis of literary devices or motifs considered as an end in itself. It was instead the elucidation of the way literature embodies or concretely enacts universal truth, what the New Critics called “concrete universals.”

Poetry, they argued, differs from ordinary practical speech, which uses language denotatively (one word for one thing), in that poetry uses language connotatively or in a way that evokes secondary meanings. Such language use allows poetry to be both concrete and specific as well as universal and general. An urn can be both an ordinary object and a metaphor for the eternal durability of art. Poetic language thus reconciles the ordinarily opposed elements of the concrete and the universal, the specific word and general meaning, body and spirit. Such reconciliation is possible in connotative poetic tropes such as paradox, irony, and metaphor, tropes which either join ordinary objects to universal meanings (metaphor, symbol) or reconcile seemingly opposed elements (irony, paradox). Cleanth Brooks, for example, notices in a famous close reading that Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is full of paradoxes such as “Cold pastoral” and “unheard melodies” which imply both life and death at once, the paradoxical cohabitation of what is vivid and moving with what is frozen and still. This is so, Brooks argues, because the poem is about how art, figured in the urn, is more vivid than life itself, even though it seems lifeless. Although dead, it possesses eternal life.

The practical denotative language of science cannot name such truth because such language is limited to the naming of positive empirical facts that can be grasped by the senses. The realm of universal meaning, however, is beyond sensory experience and cannot be analyzed using scientific methods. It can only be alluded to indirectly in poetic language and cannot be paraphrased in literal, denotative speech. For the American New Critics, therefore, the description of literary devices such as metaphor, irony, and paradox was inseparable from a theory of universal meaning that was a polemical response to modern positivist science. While the Russian Formalists sought a value‐free mode of critical description, one that would scientifically specify what it is about literature that is literary, the New Critics informed the study of literature with a concern for traditional religious and aesthetic values of a kind being displaced by science, in this case, the values of Christian theology and idealist aesthetics (that is, an aesthetics rooted in the idea that universal truth is available through art of a kind that is not determined by material social and historical circumstances). Those values have receded in importance with time, and the legacy of the New Criticism that has remained most abiding is the concern with the close reading of texts and with the analysis of the operation of literary language in all its complexity.

Formalism has become a standard approach to literature as well as to other cultural artifacts such as film and television. The specific kinds of form and procedure vary across media. Film formal analysis is concerned with the way images are constructed through set design, art direction, camera work, framing, composition, and the like. Because the production schedule usually is more compressed, television is inclined to be more constructed around narrative, character, and story than image aesthetics, although the pervasive presence of cinematographers and directors trained in film schools in television production means that television narratives are seldom lacking in compositional complexity. Story-telling has become more of an issue in television as well because
of the emergence of long-form narratives such as *True Detective* and *Forbrydelsen* (aka *The Killing*) in which a single story line is pursued through multiple episodes. *True Detective* especially invites attention to story construction because of the use of a double narrative that operates as testimony and flashback to connect the present to the past. The dual narrative structure is appropriate to a story about both personal and professional redemption and self-remaking. It is, as Sean O’Sullivan in his essay below would say, “broken on purpose.” *Forbrydelsen* (the Danish original of the US show *The Killing*) operates more as what television narrative theorist Jeff Rush would call a spiral that loops back on itself as it moves forward, recapitulating some of the same conflicts as it moves progressively closer to its goal of solution and revelation. Each serial honors the conventions of the detective story. A somewhat monomaniacal detective sacrifices personal relations and opposes obstructive institutions as he or she tenaciously pursues a goal only he or she has the vision to see. The device of institutional obstruction is common to each, and often, the narrative tension is more provoked by the conflict with dim-witted superiors than by the interaction with suspects. While the formal dimension of both shows is weighted towards narrative issues such as obstruction, deflection, frustration, and delay, the visual style of each is characterized by highly thematic and often quite melodramatic shot selection and combination conjoined with a sound design that emphatically evokes emotional distress, empathy, and concern. *True Detective*, which dwells on the role of the cultural environment in crime, often relies on long shots that emphasize the size of the environment in comparison with the detectives. In one of the key moments in the first episode of *Forbrydelsen*, the camera stays on the detective, Sarah Lund, as she rotates her head, thinking about what might have happened at the crime scene. Her colleagues have told her there is no use in continuing the search; they should give up and go home, but Lund lingers, thinking, looking around. The sound accompaniment is strongly pronounced, and it evokes the process of thoughtful reflection in its slow cadence and rising and falling notes. When her rotation finally stops, there is a cut to what she sees: people coming down a road with bicycles and fishing poles. No one amongst the many police searching, she realizes, has thought to search in that direction, and it is there they find a canal containing a car and a body. The narrative is set in motion by a piece of visual story-telling that emphasizes her singularity of vision and its contrast (and conflict) with the hurried irresponsibility of her police comrades and superiors.
One of the founders of the Formalist study group in Petrograd in the early twentieth century, Shklovsky was also one of its most innovative thinkers. In seeking to move literary study out of the realm of religion and into that of science, Shklovsky and his colleagues argued against the Symbolists who conceived of poetry in spiritualist terms. In continuing the effort to exactly delineate the “literary” quality of those devices and techniques that separates them from ordinary prose, Shklovsky argues in this essay (1916) that such devices impede normal perceptions. This essay demonstrates the similarity between the formal scholarly undertaking and the innovations in poetry that were occurring at the same time in Europe, such as Dada. Concerned with writing that would be brutally honest and shockingly new, these writers rejected traditional culture and traditional artistic forms that had for them become both boring and overly conventional. Shklovsky, thinking along similar lines, saw all poetry as producing a shock effect that disrupted habitual ways of seeing and thinking.

If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree with us. Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed. In this process, ideally realized in algebra, things are replaced by symbols. Complete words are not expressed in rapid speech; their initial sounds are barely perceived. Alexander Pogodin offers the example of a boy considering the sentence “The Swiss mountains are beautiful” in the form of a series of letters: $T, S, m, a, b$.

This characteristic of thought not only suggests the method of algebra, but even prompts the choice of symbols (letters, especially initial letters). By this “algebraic” method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics.
We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten. Such perception explains why we fail to hear the prose word in its entirety (see Leo Jakubinsky’s article\(^2\) ) and, hence, why (along with other slips of the tongue) we fail to pronounce it. The process of “algebrization,” the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature – a number, for example – or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition:

I was cleaning and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn’t remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember – so that if I had dusted it and forgot – that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.\(^3\) And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. “If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.” And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important …

After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it\(^4\) – hence we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways. Here I want to illustrate a way used repeatedly by Leo Tolstoy, that writer who, for Merezhkovsky at least, seems to present things as if he himself saw them, saw them in their entirety, and did not alter them.

Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects. For example, in “Shame” Tolstoy “defamiliarizes” the idea of flogging in this way: “to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottoms with switches,” and, after a few lines, “to lash about on the naked buttocks.” Then he remarks:

Just why precisely this stupid, savage means of causing pain and not any other – why not prick the shoulders or any part of the body with needles, squeeze the hands or the feet in a vise, or anything like that?\(^2\)

I apologize for this harsh example, but it is typical of Tolstoy’s way of pricking the conscience. The familiar act of flogging is made unfamiliar both by the description and by the proposal to change its form without changing its nature. Tolstoy uses this technique of “defamiliarization” constantly. The narrator of “Kholstomer,” for example, is a horse,
and it is the horse’s point of view (rather than a person’s) that makes the content of the story seem unfamiliar. Here is how the horse regards the institution of private property:

I understood well what they said about whipping and Christianity. But then I was absolutely in the dark. What’s the meaning of “his own,” “his colt”? From these phrases I saw that people thought there was some sort of connection between me and the stable. At the time I simply could not understand the connection. Only much later, when they separated me from the other horses, did I begin to understand. But even then I simply could not see what it meant when they called me “man’s property.” The words “my horse” referred to me, a living horse, and seemed as strange to me as the words “my land,” “my air,” “my water.”

But the words made a strong impression on me. I thought about them constantly, and only after the most diverse experiences with people did I understand, finally, what they meant. They meant this: In life people are guided by words, not by deeds. It’s not so much that they love the possibility of doing or not doing something as it is the possibility of speaking with words, agreed on among themselves, about various topics. Such are the words “my” and “mine,” which they apply to different things, creatures, objects, and even to land, people, and horses. They agree that only one may say “mine” about this, that or the other thing. And the one who says “mine” about the greatest number of things is, according to the game which they’ve agreed to among themselves, the one they consider the most happy. I don’t know the point of all this, but it’s true. For a long time I tried to explain it to myself in terms of some kind of real gain, but I had to reject that explanation because it was wrong.

Many of those, for instance, who called me their own never rode on me – although others did. And so with those who fed me. Then again, the coachman, the veterinarians, and the outsiders in general treated me kindly, yet those who called me their own did not. In due time, having widened the scope of my observations, I satisfied myself that the notion “my,” not only has relation to us horses, has no other basis than a narrow human instinct which is called a sense of or right to private property. A man says “this house is mine” and never lives in it; he only worries about its construction and upkeep. A merchant says “my shop,” or “my dry goods shop,” for instance, and does not even wear clothes made from the better cloth he keeps in his own shop.

There are people who call a tract of land their own, but they never set eyes on it and never take a stroll on it. There are people who call others their own, yet never see them. And the whole relationship between them is that the so-called “owners” treat the others unjustly.

There are people who call women their own, or their “wives,” but their women live with other men. And people strive not for the good in life, but for goods they can call their own.

I am now convinced that this is the essential difference between people and ourselves. And therefore, not even considering the other ways in which we are superior, but considering just this one virtue, we can bravely claim to stand higher than men on the ladder of living creatures. The actions of men, at least those with whom I have had dealings, are guided by words – ours by deeds.

The horse is killed before the end of the story, but the manner of the narrative, its technique, does not change:

Much later they put Serpukhovsky’s body, which had experienced the world, which had eaten and drunk, into the ground. They could profitably send neither his hide, nor his flesh, nor his bones anywhere.

But since his dead body, which had gone about in the world for twenty years, was a great burden to everyone, its burial was only a superfluous embarrassment for the people. For a long time no one had needed him; for a long time he had been a burden on all. But nevertheless, the dead who buried the dead found it necessary to dress this bloated body, which
immediately began to rot, in a good uniform and good boots; to lay it in a good new coffin with new tassels at the four corners, then to place this new coffin in another of lead and ship it to Moscow; there to exhume ancient bones and at just that spot, to hide this putrefying body, swarming with maggots, in its new uniform and clean boots, and to cover it over completely with dirt.

Thus we see that at the end of the story Tolstoy continues to use the technique even though the motivation for it (the reason for its use) is gone.

In *War and Peace* Tolstoy uses the same technique in describing whole battles as if battles were something new. These descriptions are too long to quote; it would be necessary to extract a considerable part of the four-volume novel. But Tolstoy uses the same method in describing the drawing room and the theater:

The middle of the stage consisted of flat boards; by the sides stood painted pictures representing trees, and at the back a linen cloth was stretched down to the floor boards. Maidens in red bodices and white skirts sat on the middle of the stage. One, very fat, in a white silk dress, sat apart on a narrow bench to which a green pasteboard box was glued from behind. They were all singing something. When they had finished, the maiden in white approached the prompter’s box. A man in silk with tight-fitting pants on his fat legs approached her with a plume and began to sing and spread his arms in dismay. The man in the tight pants finished his song alone; then the girl sang. After that both remained silent as the music resounded; and the man, obviously waiting to begin singing his part with her again, began to run his fingers over the hand of the girl in the white dress. They finished their song together, and everyone in the theater began to clap and shout. But the men and women on stage, who represented lovers, started to bow, smiling and raising their hands.

In the second act were pictures representing monuments and openings in the linen cloth representing the moonlight, and they raised lamp shades on a frame. As the musicians started to play the bass horn and counter-bass, a large number of people in black mantels poured onto the stage from right and left. The people, with something like daggers in their hands, started to wave their arms. Then still more people came running out and began to drag away the maiden who had been wearing a white dress but who now wore one of sky blue. They did not drag her off immediately, but sang with her for a long time before dragging her away. Three times they struck on something metallic behind the side scenes, and everyone got down on his knees and began to chant a prayer. Several times all of this activity was interrupted by enthusiastic shouts from the spectators…

Anyone who knows Tolstoy can find several hundred such passages in his work. His method of seeing things out of their normal context is also apparent in his last works. Tolstoy described the dogmas and rituals he attacked as if they were unfamiliar, substituting everyday meanings for the customarily religious meanings of the words common in church ritual. Many persons were painfully wounded; they considered it blasphemy to present as strange and monstrous what they accepted as sacred. Their reaction was due chiefly to the technique through which Tolstoy perceived and reported his environment. And after turning to what he had long avoided, Tolstoy found that his perceptions had unsettled his faith.

The technique of defamiliarization is not Tolstoy’s alone. I cited Tolstoy because his work is generally known.

Now, having explained the nature of this technique, let us try to determine the approximate limits of its application. I personally feel that defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found … An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable
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complexities of life which are revealed through it, its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object – it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it …

Such constructions as “the pestle and the mortar,” or “Old Nick and the infernal regions” (Decameron) are also examples of the technique of defamiliarization. And in my article on plot construction I write about defamiliarization in psychological parallelism. Here, then, I repeat that the perception of disharmony in a harmonious context is important in parallelism. The purpose of parallelism, like the general purpose of imagery, is to transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of new perception – that is, to make a unique semantic modification.

In studying poetic speech in its phonetic and lexical structure as well as in its characteristic distribution of words and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from the words, we find everywhere the artistic trademark – that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author’s purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created “artistically” so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. As a result of this lingering, the object is perceived not in its extension in space, but, so to speak, in its continuity. Thus “poetic language” gives satisfaction. According to Aristotle, poetic language must appear strange and wonderful; and, in fact, it is often actually foreign: the Sumerian used by the Assyrians, the Latin of Europe during the Middle Ages, the Arabisms of the Persians, the Old Bulgarian of Russian literature, or the elevated, almost literary language of folk songs. The common archaisms of poetic language, the intricacy of the sweet new style [dolce stil nuovo], the obscure style of the language of Arnaut Daniel with the “roughened” [harte] forms which make pronunciation difficult – these are used in much the same way. Leo Jakubinsky has demonstrated the principle of phonetic “roughening” of poetic language in the particular case of the repetition of identical sounds. The language of poetry is, then, a difficult, roughened, impeded language. In a few special instances the language of poetry approximates the language of prose, but this does not violate the principle of “roughened” form.

Her sister was called Tatyana
For the first time we shall
Willfully brighten the delicate
Pages of a novel with such a name

wrote Pushkin. The usual poetic language for Pushkin’s contemporaries was the elegant style of Derzhavin; but Pushkin’s style, because it seemed trivial then, was unexpectedly difficult for them. We should remember the consternation of Pushkin’s contemporaries over the vulgarity of his expressions. He used the popular language as a special device for prolonging attention, just as his contemporaries generally used Russian words in their usually French speech (see Tolstoy’s examples in War and Peace).

Just now a still more characteristic phenomenon is under way. Russian literary language, which was originally foreign to Russia, has so permeated the language of the people that it has blended with their conversation. On the other hand, literature has now begun to show a tendency towards the use of dialects (Remizov, Klyuyev, Essenin, and others, so unequal in talent and so alike in language, are intentionally provincial) and/or barbarisms (which gave rise to the Severyanin group). And currently Maxim Gorky is changing his diction
from the old literary language to the new literary colloquialism of Leskov. Ordinary speech and literary language have thereby changed places (see the work of Vyacheslav Ivanov and many others). And finally, a strong tendency, led by Khlebnikov, to create a new and properly poetic language has emerged. In the light of these developments we can define poetry as *attenuated, tortuous* speech. Poetic speech is *formed* speech. Prose is ordinary speech – economical, easy, proper, the goddess of prose [*dea prosae*] is a goddess of the accurate, facile type, of the “direct” expression of a child. I shall discuss roughened form and retardation as the general law of art at greater length in an article on plot construction.

Nevertheless, the position of those who urge the idea of the economy of artistic energy as something which exists in and even distinguishes poetic language seems, at first glance, tenable for the problem rhythm. Spencer’s description of rhythm would seem to be absolutely incontestable:

> Just as the body in receiving a series of varying concussions, must keep the muscles ready to meet the most violent of them, as not knowing when such may come: so, the mind in receiving unarranged articulations, must keep its perspectives active enough to recognize the least easily caught sounds. And as, if the concussions recur in definite order, the body may husband its forces by adjusting the resistance needful for each concussion; so, if the syllables be rhythmically arranged, the mind may economize its energies by anticipating the attention required for each syllable.

This apparent observation suffers from the common fallacy, the confusion of the laws of poetic and prosaic language. In *The Philosophy of Style* Spencer failed utterly to distinguish between them. But rhythm may have two functions. The rhythm of prose, or a work song like “Dubinushka,” permits the members of the work crew to do their necessary “groaning together” and also eases the work by making it automatic. And, in fact, it is easier to march with music than without it, and to march during an animated conversation is even easier, for the walking is done unconsciously. Thus the rhythm of prose is an important automatizing element; the rhythm of poetry is not. There is “order” in art, yet not a single column of a Greek temple stands exactly in its proper order; poetic rhythm is similarly disordered rhythm. Attempts to systematize the irregularities have been made, and such attempts are part of the current problem in the theory of rhythm. It is obvious that the systematization will not work, for in reality the problem is not one of complicating the rhythm but of disordering the rhythm – a disordering which cannot be predicted. Should the disordering of rhythm become a convention, it would be ineffective as a procedure for the roughening of language. But I will not discuss rhythm in more detail since I intend to write a book about it.

**Notes**

1. Alexander Pogodin, *Yazyk, kak tvorchestvo [Language as Art]* (Kharkov, 1913), p. 42. [The original sentence was in French, “Les montagnes de la Suisse sont belles,” with the appropriate initials.]
3. Leo Tolstoy’s *Diary*, entry dated February 29, 1897. [The date is transcribed incorrectly; it should read March 1, 1897.]
6. Alexy Remizov (1877–1957) is best known as a novelist and satirist; Nicholas Klyuyev (1885–1937) and Sergey Essenin (1895–1925) were “peasant poets.” All three were noted for their faithful reproduction of Russian dialects and colloquial language. [Trans.]
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7 A group noted for its opulent and sensuous verse style. [Trans.]
8 Nicholas Leskov (1831–95), novelist and short story writer, helped popularize the skaz, or yarn, and hence, because of the part dialect peculiarities play in the skaz, also altered Russian literary language. [Trans.]
9 Shklovsky is probably referring to his Razvyortyvaniye syuzheta [Plot Development] (Petrograd, 1921). [Trans.]
10 Herbert Spencer, The Philosophy of Style [(Humboldt Library, vol. XXXIV; New York, 1882), p. 169. The Russian text is slightly shortened from the original].
Published (1951) in The Raritan Review, this polemic in favor of the New Criticism was written by one of the major practitioners and promoters of the new approach to literature – Cleanth Brooks. Brooks had studied in Cambridge with I. A. Richards, who first laid the foundation for the New Criticism in his Principles of Literary Criticism (1924). Upon his return to the United States, Brooks began writing a series of books, from An Approach to Literature (1936) to The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry (1947), that helped establish “close reading” as the dominant form of literary study in the American academy from the 1940s through the late 1960s.

Here are some articles of faith I could subscribe to:

That literary criticism is a description and an evaluation of its object.
That the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity – the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole.
That the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed, those of logic.
That in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated.
That form is meaning.
That literature is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic.
That the general and the universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and the particular.
That literature is not a surrogate for religion.
That, as Allen Tate says, “specific moral problems” are the subject matter of literature, but that the purpose of literature is not to point a moral.
That the principles of criticism define the area relevant to literary criticism; they do not constitute a method for carrying out the criticism.

Original publication details: Cleanth Brooks, “The Formalist Critics” from The Kenyon Review OS XIII.1 (Winter 1951). Reproduced with permission from The Kenyon Review.
Such statements as these would not, however, even though greatly elaborated, serve any useful purpose here. The interested reader already knows the general nature of the critical position adumbrated – or, if he does not, he can find it set forth in writings of mine or of other critics of like sympathy. Moreover, a condensed restatement of the position here would probably beget as many misunderstandings as have past attempts to set it forth. It seems much more profitable to use the present occasion for dealing with some persistent misunderstandings and objections.

In the first place, to make the poem or the novel the central concern of criticism has appeared to mean cutting it loose from its author and from his life as a man, with his own particular hopes, fears, interests, conflicts, etc. A criticism so limited may seem bloodless and hollow. It will seem so to the typical professor of literature in the graduate school, where the study of literature is still primarily a study of the ideas and personality of the author as revealed in his letters, his diaries, and the recorded conversations of his friends. It will certainly seem so to literary gossip columnists who purvey literary chitchat. It may also seem so to the young poet or novelist, beset with his own problems of composition and with his struggles to find a subject and a style and to get a hearing for himself.

In the second place, to emphasize the work seems to involve severing it from those who actually read it, and this severance may seem drastic and therefore disastrous. After all, literature is written to be read. Wordsworth's poet was a man speaking to men. In each Sunday Times, Mr J. Donald Adams points out that the hungry sheep look up and are not fed; and less strenuous moralists than Mr Adams are bound to feel a proper revulsion against "mere aestheticism." Moreover, if we neglect the audience which reads the work, including that for which it was presumably written, the literary historian is prompt to point out that the kind of audience that Pope had did condition the kind of poetry that he wrote. The poem has its roots in history, past or present. Its place in the historical context simply cannot be ignored.

I have stated these objections as sharply as I can because I am sympathetic with the state of mind which is prone to voice them. Man's experience is indeed a seamless garment, no part of which can be separated from the rest. Yet if we urge this fact, of inseparability against the drawing of distinctions, then there is no point in talking about criticism at all. I am assuming that distinctions are necessary and useful and indeed inevitable.

The formalist critic knows as well as anyone that poems and plays and novels are written by men – that they do not somehow happen – and that they are written as expressions of particular personalities and are written from all sorts of motives – for money, from a desire to express oneself, for the sake of a cause, etc. Moreover, the formalist critic knows as well as anyone that literary works are mere potential until they are read – that is, that they are recreated in the minds of actual readers, who vary enormously in their capabilities, their interests, their prejudices, their ideas. But the formalist critic is concerned primarily with the work itself. Speculation on the mental processes of the author takes the critic away from the work into biography and psychology. There is no reason, of course, why he should not turn away into biography and psychology. Such explorations are very much worth making. But they should not be confused with an account of the work. Such studies describe the process of composition, not the structure of the thing composed, and they may be performed quite as validly for the poor work as for the good one. They may be validly performed for any kind of expression – nonliterary as well as literary.

On the other hand, exploration of the various readings which the work has received also takes the critic away from the work into psychology and the history of taste. The various
imports of a given work may well be worth studying. I. A. Richards has put us all in his
debt by demonstrating what different experiences may be derived from the same poem by
an apparently homogeneous group of readers; and the scholars have pointed out, all along,
how different Shakespeare appeared to an eighteenth-century as compared with a
nineteenth-century audience; or how sharply divergent are the estimates of John Donne’s
lyrics from historical period to historical period. But such work, valuable and necessary as
it may be, is to be distinguished from a criticism of the work itself. The formalist critic,
because he wants to criticize the work itself, makes two assumptions: (1) he assumes that
the relevant part of the author’s intention is what he got actually into his work; that is, he
assumes that the author’s intention as realized is the “intention” that counts, not necessarily
what he was conscious of trying to do, or what he now remembers he was then trying to do.
And (2) the formalist critic assumes an ideal reader: that is, instead of focusing on the
varying spectrum of possible readings, he attempts to find a central point of reference from
which he can focus upon the structure of the poem or novel.

But there is no ideal reader, someone is prompt to point out, and he will probably add
that it is sheer arrogance that allows the critic, with his own blindsides and prejudice, to
put himself in the position of that ideal reader. There is no ideal reader, of course, and
I suppose that the practicing critic can never be too often reminded of the gap between
his reading and the “true” reading of the poem. But for the purpose of focusing upon the
poem rather than upon his own reactions, it is a defensible strategy. Finally, of course, it
is the strategy that all critics of whatever persuasion are forced to adopt. (The alternatives
are desperate: either we say that one person’s reading is as good as another’s and equate
those readings on a basis of absolute equality and thus deny the possibility of any standard
reading. Or else we take a lowest common denominator of the various readings that
have been made; that is, we frankly move from literary criticism into socio-psychology.
To propose taking a consensus of the opinions of “qualified” readers is simply to split the
ideal reader into a group of ideal readers.) As consequences of the distinction just referred
to, the formalist critic rejects two popular tests for literary value. The first proves the
value of the work from the author’s “sincerity” (or the intensity of the author’s feelings
as he composed it). If we heard that Mr Guest testified that he put his heart and soul into
his poems, we would not be very much impressed, though I should see no reason to
doubt such a statement from Mr Guest. It would simply be critically irrelevant. Ernest
Hemingway’s statement in a recent issue of Time magazine that he counts his last novel
his best is of interest for Hemingway’s biography, but most readers of Across the River and
Into the Trees would agree that it proves nothing at all about the value of the novel—that
in this case the judgment is simply pathetically inept. We discount also such tests for
poetry as that proposed by A. E. Housman—the bristling of his beard at the reading of a
good poem. The intensity of his reaction has critical significance only in proportion as we
have already learned to trust him as a reader. Even so, what it tells us is something about
Housman—nothing decisive about the poem.

It is unfortunate if this playing down of such responses seems to deny humanity to
either writer or reader. The critic may enjoy certain works very much and may be indeed
intensely moved by them. I am, and I have no embarrassment in admitting the fact; but
a detailed description of my emotional state on reading certain works has little to do with
indicating to an interested reader what the work is and how the parts of it are related.

Should all criticism, then, be self-effacing and analytic? I hope that the answer is
implicit in what I have already written, but I shall go on to spell it out. Of course not.
That will depend upon the occasion and the audience. In practice, the critic’s job is
Formalisms rarely a purely critical one. He is much more likely to be involved in dozens of more or less related tasks, some of them trivial, some of them important. He may be trying to get a hearing for a new author, or to get the attention of the freshman sitting in the back row. He may be comparing two authors, or editing a text; writing a brief newspaper review or reading a paper before the Modern Language Association. He may even be simply talking with a friend, talking about literature for the hell of it. Parable, anecdote, epigram, metaphor – these and a hundred other devices may be thoroughly legitimate for his varying purposes. He is certainly not to be asked to suppress his personal enthusiasms or his interest in social history or in politics. Least of all is he being asked to present his criticisms as the close reading of a text. Tact, common sense, and uncommon sense if he has it, are all requisite if the practicing critic is to do his various jobs well.

But it will do the critic no harm to have a clear idea of what his specific job as a critic is. I can sympathize with writers who are tired of reading rather drab “critical analyses,” and who recommend brighter, more amateur, and more “human” criticism. As ideals, these are excellent; as recipes for improving criticism, I have my doubts. Appropriate vulgarizations of these ideals are already flourishing, and have long flourished – in the classroom presided over by the college lecturer of infectious enthusiasm, in the gossipy Book-of-the-Month Club bulletins, and in the columns of the Saturday Review of Literature.

I have assigned the critic a modest, though I think an important, role. With reference to the help which the critic can give to the practicing artist, the role is even more modest. As critic, he can give only negative help. Literature is not written by formula: he can have no formula to offer. Perhaps he can do little more than indicate whether in his opinion the work has succeeded or failed. Healthy criticism and healthy creation do tend to go hand in hand. Everything else being equal, the creative artist is better off for being in touch with a vigorous criticism. But the other considerations are never equal, the case is always special, and in a given case the proper advice could be: quit reading criticism altogether, or read political science or history or philosophy – or join the army, or join the church.

There is certainly no doubt that the kind of specific and positive help that someone like Ezra Pound was able to give to several writers of our time is in one sense the most important kind of criticism that there can be. I think that it is not unrelated to the kind of criticism that I have described: there is the same intense concern with the text which is being built up, the same concern with “technical problems.” But many other things are involved – matters which lie outside the specific ambit of criticism altogether; among them a knowledge of the personality of the particular writer, the ability to stimulate, to make positive suggestions.

A literary work is a document and as a document can be analyzed in terms of the forces that have produced it, or it may be manipulated as a force in its own right. It mirrors the past, it may influence the future. These facts it would be futile to deny, and I know of no critic who does deny them. But the reduction of a work of literature to its causes does not constitute literary criticism; nor does an estimate of its effects. Good literature is more than effective rhetoric applied to true ideas – even if we could agree upon a philosophical yardstick for measuring the truth of ideas and even if we could find some way that transcended nose-counting for determining the effectiveness of the rhetoric.

A recent essay by Lionel Trilling bears very emphatically upon this point. (I refer to him the more readily because Trilling has registered some of his objections to the critical
position that I maintain.) In the essay entitled “The Meaning of a Literary Idea,” Trilling discusses the debt to Freud and Spengler of four American writers, O’Neill, Dos Passos, Wolfe, and Faulkner. Very justly, as it seems to me, he chooses Faulkner as the contemporary writer who, along with Ernest Hemingway, best illustrates the power and importance of ideas in literature. Trilling is thoroughly aware that his choice will seem shocking and perhaps perverse, “because,” as he writes, “Hemingway and Faulkner have insisted on their indifference to the conscious intellectual tradition of our time and have acquired the reputation of achieving their effects by means that have the least possible connection with any sort of intellectuality or even with intelligence.”

Here Trilling shows not only acute discernment but an admirable honesty in electing to deal with the hard cases – with the writers who do not clearly and easily make the case for the importance of ideas. I applaud the discernment and the honesty, but I wonder whether the whole discussion in his essay does not indicate that Trilling is really much closer to the so-called “new critics” than perhaps he is aware. For Trilling, one notices, rejects any simple one-to-one relation between the truth of the idea and the value of the literary work in which it is embodied. Moreover, he does not claim that “recognizable ideas of a force or weight are ‘used’ in the work,” or “new ideas of a certain force and weight are ‘produced’ by the work.” He praises rather the fact that we feel that Hemingway and Faulkner are “intensely at work upon the recalcitrant stuff of life.” The last point is made the matter of real importance. Whereas Dos Passos, O’Neill, and Wolfe make us “feel that they feel that they have said the last word,” “we seldom have the sense that [Hemingway and Faulkner] … have misrepresented to themselves the nature and the difficulty of the matter they work on.”

Trilling has chosen to state the situation in terms of the writer’s activity (Faulkner is intensely at work, etc.). But this judgment is plainly an inference from the quality of Faulkner’s novels – Trilling has not simply heard Faulkner say that he has had to struggle with his work. (I take it Mr Hemingway’s declaration about the effort he put into the last novel impresses Trilling as little as it impresses the rest of us.)

Suppose, then, that we tried to state Mr Trilling’s point, not in terms of the effort of the artist, but in terms of the structure of the work itself. Should we not get something very like the terms used by the formalist critics? A description in terms of “tensions,” of symbolic development, of ironies and their resolution? In short, is not the formalist critic trying to describe in terms of the dynamic form of the work itself how the recalcitrancy of the material is acknowledged and dealt with?

Trilling’s definition of “ideas” makes it still easier to accommodate my position to his. I have already quoted a passage in which he repudiates the notion that one has to show how recognizable ideas are “used” in the work, or new ideas are “produced” by the work. He goes on to write: “All that we need to do is account for a certain aesthetic effect as being in some important part achieved by a mental process which is not different from the process by which discursive ideas are conceived, and which is to be judged by some of the criteria by which an idea is judged.” One would have to look far to find a critic “formal” enough to object to this. What some of us have been at pains to insist upon is that literature does not simply “exemplify” ideas or “produce” ideas – as Trilling acknowledges. But no one claims that the writer is an inspired idiot. He uses his mind and his reader ought to use his, in processes “not different from the process by which discursive ideas are conceived.” Literature is not inimical to ideas. It thrives upon ideas but it does not present ideas patly and neatly. It involves them with the “recalcitrant stuff of life.” The literary critic’s job is to deal with that involvement.
The mention of Faulkner invites a closing comment upon the critic’s specific job. As I have described it, it may seem so modest that one could take its performance for granted. But consider the misreadings of Faulkner now current, some of them the work of the most brilliant critics that we have, some of them quite wrong-headed, and demonstrably so. What is true of Faulkner is only less true of many another author, including many writers of the past. Literature has many “uses” – and critics propose new uses, some of them exciting and spectacular. But all the multiform uses to which literature can be put rest finally upon our knowing what a given work “means.” That knowledge is basic.
Keats’ Sylvan Historian: History Without the Footnotes*

_Cleanth Brooks_

The New Critics favored the close reading of literary texts over the historical study of literature that was popular when they came upon the scene in the mid-twentieth century. The approach called for the critic to attend to image patterns and semantic tensions within the work. Poetry lent itself especially well to this critical endeavor, and English poetry from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, because it was so stylized and philosophic, was an especially attractive object of study. In this essay, the leading New Critic, Cleanth Brooks, examines Keats’s famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn" for the way its images embody ideas about the tension between the brevity of actual life and the eternal life art guarantees. Paradox, Brooks argues, is essential to poetry expression, since a poem embodies a universal idea with concrete form.

There is much in the poetry of Keats which suggests that he would have approved of Archibald MacLeish’s dictum, “A poem should not mean / But be.” There is even some warrant for thinking that the Grecian urn (real or imagined) which inspired the famous ode was, for Keats, just such a poem, “palpable and mute,” a poem in stone. Hence it is the more remarkable that the “Ode” itself differs from Keats’s other odes by culminating in a statement—a statement even of some sententiousness in which the urn itself is made to say that beauty is truth, and—more sententious still—that this bit of wisdom sums up the whole of mortal knowledge.

This is “to mean” with a vengeance— to violate the doctrine of the objective correlative, not only by stating truths, but by defining the limits of truth. Small wonder that some critics have felt that the unravished bride of quietness protests too much.

T. S. Eliot, for example, says that “this line ["Beauty is truth,""] etc.] strikes me as a serious blemish on a beautiful poem; and the reason must be either that I fail to understand it, or that it is a statement which is untrue.” But even for persons who feel that they do understand it, the line may still constitute a blemish. Middleton Murry, who,
after a discussion of Keats's other poems and his letters, feels that he knows what Keats meant by “beauty” and what he meant by “truth,” and that Keats used them in senses which allowed them to be properly bracketed together, still, is forced to conclude: “My own opinion concerning the value of these two lines in the context of the poem itself is not very different from Mr. T. S. Eliot's.” The troubling assertion is apparently an intrusion upon the poem – does not grow out of it – is not dramatically accommodated to it.

This is essentially Garrod’s objection, and the fact that Garrod does object indicates that a distaste for the ending of the “Ode” is by no means limited to critics of notoriously “modern” sympathies.

But the question of real importance is not whether Eliot, Murry, and Garrod are right in thinking that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” injures the poem. The question of real importance concerns beauty and truth in a much more general way: what is the relation of the beauty (the goodness, the perfection) of a poem to the truth or falsity of what it seems to assert? It is a question which has particularly vexed our own generation – to give it I. A. Richards’ phrasing, it is the problem of belief.

The “Ode,” by its bold equation of beauty and truth, raises this question in its sharpest form – the more so when it becomes apparent that the poem itself is obviously intended to be a parable on the nature of poetry, and of art in general. The “Ode” has apparently been an enigmatic parable, to be sure: one can emphasize beauty is truth and throw Keats into the pure-art camp, the usual procedure. But it is only fair to point out that one could stress truth is beauty, and argue with the Marxist critics of the 'thirties for a propaganda art. The very ambiguity of the statement, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” ought to warn us against insisting very much on the statement in isolation, and to drive us back to a consideration of the context in which the statement is set.

It will not be sufficient, however, if it merely drives us back to a study of Keats’s reading, his conversation, his letters. We shall not find our answer there even if scholarship does prefer on principle investigations of Browning’s ironic question, “What porridge had John Keats?” For even if we knew just what porridge he had, physical and mental, we should still not be able to settle the problem of the “Ode.” The reason should be clear: our specific question is not what did Keats the man perhaps want to assert here about the relation of beauty and truth; it is rather: was Keats the poet able to exemplify that relation in this particular poem? Middleton Murry is right: the relation of the final statement in the poem to the total context is all-important.

Indeed, Eliot, in the very passage in which he attacks the “Ode” has indicated the general line which we are to take in its defense. In that passage, Eliot goes on to contrast the closing lines of the “Ode” with a line from King Lear, “Ripeness is all.” Keats’s lines strike him as false; Shakespeare’s, on the other hand, as not clearly false, and as possibly quite true. Shakespeare’s generalization, in other words, avoids raising the question of truth. But is it really a question of truth and falsity? One is tempted to account for the difference of effect which Eliot feels in this way: “Ripeness is all” is a statement put in the mouth of a dramatic character and a statement which is governed and qualified by the whole context of the play. It does not directly challenge an examination into its truth because its relevance is pointed up and modified by the dramatic context.

Now, suppose that one could show that Keats’s lines, in quite the same way, constitute a speech, a consciously riddling paradox, put in the mouth of a particular character, and modified by the total context of the poem. If we could demonstrate that the speech was “in character,” was dramatically appropriate, was properly prepared for – then would not the lines have all the justification of “Ripeness is all”? In such case, should we not
have waived the question of the scientific or philosophic truth of the lines in favor of
the application of a principle curiously like that of dramatic propriety? I suggest that
some such principle is the only one legitimately to be invoked in any case. Be this as it
may, the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” provides us with as neat an instance as one could wish
in order to test the implications of such a maneuver.

It has seemed best to be perfectly frank about procedure: the poem is to be read in order
to see whether the last lines of the poem are not, after all, dramatically prepared for. Yet
there are some claims to be made upon the reader too, claims which he, for his part, will
have to be prepared to honor. He must not be allowed to dismiss the early characterizations
of the urn as merely so much vaguely beautiful description. He must not be too much
surprised if “mere decoration” turns out to be meaningful symbolism – or if ironies
develop where he has been taught to expect only sensuous pictures. Most of all, if the
teasing riddle spoken finally by the urn is not to strike him as a bewildering break in tone,
his must not be too much disturbed to have the element of paradox latent in the poem
emphasized, even in those parts of the poem which have none of the energetic crackle of
wit with which he usually associates paradox. This is surely not too much to ask of the
reader – namely, to assume that Keats meant what he said and that he chose his words with
care. After all, the poem begins on a note of paradox, though a mild one: for we ordinarily
do not expect an urn to speak at all; and yet, Keats does more than this: he begins his poem
by emphasizing the apparent contradiction.

The silence of the urn is stressed – it is a “bride of quietness”; it is a “foster‐child of
silence,” but the urn is a “historian” too. Historians tell the truth, or are at least expected
to tell the truth. What is a “Sylvan historian”? A historian who is like the forest rustic, a
woodlander? Or, a historian who writes histories of the forest? Presumably, the urn is
sylvan in both senses. True, the latter meaning is uppermost: the urn can “express / A
flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme,” and what the urn goes on to express is a
“leaf‐fring’d legend” of “Tempe or the dales of Arcady.” But the urn, like the “leaf‐fring’d legend” which it tells, is covered with emblems of the fields and forests:
“Overwrought, / With forest branches and the trodden weed.” When we consider the
way in which the urn utters its history, the fact that it must be sylvan in both senses is
seen as inevitable. Perhaps too the fact that it is a rural historian, a rustic, a peasant
historian, qualifies in our minds the dignity and the “truth” of the histories which it
recites. Its histories, Keats has already conceded, may be characterized as “tales” – not
formal history at all.

The sylvan historian certainly supplies no names and dates – “What men or gods are
these?” the poet asks. What it does give is action – of men or gods, of godlike men or of
superhuman (though not daemonic) gods – action, which is not the less intense for all
that the urn is cool marble. The words “mad” and “ecstasy” occur, but it is the quiet,
rigid urn which gives the dynamic picture. And the paradox goes further: the scene is one
of violent love‐making, a Bacchanalian scene, but the urn itself is like a “still unravish’d
bride,” or like a child, a child “of silence and slow time.” It is not merely like a child, but
like a “foster‐child.” The exactness of the term can be defended. “Silence and slow
time,” it is suggested, are not the true parents, but foster‐parents. They are too old, one
feels, to have borne the child themselves. Moreover, they dote upon the “child” as grand‐
parents do. The urn is fresh and unblemished; it is still young, for all its antiquity, and
time which destroys so much has “fostered” it.

With Stanza II we move into the world presented by the urn, into an examination, not
of the urn as a whole – as an entity with its own form – but of the details which overlay it.
But as we enter that world, the paradox of silent speech is carried on, this time in terms of the objects portrayed on the vase.

The first lines of the stanza state a rather bold paradox – even the dulling effect of many readings has hardly blunted it. At least we can easily revive its sharpness. Attended to with care, it is a statement which is preposterous, and yet true – true on the same level on which the original metaphor of the speaking urn is true. The unheard music is sweeter than any audible music. The poet has rather cunningly enforced his conceit by using the phrase, “ye soft pipes.” Actually, we might accept the poet’s metaphor without being forced to accept the adjective “soft.” The pipes might, although “unheard,” be shrill, just as the action which is frozen in the figures on the urn can be violent and ecstatic as in Stanza I and slow and dignified as in Stanza IV (the procession to the sacrifice). Yet, by characterizing the pipes as “soft,” the poet has provided a sort of realistic basis for his metaphor: the pipes, it is suggested, are playing very softly; if we listen carefully, we can hear them; their music is just below the threshold of normal sound.

This general paradox runs through the stanza: action goes on though the actors are motionless; the song will not cease; the lover cannot leave his song; the maiden, always to be kissed, never actually kissed, will remain changelessly beautiful. The maiden is, indeed, like the urn itself, a “still unravished bride of quietness” – not even ravished by a kiss; and it is implied, perhaps, that her changeless beauty, like that of the urn, springs from this fact.

The poet is obviously stressing the fresh, unwearied charm of the scene itself which can defy time and is deathless. But, at the same time, the poet is being perfectly fair to the terms of his metaphor. The beauty portrayed is deathless because it is lifeless. And it would be possible to shift the tone easily and ever so slightly by insisting more heavily on some of the phrasings so as to give them a darker implication. Thus, in the case of “thou canst not leave / Thy song,” one could interpret: the musician cannot leave the song even if he would: he is fettered to it, a prisoner. In the same way, one could enlarge on the hint that the lover is not wholly satisfied and content: “never canst thou kiss, / … yet, do not grieve.” These items are mentioned here, not because one wishes to maintain that the poet is bitterly ironical, but because it is important for us to see that even here the paradox is being used fairly, particularly in view of the shift in tone which comes in the next stanza.

This third stanza represents, as various critics have pointed out, a recapitulation of earlier motifs. The boughs which cannot shed their leaves, the unwearied melodist, and the ever-ardent lover reappear. Indeed, I am not sure that this stanza can altogether be defended against the charge that it represents a falling off from the delicate but firm precision of the earlier stanzas. There is a tendency to linger over the scene sentimentally: the repetition of the word “happy” is perhaps symptomatic of what is occurring. Here, if anywhere, in my opinion, is to be found the blemish on the ode – not in the last two lines. Yet, if we are to attempt a defense of the third stanza, we shall come nearest success by emphasizing the paradoxical implications of the repeated items; for whatever development there is in the stanza inheres in the increased stress on the paradoxical element. For example, the boughs cannot “bid the Spring adieu,” a phrase which repeats “nor ever can those trees be bare,” but the new line strengthens the implications of speaking: the falling leaves are a gesture, a word of farewell to the joy of spring. The melodist of Stanza II played sweeter music because unheard, but here, in the third stanza, it is implied that he does not tire of his song for the same reason that the lover does not tire of his love – neither song nor love is consummated. The songs are “for ever new” because they cannot be completed.
The paradox is carried further in the case of the lover whose love is “For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d.” We are really dealing with an ambiguity here, for we can take “still to be enjoy’d” as an adjectival phrase on the same level as “warm” – that is, “still virginal and warm.” But the tenor of the whole poem suggests that the warmth of the love depends upon the fact that it has not been enjoyed – that is, “warm and still to be enjoy’d” may mean also “warm because still to be enjoy’d.”

But though the poet has developed and extended his metaphors furthest here in this third stanza, the ironic counterpoise is developed furthest too. The love which a line earlier was “warm” and “panting” becomes suddenly in the next line, “All breathing human passion far above.” But if it is above all breathing passion, it is, after all, outside the realm of breathing passion, and therefore, not human passion at all.

(If one argues that we are to take “All breathing human passion” as qualified by “That leaves a heart high‐sorrowful and cloy’d” – that is, if one argues that Keats is saying that the love depicted on the urn is above only that human passion which leaves one cloyed and not above human passion in general, he misses the point. For Keats in the “Ode” is stressing the ironic fact that all human passion does leave one cloyed; hence the superiority of art.)

The purpose in emphasizing the ironic undercurrent in the foregoing lines is not at all to disparage Keats – to point up implications of his poem of which he was himself unaware. Far from it: the poet knows precisely what he is doing. The point is to be made simply in order to make sure that we are completely aware of what he is doing. Garrod, sensing this ironic undercurrent, seems to interpret it as an element over which Keats was not able to exercise full control. He says: “Truth to his main theme [the fixity given by art to forms which in life are impermanent] has taken Keats farther than he meant to go. The pure and ideal art of this ‘cold Pastoral,’ this ‘silent form,’ has a cold silentness which in some degree saddens him. In the last lines of the fourth stanza, especially the last three lines … every reader is conscious, I should suppose, of an undertone of sadness, of disappointment.” The undertone is there, but Keats has not been taken “farther than he meant to go.” Keats’s attitude, even in the early stanzas, is more complex than Garrod would allow: it is more complex and more ironic, and a recognition of this is important if we are to be able to relate the last stanza to the rest of the “Ode.” Keats is perfectly aware that the frozen moment of loveliness is more dynamic than is the fluid world of reality only because it is frozen. The love depicted on the urn remains warm and young because it is not human flesh at all but cold, ancient marble.

With Stanza IV, we are still within the world depicted by the urn, but the scene presented in this stanza forms a contrast to the earlier scenes. It emphasizes, not individual aspiration and desire, but communal life. It constitutes another chapter in the history that the “Sylvan historian” has to tell. And again, names and dates have been omitted. We are not told to what god’s altar the procession moves, nor the occasion of the sacrifice.

Moreover, the little town from which the celebrants come is unknown; and the poet rather goes out of his way to leave us the widest possible option in locating it. It may be a mountain town, or a river town, or a tiny seaport. Yet, of course, there is a sense in which the nature of the town – the essential character of the town – is actually suggested by the figured urn. But it is not given explicitly. The poet is willing to leave much to our imaginations; and yet the stanza in its organization of imagery and rhythm does describe the town clearly enough; it is small, it is quiet, its people are knit together as an organic whole, and on a “pious morn” such as this, its whole population has turned out to take part in the ritual.
The stanza has been justly admired. Its magic of effect defies reduction to any formula. Yet, without pretending to “account” for the effect in any mechanical fashion, one can point to some of the elements active in securing the effect: there is the suggestiveness of the word “green” in “green altar” – something natural, spontaneous, living; there is the suggestion that the little town is caught in a curve of the seashore, or nestled in a fold of the mountains – at any rate, is something secluded and something naturally related to its terrain; there is the effect of the phrase “peaceful citadel,” a phrase which involves a clash between the ideas of war and peace and resolves it in the sense of stability and independence without imperialistic ambition – the sense of stable repose.

But to return to the larger pattern of the poem: Keats does something in this fourth stanza which is highly interesting in itself and thoroughly relevant to the sense in which the urn is a historian. One of the most moving passages in the poem is that in which the poet speculates on the strange emptiness of the little town which, of course, has not been pictured on the urn at all.

The little town which has been merely implied by the procession portrayed on the urn is endowed with a poignance beyond anything else in the poem. Its streets “for evermore / Will silent be,” its desolation forever shrouded in a mystery. No one in the figured procession will ever be able to go back to the town to break the silence there, not even one to tell the stranger there why the town remains desolate.

If one attends closely to what Keats is doing here, he may easily come to feel that the poet is indulging himself in an ingenious fancy, an indulgence, however, which is gratuitous and finally silly; that is, the poet has created in his own imagination the town implied by the procession of worshipers, has given it a special character of desolation and loneliness, and then has gone on to treat it as if it were a real town to which a stranger might actually come and be puzzled by its emptiness. (I can see no other interpretation of the lines, “and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate can e’er return.”) But, actually, of course, no one will ever discover the town except by the very same process by which Keats has discovered it: namely, through the figured urn, and then, of course, he will not need to ask why it is empty. One can well imagine what a typical eighteenth-century critic would have made of this flaw in logic.

It will not be too difficult, however, to show that Keats’s extension of the fancy is not irrelevant to the poem as a whole. The “reality” of the little town has a very close relation to the urn’s character as a historian. If the earlier stanzas have been concerned with such paradoxes as the ability of static carving to convey dynamic action, of the soundless pipes to play music sweeter than that of the heard melody, of the figured lover to have a love more warm and panting than that of breathing flesh and blood, so in the same way the town implied by the urn comes to have a richer and more important history than that of actual cities. Indeed, the imagined town is to the figured procession as the unheard melody is to the carved pipes of the unwearied melodist. And the poet, by pretending to take the town as real – so real that he can imagine the effect of its silent streets upon the stranger who chances to come into it – has suggested in the most powerful way possible its essential reality for him – and for us. It is a case of the doctor’s taking his own medicine: the poet is prepared to stand by the illusion of his own making.

With Stanza V we move back out of the enchanted world portrayed by the urn to consider the urn itself once more as a whole, as an object. The shift in point of view is marked with the first line of the stanza by the apostrophe, “O Attic shape…” It is the urn itself as a formed thing, as an autonomous world, to which the poet addresses these last words. And the rich, almost breathing world which the poet has conjured up for us
contracts and hardens into the decorated motifs on the urn itself: “with brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought.” The beings who have a life above life – “All breathing human passion far above” – are marble, after all.

This last is a matter which, of course, the poet has never denied. The recognition that the men and maidens are frozen, fixed, arrested, has, as we have already seen, run through the second, third, and fourth stanzas as an ironic undercurrent. The central paradox of the poem, thus, comes to conclusion in the phrase, “Cold Pastoral.” The word “pastoral” suggests warmth, spontaneity, the natural and the informal as well as the idyllic, the simple, and the informally charming. What the urn tells is a “flowery tale,” a “leaf-fring’d legend,” but the “sylvan historian” works in terms of marble. The urn itself is cold, and the life beyond life which it expresses is life which has been formed, arranged. The urn itself is a “silent form,” and it speaks, not by means of statement, but by “teasing us out of thought.” It is as enigmatic as eternity is, for, like eternity, its history is beyond time, outside time, and for this very reason bewilders our time-ridden minds: it teases us.

The marble men and maidens of the urn will not age as flesh-and-blood men and women will: “When old age shall this generation waste.” (The word “generation,” by the way, is very rich. It means on one level “that which is generated” – that which springs from human loins – Adam’s breed; and yet, so intimately is death wedded to men, the word “generation” itself has become, as here, a measure of time.) The marble men and women lie outside time. The urn which they adorn will remain. The “Sylvan historian” will recite its history to other generations.

What will it say to them? Presumably, what it says to the poet now: that “formed experience,” imaginative insight, embodies the basic and fundamental perception of man and nature. The urn is beautiful, and yet its beauty is based – what else is the poem concerned with? – on an imaginative perception of essentials. Such a vision is beautiful but it is also true. The sylvan historian presents us with beautiful histories, but they are true histories, and it is a good historian.

Moreover, the “truth” which the sylvan historian gives is the only kind of truth which we are likely to get on this earth, and, furthermore, it is the only kind that we have to have. The names, dates, and special circumstances, the wealth of data – these the sylvan historian quietly ignores. But we shall never get all the facts anyway – there is no end to the accumulation of facts. Moreover, mere accumulations of facts – a point our own generation is only beginning to realize – are meaningless. The sylvan historian does better than that: it takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth. Its “history,” in short, is a history without footnotes. It has the validity of myth – not myth as a pretty but irrelevant make-belief, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception into reality.

So much for the “meaning” of the last lines of the “Ode.” It is an interpretation which differs little from past interpretations. It is put forward here with no pretension to novelty. What is important is the fact that it can be derived from the context of the “Ode” itself.

And now, what of the objection that the final lines break the tone of the poem with a display of misplaced sententiousness? One can summarize the answer already implied thus: throughout the poem the poet has stressed the paradox of the speaking urn. First, the urn itself can tell a story, can give a history. Then, the various figures depicted upon the urn play music or speak or sing. If we have been alive to these items, we shall not, perhaps, be too much surprised to have the urn speak once more, not in the sense in
which it tells a story – a metaphor which is rather easy to accept – but, to have it speak on a higher level, to have it make a commentary on its own nature. If the urn has been properly dramatized, if we have followed the development of the metaphors, if we have been alive to the paradoxes which work throughout the poem, perhaps then, we shall be prepared for the enigmatic, final paradox which the “silent form” utters. But in that case, we shall not feel that the generalization, unqualified and to be taken literally, is meant to march out of its context to compete with the scientific and philosophical generalizations which dominate our world.

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty” has precisely the same status, and the same justification as Shakespeare’s “Ripeness is all.” It is a speech “in character” and supported by a dramatic context.

To conclude thus may seem to weight the principle of dramatic propriety with more than it can bear. This would not be fair to the complexity of the problem of truth in art nor fair to Keats’s little parable. Granted; and yet the principle of dramatic propriety may take us further than would first appear. Respect for it may at least insure our dealing with the problem of truth at the level on which it is really relevant to literature. If we can see that the assertions made in a poem are to be taken as part of an organic context, if we can resist the temptation to deal with them in isolation, then we may be willing to go on to deal with the world-view, or “philosophy,” or “truth” of the poem as a whole in terms of its dramatic wholeness: that is, we shall not neglect the maturity of attitude, the dramatic tension, the emotional and intellectual coherence in favor of some statement of theme abstracted from it by paraphrase. Perhaps, best of all, we might learn to distrust our ability to represent any poem adequately by paraphrase. Such a distrust is healthy. Keats’s sylvan historian, who is not above “teasing” us, exhibits such a distrust, and perhaps the point of what the sylvan historian “says” is to confirm us in our distrust.

Note

* This essay had been finished some months before I came upon Kenneth Burke’s brilliant essay on Keats’s “Ode” (“Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats,” Accent, Autumn, 1943). I have decided not to make any alterations, though I have been tempted to adopt some of Burke’s insights, and, in at least one case, his essay has convinced me of a point which I had considered but rejected – the pun on “breed” and “Brede.”

I am happy to find that two critics with methods and purposes so different should agree so thoroughly as we do on the poem. I am pleased, for my part, therefore, to acknowledge the amount of duplication which exists between the two essays, counting it as rather important corroboration of a view of the poem which will probably seem to some critics overingenious. In spite of the common elements, however, I feel that the emphasis of my essay is sufficiently different from Burke’s to justify my going on with its publication.
Composed in 1949, “The Intentional Fallacy” is an important polemical essay in the corpus of the New Criticism. The New Critics were determined to isolate literature from other objects of study, especially historical and biographic criticism, which often treated literary texts as boxes of clues that had to be solved through the tracking down of references to the author’s life. Shakespeare inserted references to a ship called The Tyger in Othello because he was involved in Court politics and had an actual vessel used by the queen’s minister, Robert Cecil, in mind. Such intended meanings were what literature was about. Not so, argued the New Critics. Literature is much more than that. It is the texture of images the writer creates, a texture that, once launched, has a semantic dimension entirely its own that should be deciphered and described. The writer engages with the history of language when s/he writes, and his or her work is, in a sense, absorbed into that history. It becomes objective, and its meaning ceases to be subjective. Moreover, literature, through its complex linguistic forms, evokes universals that are not reducible to a singular conscious intention. That point is not made in this essay, but it can be found in other works of Wimsatt especially (for example, “The Concrete Universal”).

Monroe Beardsley was a Professor of Philosophy at Temple University and Swarthmore University. Beardsley’s body of work focused on aesthetics, theory of art, and the examination of criticism in myriad subjects. He is the author of Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism (1958), The Aesthetic Point of View (1982), and many others.

W. K. Wimsatt was a Professor of English at Yale University with works mainly on criticism and theory. He is the author of Literary Criticism: A Short History (1957) and Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry (1954). His theories are rooted deeply in formalism and were key contributions to the New Criticism movement during the twentieth century.
Formalisms

He owns with toil he wrote the following scenes;
But, if they’re naught, ne’er spare him for his pains:
Damn him the more; have no commiseration
For dullness on mature deliberation.

William Congreve, Prologue to
The Way of the World

The claim of the author’s “intention” upon the critic’s judgment has been challenged in a number of recent discussions, notably in the debate entitled The Personal Heresy, between Professors Lewis and Tillyard, and at least implicitly in periodical essays like those in the “Symposiums” of 1940 in the Southern and Kenyon Reviews.1 But it seems doubtful if this claim and most of its romantic corollaries are as yet subject to any widespread questioning. The present writers, in a short article entitled “Intention” for a Dictionary2 of literary criticism, raised the issue but were unable to pursue its implications at any length. We argued that the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art, and it seems to us that this is a principle which goes deep into some differences in the history of critical attitudes. It is a principle which accepted or rejected points to the polar opposites of classical “imitation” and romantic expression. It entails many specific truths about inspiration, authenticity, biography, literary history and scholarship, and about some trends of contemporary poetry, especially its allusiveness. There is hardly a problem of literary criticism in which the critic’s approach will not be qualified by his view of “intention.”

“Intention,” as we shall use the term, corresponds to what he intended in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance. “In order to judge the poet’s performance, we must know what he intended.” Intention is design or plan in the author’s mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author’s attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write.

We begin our discussion with a series of propositions summarized and abstracted to a degree where they seem to us axiomatic, if not truistic.

(1) A poem does not come into existence by accident. The words of a poem, as Professor Stoll has remarked, come out of a head, not out of a hat. Yet to insist on the designing intellect as a cause of a poem is not to grant the design or intention as a standard.

(2) One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem. “Only one caveat must be borne in mind,” says an eminent intentionalist3 in a moment when his theory repudiates itself; “the poet’s aim must be judged at the moment of the creative act, that is to say, by the art of the poem itself.”

(3) Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artifact works that we infer the intention of an artificer. “A poem should not mean but be.” A poem can be only through its meaning – since its medium is words – yet it is, simply is, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant.4 Poetry is a feat of style by which a complex of meaning is handled all at once. Poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what
is irrelevant has been excluded, like lumps from pudding and “bugs” from machinery. In this respect poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention. They are more abstract than poetry.

(4) The meaning of a poem may certainly be a personal one, in the sense that a poem expresses a personality or state of soul rather than a physical object like an apple. But even a short lyric poem is dramatic, the response of a speaker (no matter how abstractly conceived) to a situation (no matter how universalized). We ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic speaker, and if to the author at all, only by a biographical act of inference.

(5) If there is any sense in which an author, by revision, has better achieved his original intention, it is only the very abstract, tautological, sense that he intended to write a better work and now has done it. (In this sense every author’s intention is the same.) His former specific intention was not his intention. “He’s the man we were in search of, that’s true,” says Hardy’s rustic constable, “and yet he’s not the man we were in search of. For the man we were in search of was not the man we wanted.”

“Is not a critic,” asks Professor Stoll, “… a judge, who does not explore his own consciousness, but determines the author’s meaning or intention, as if the poem were a will, a contract, or the constitution? The poem is not the critic’s own.” He has diagnosed very accurately two forms of irresponsibility, one which he prefers. Our view is yet different. The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge. What is said about the poem is subject to the same scrutiny as any statement in linguistics or in the general science of psychology or morals. Mr. Richards has aptly called the poem a class—“a class of experiences which do not differ in any character more than a certain amount … from a standard experience.” And he adds, “We may take as this standard experience the relevant experience of the poet when contemplating the completed composition.” Professor Wellek in a fine essay on the problem has preferred to call the poem “a system of norms,” “extracted from every individual experience,” and he objects to Mr. Richards’ deference to the poet as reader. We side with Professor Wellek in not wishing to make the poet (outside the poem) an authority.

A critic of our Dictionary article, Mr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, has argued that there are two kinds of enquiry about a work of art: (1) whether the artist achieved his intentions; (2) whether the work of art “ought ever to have been undertaken at all” and so “whether it is worth preserving.” Number (2), Mr. Coomaraswamy maintains, is not “criticism of any work of art qua work of art,” but is rather moral criticism; number (1) is artistic criticism. But we maintain that (2) need not be moral criticism: that there is another way of deciding whether works of art are worth preserving and whether, in a sense, they “ought” to have been undertaken, and this is the way of objective criticism of works of art as such, the way which enables us to distinguish between a skilful murder and a skilful poem. A skilful murder is an example which Mr. Coomaraswamy uses, and in his system the difference between the murder and the poem is simply a “moral” one, not an “artistic” one, since each if carried out according to plan is “artistically” successful. We maintain that (2) is an enquiry of more worth than (1), and since (2), and not (1), is capable of distinguishing poetry from murder, the name “artistic criticism” is properly given to (2).
Formalisms

II

It is not so much an empirical as an analytic judgment, not a historical statement, but a definition, to say that the intentional fallacy is a romantic one. When a rhetorician, presumably of the first century A.D., writes: “Sublimity is the echo of a great soul,” or tells us that “Homer enters into the sublime actions of his heroes” and “shares the full inspiration of the combat,” we shall not be surprised to find this rhetorician considered as a distant harbinger of romanticism and greeted in the warmest terms by so romantic a critic as Saintsbury. One may wish to argue whether Longinus should be called romantic,® but there can hardly be a doubt that in one important way he is.

Goethe’s three questions for “constructive criticism” are “What did the author set out to do? Was his plan reasonable and sensible, and how far did he succeed in carrying it out?” If one leaves out the middle question, one has in effect the system of Croce – the culmination and crowning philosophic expression of romanticism. The beautiful is the successful intuition-expression, and the ugly is the unsuccessful; the intuition or private part of art is the aesthetic fact, and the medium or public part is not the subject of aesthetic at all. Yet aesthetic reproduction takes place only “if all the other conditions remain equal.”

Oil-paintings grow dark, frescoes fade, statues lose noses … the text of a poem is corrupted by bad copyists or bad printing.

The Madonna of Cimabue is still in the Church of Santa Maria Novella; but does she speak to the visitor of to-day as to the Florentines of the thirteenth century?

Historical interpretation labours … to reintegrate in us the psychological conditions which have changed in the course of history. It … enables us to see a work of art (a physical object) as its author saw it in the moment of production.⁹

The first italics are Croce’s, the second ours. The upshot of Croce’s system is an ambiguous emphasis on history. With such passages as a point of departure a critic may write a close analysis of the meaning or “spirit” of a play of Shakespeare or Corneille – a process that involves close historical study but remains aesthetic criticism – or he may write sociology, biography, or other kinds of non-aesthetic history. The Crocean system seems to have given more of a boost to the latter way of writing.

“What has the poet tried to do,” asks Spingarn in his 1910 Columbia Lecture from which we have already quoted, “and how has he fulfilled his intention?” The place to look for “insuperable” ugliness, says Bosanquet, in his third Lecture of 1914, is the “region of insincere and affected art.” The seepage of the theory into a non-philosophic place may be seen in such a book as Marguerite Wilkinson’s inspirational New Voices, about the poetry of 1919 to 1931 – where symbols “as old as the ages … retain their strength and freshness” through “Realization.” We close this section with two examples from quarters where one might least expect a taint of the Crocean. Mr. I. A. Richards’ fourfold distinction of meaning into “sense,” “feeling,” “tone,” “intention” has been probably the most influential statement of intentionalism in the past fifteen years, though it contains a hint of self-repudiation: “This function [intention],” says Mr. Richards, “is not on all fours with the others.” In an essay on “Three Types of Poetry” Mr. Allen Tate writes as follows:

We must understand that the lines
Life like a dome of many-colored glass
Stains the white radiance of eternity
are not poetry; they express the frustrated will trying to compete with science. The will asserts a rhetorical proposition about the whole of life, but the imagination has not seized upon the materials of the poem and made them into a whole. Shelley’s simile is imposed upon the material from above; it does not grow out of the material.

The last sentence contains a promise of objective analysis which is not fulfilled. The reason why the essay relies so heavily throughout on the terms “will” and “imagination” is that Mr. Tate is accusing the romantic poets of a kind of insincerity (romanticism in reverse) and at the same time is trying to describe something mysterious and perhaps indescribable, an “imaginative whole of life,” a “wholeness of vision at a particular moment of experience,” something which “yields us the quality of the experience.” If a poet had a toothache at the moment of conceiving a poem, that would be part of the experience, but Mr. Tate of course does not mean anything like that. He is thinking about some kind of “whole” which in this essay at least he does not describe, but which doubtless it is the prime need of criticism to describe – in terms that may be publicly tested.

III

I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. … I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them. … Will you believe me? … there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration.

That reiterated mistrust of the poets which we hear from Socrates may have been part of a rigorously ascetic view in which we hardly wish to participate, yet Plato’s Socrates saw a truth about the poetic mind which the world no longer commonly sees – so much criticism, and that the most inspirational and most affectionately remembered, has proceeded from the poets themselves.

Certainly the poets have had something to say that the analyst and professor could not say; their message has been more exciting: that poetry should come as naturally as leaves to a tree, that poetry is the lava of the imagination, or that it is emotion recollected in tranquillity. But it is necessary that we realize the character and authority of such testimony. There is only a fine shade between those romantic expressions and a kind of earnest advice that authors often give. Thus Edward Young, Carlyle, Walter Pater:

I know two golden rules from ethics, which are no less golden in Composition, than in life. 1. Know thyself; 2dly, Reverence thyself.

This is the grand secret for finding readers and retaining them: let him who would move and convince others, be first moved and convinced himself. Horace’s rule, Si vis me flere, is applicable in a wider sense than the literal one. To every poet, to every writer, we might say: Be true, if you would be believed.

Truth! there can be no merit, no craft at all, without that. And further, all beauty is in the long run only fineness of truth, or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within.
And Housman’s little handbook to the poetic mind yields the following illustration:

Having drunk a pint of beer at luncheon – beer is a sedative to the brain, and my afternoons are the least intellectual portion of my life – I would go out for a walk of two or three hours. As I went along, thinking of nothing in particular, only looking at things around me and following the progress of the seasons, there would flow into my mind, with sudden and unaccountable emotion, sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once. …

This is the logical terminus of the series already quoted. Here is a confession of how poems were written which would do as a definition of poetry just as well as “emotion recollected in tranquility” – and which the young poet might equally well take to heart as a practical rule. Drink a pint of beer, relax, go walking, think on nothing in particular, look at things, surrender yourself to yourself, search for the truth in your own soul, listen to the sound of your own inside voice, discover and express the vraie vérité.

It is probably true that all this is excellent advice for poets. The young imagination fired by Wordsworth and Carlyle is probably closer to the verge of producing a poem than the mind of the student who has been sobered by Aristotle or Richards. The art of inspiring poets, or at least of inciting something like poetry in young persons, has probably gone further in our day than ever before. Books of creative writing such as those issued from the Lincoln School are interesting evidence of what a child can do if taught how to manage himself honestly. All this, however, would appear to belong to an art separate from criticism, or to a discipline which one might call the psychology of composition, valid and useful, an individual and private culture, yoga, or system of self-development which the young poet would do well to notice, but different from the public science of evaluating poems.

Coleridge and Arnold were better critics than most poets have been, and if the critical tendency dried up the poetry in Arnold and perhaps in Coleridge, it is not inconsistent with our argument, which is that judgment of poems is different from the art of producing them. Coleridge has given us the classic “anodyne” story, and tells what he can about the genesis of a poem which he calls a “psychological curiosity,” but his definitions of poetry and of the poetic quality “imagination” are to be found elsewhere and in quite other terms.

The day may arrive when the psychology of composition is unified with the science of objective evaluation, but so far they are separate. It would be convenient if the passwords of the intentional school, “sincerity,” “fidelity,” “spontaneity,” “authenticity,” “genuineness,” “originality,” could be equated with terms of analysis such as “integrity,” “relevance,” “unity,” “function”; with “maturity,” “subtlety,” and “adequacy,” and other more precise axiological terms – in short, if “expression” always meant aesthetic communication. But this is not so.

“Aesthetic” art, says Professor Curt Ducasse, an ingenious theorist of expression, is the conscious objectification of feelings, in which an intrinsic part is the critical moment. The artist corrects the objectification when it is not adequate, but this may mean that the earlier attempt was not successful in objectifying the self, or “it may also mean that it was a successful objectification of a self which, when it confronted us clearly, we disowned and repudiated in favor of another.” What is the standard by which we disown or accept the self? Professor Ducasse does not say. Whatever it may be, however, this standard is an element in the definition of art which will not reduce to terms of objectification. The evaluation of the work of art remains public; the work is measured against something outside the author.
There is criticism of poetry and there is, as we have seen, author psychology, which when applied to the present or future takes the form of inspirational promotion; but author psychology can be historical too, and then we have literary biography, a legitimate and attractive study in itself, one approach, as Mr. Tillyard would argue, to personality, the poem being only a parallel approach. Certainly it need not be with a derogatory purpose that one points out personal studies, as distinct from poetic studies, in the realm of literary scholarship. Yet there is danger of confusing personal and poetic studies; and there is the fault of writing the personal as if it were poetic.

There is a difference between internal and external evidence for the meaning of a poem. And the paradox is only verbal and superficial that what is (1) internal is also public: it is discovered through the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of the language, through grammars, dictionaries, and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries, in general through all that makes a language and culture; while what is (2) external is private or idiosyncratic; not a part of the work as a linguistic fact: it consists of revelations (in journals, for example, or letters or reported conversations) about how or why the poet wrote the poem — to what lady, while sitting on what lawn, or at the death of what friend or brother. There is (3) an intermediate kind of evidence about the character of the author or about private or semi-private meanings attached to words or topics by an author or by a coterie of which he is a member. The meaning of words is the history of words, and the biography of an author, his use of a word, and the associations which the word had for him, are part of the word’s history and meaning. But the three types of evidence, especially (2) and (3), shade into one another so subtly that it is not always easy to draw a line between examples, and hence arises the difficulty for criticism. The use of biographical evidence need not involve intentionalism, because while it may be evidence of what the author intended, it may also be evidence of the meaning of his words and the dramatic character of his utterance. On the other hand, it may not be all this. And a critic who is concerned with evidence of type (1) and moderately with that of type (3) will in the long run produce a different sort of comment from that of the critic who is concerned with type (2) and with (3) where it shades into (2).

The whole glittering parade of Professor Lowes’ Road to Xanadu, for instance, runs along the border between types (2) and (3) or boldly traverses the romantic region of (2). “Kubla Khan,” says Professor Lowes, “is the fabric of a vision, but every image that rose up in its weaving had passed that way before. And it would seem that there is nothing haphazard or fortuitous in their return.” This is not quite clear — not even when Professor Lowes explains that there were clusters of associations, like hooked atoms, which were drawn into complex relation with other clusters in the deep well of Coleridge’s memory, and which then coalesced and issued forth as poems. If there was nothing “haphazard or fortuitous” in the way the images returned to the surface, that may mean (1) that Coleridge could not produce what he did not have, that he was limited in his creation by what he had read or otherwise experienced, or (2) that having received certain clusters of associations, he was bound to return them in just the way he did, and that the value of the poem may be described in terms of the experiences on which he had to draw. The latter pair of propositions (a sort of Hartleyan associationism which Coleridge himself repudiated in the Biographia) may not be assented to. There were certainly other combinations, other poems, worse or better, that might have been written by men who had read Bartram and
Purchas and Bruce and Milton. And this will be true no matter how many times we are able to add to the brilliant complex of Coleridge’s reading. In certain flourishes (such as the sentence we have quoted) and in chapter headings like “The Shaping Spirit,” “The Magical Synthesis,” “Imagination Creatrix,” it may be that Professor Lowes pretends to say more about the actual poems than he does. There is a certain deceptive variation in these fancy chapter titles; one expects to pass on to a new stage in the argument, and one finds – more and more sources, more about “the streamy nature of association.”

“Wohin der Weg?” quotes Professor Lowes for the motto of his book. “Kein Weg! Ins Unbetretene.” Precisely because the way is unbetreten, we should say, it leads away from the poem. Bartram’s Travels contains a good deal of the history of certain words and romantic Floridan conceptions that appear in “Kubla Khan.” And a good deal of that history has passed and was then passing into the very stuff of our language. Perhaps a person who has read Bartram appreciates the poem more than one who has not. Or, by looking up the vocabulary of “Kubla Khan” in the Oxford English Dictionary, or by reading some of the other books there quoted, a person may know the poem better. But it would seem to pertain little to the poem to know that Coleridge had read Bartram. There is a gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience, which lies behind and in some sense causes every poem, but can never be and need not be known in the verbal and hence intellectual composition which is the poem. For all the objects of our manifold experience, especially for the intellectual objects, for every unity, there is an action of the mind which cuts off roots, melts away context – or indeed we should never have objects or ideas or anything to talk about.

It is probable that there is nothing in Professor Lowes’ vast book which could detract from anyone’s appreciation of either The Ancient Mariner or Kubla Khan. We next present a case where preoccupation with evidence of type (3) has gone so far as to distort a critic’s view of a poem (yet a case not so obvious as those that abound in our critical journals).

In a well-known poem by John Donne appears the following quatrains:

Moving of th’ earth brings harmes and feares,
Men reckon what it did and meant,
But trepidation of the sphereas,
Though greater farre, is innocent.

A recent critic in an elaborate treatment of Donne’s learning has written of this quatrains as follows:

… he touches the emotional pulse of the situation by a skillful allusion to the new and the old astronomy. … Of the new astronomy, the “moving of the earth” is the most radical principle; of the old, the “trepidation of the spheres” is the motion of the greatest complexity. … As the poem is a valediction forbidding mourning, the poet must exhort his love to quietness and calm upon his departure; and for this purpose the figure based upon the latter motion (trepidation), long absorbed into the traditional astronomy, fittingly suggests the tension of the moment without arousing the “harmes and feares” implicit in the figure of the moving earth.

The argument is plausible and rests on a well-substantiated thesis that Donne was deeply interested in the new astronomy and its repercussions in the theological realm. In various works Donne shows his familiarity with Kepler’s De Stella Nova, with Galileo’s Siderius
Nuncius, with William Gilbert’s De Magnete, and with Clavius’s commentary on the De Sphaera of Sacrobosco. He refers to the new science in his Sermon at Paul’s Cross and in a letter to Sir Henry Goodyer. In The First Anniversary he says the “new philosophy calls all in doubt.” In the Elegy on Prince Henry he says that the “least moving of the center” makes “the world to shake.”

It is difficult to answer argument like this, and impossible to answer it with evidence of like nature. There is no reason why Donne might not have written a stanza in which the two kinds of celestial motion stood for two sorts of emotion at parting. And if we become full of astronomical ideas and see Donne only against the background of the new science, we may believe that he did. But the text itself remains to be dealt with, the analyzable vehicle of a complicated metaphor. And one may observe: (1) that the movement of the earth according to the Copernican theory is a celestial motion, smooth and regular, and while it might cause religious or philosophic fears, it could not be associated with the crudity and earthiness of the kind of commotion which the speaker in the poem wishes to discourage; (2) that there is another moving of the earth, an earthquake, which has just these qualities and is to be associated with the tear-floods and sigh-tempests of the second stanza of the poem; (3) that “trepidation” is an appropriate opposite of earthquake, because each is a shaking or vibratory motion; and “trepidation of the spheres” is “greater far” than an earthquake, but not much greater (if two such motions can be compared as to greatness) than the annual motion of the earth; (4) that reckoning what it “did and meant” shows that the event has passed, like an earthquake, not like the incessant celestial movement of the earth. Perhaps a knowledge of Donne’s interest in the new science may add another shade of meaning, an overtone to the stanza in question, though to say even this runs against the words. To make the geo-centric and helio-centric antithesis the core of the metaphor is to disregard the English language, to prefer private evidence to public, external to internal.

V

If the distinction between kinds of evidence has implications for the historical critic, it has them no less for the contemporary poet and his critic. Or, since every rule for a poet is but another side of a judgment by a critic, and since the past is the realm of the scholar and critic, and the future and present that of the poet and the critical leaders of taste, we may say that the problems arising in literary scholarship from the intentional fallacy are matched by others which arise in the world of progressive experiment.

The question of “allusiveness,” for example, as acutely posed by the poetry of Eliot, is certainly one where a false judgment is likely to involve the intentional fallacy. The frequency and depth of literary allusion in the poetry of Eliot and others has driven so many in pursuit of full meanings to the Golden Bough and the Elizabethan drama that it has become a kind of commonplace to suppose that we do not know what a poet means unless we have traced him in his reading – a supposition redolent with intentional implications. The stand taken by Mr. F.O. Matthiessen is a sound one and partially forestalls the difficulty.

If one reads these lines with an attentive ear and is sensitive to their sudden shifts in movement, the contrast between the actual Thames and the idealized vision of it during an age before it flowed through a megalopolis is sharply conveyed by that movement itself, whether or not one recognizes the refrain to be from Spenser.
Eliot’s allusions work when we know them – and to a great extent even when we do not know them, through their suggestive power.

But sometimes we find allusions supported by notes, and it is a very nice question whether the notes function more as guides to send us where we may be educated, or more as indications in themselves about the character of the allusions. “Nearly everything of importance … that is apposite to an appreciation of ‘The Waste Land’,,” writes Mr. Matthiessen of Miss Weston’s book, “has been incorporated into the structure of the poem itself, or into Eliot’s Notes.” And with such an admission it may begin to appear that it would not much matter if Eliot invented his sources (as Sir Walter Scott invented chapter epigraphs from “old plays” and “anonymous” authors, or as Coleridge wrote marginal glosses for “The Ancient Mariner”). Allusions to Dante, Webster, Marvell, or Baudelaire, doubtless gain something because these writers existed, but it is doubtful whether the same can be said for an allusion to an obscure Elizabethan:

The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.

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“The irony is completed by the quotation itself; had Eliot, as is quite conceivable, composed these lines to furnish his own background, there would be no loss of validity. The conviction may grow as one reads Eliot’s next note: “I do not know the origin of the ballad from which these lines are taken: it was reported to me from Sydney, Australia.” The important word in this note – on Mrs. Porter and her daughter who washed their feet in soda water – is “ballad.” And if one should feel from the lines themselves their “ballad” quality, there would be little need for the note. Ultimately, the inquiry must focus on the integrity of such notes as part of the poem, for where they constitute special information about the meaning of phrases in the poem, they ought to be subject to the same scrutiny as any of the other words in which it is written. Mr. Matthiessen believes the notes were the price Eliot “had to pay in order to avoid what he would have considered muffling the energy of his poem by extended connecting links in the text itself.” But it may be questioned whether the notes and the need for them are not equally muffling. The omission from poems of the explanatory stratum on which is built the dramatic or poetic stuff is a dangerous responsibility. Mr. F. W. Bateson has plausibly argued that Tennyson’s “The Sailor Boy” would be better if half the stanzas were omitted, and the best versions of ballads like “Sir Patrick Spens” owe their power to the very audacity with which the minstrel has taken for granted the story upon which he comments. What then if a poet finds he cannot take so much for granted in a more recondite context and rather than write informatively, supplies notes? It can be said in favor of this plan that at least the notes do not pretend to be dramatic, as they would if written in verse. On the other hand, the notes may look like unassimilated material lying loose beside the poem, necessary for the meaning of the verbal symbol, but not integrated, so that the symbol stands incomplete.
We mean to suggest by the above analysis that whereas notes tend to seem to justify themselves as external indexes to the author’s intention, yet they ought to be judged like any other parts of a composition (verbal arrangement special to a particular context), and when so judged their reality as parts of the poem or their imaginative integration with the rest of the poem, may come into question. Mr. Matthiessen, for instance, sees that Eliot’s titles for poems and his epigraphs are informative apparatus, like the notes. But while he is worried by some of the notes and thinks that Eliot “appears to be mocking himself for writing the note at the same time that he wants to convey something by it,” Mr. Matthiessen believes that the “device” of epigraphs “is not at all open to the objection of not being sufficiently structural.” “The intention,” he says, “is to enable the poet to secure a condensed expression in the poem itself.” “In each case the epigraph is designed to form an integral part of the effect of the poem.” And Eliot himself, in his notes, has justified his poetic practice in terms of intention.

The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hanged God of Frazier, and because I associate him with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V. … The man with Three Staves (an authentic member of the Tarot pack) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself.

And perhaps he is to be taken more seriously here, when off guard in a note, than when in his Norton Lectures he comments on the difficulty of saying what a poem means and adds playfully that he thinks of prefixing to a second edition of Ash Wednesday some lines from Don Juan:

I don’t pretend that I quite understand  
My own meaning when I would be very fine;  
But the fact is that I have nothing planned  
Unless it were to be a moment merry.

If Eliot and other contemporary poets have any characteristic fault, it may be in planning too much.15

Allusiveness in poetry is one of several critical issues by which we have illustrated the more abstract issue of intentionalism, but it may be for today the most important illustration. As a poetic practice allusiveness would appear to be in some recent poems an extreme corollary of the romantic intentionalist assumption, and as a critical issue it challenges and brings to light in a special way the basic premise of intentionalism. The following instance from the poetry of Eliot may serve to epitomize the practical implications of what we have been saying. In Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” towards the end, occurs the line: “I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each,” and this bears a certain resemblance to a line in a Song by John Donne, “ Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,” so that for the reader acquainted to a certain degree with Donne’s poetry, the critical question arises: Is Eliot’s line an allusion to Donne’s? Is Prufrock thinking about Donne? Is Eliot thinking about Donne? We suggest that there are two radically different ways of looking for an answer to this question. There is (1) the way of poetic analysis and exegesis, which inquires whether it makes any sense if Eliot–Prufrock is thinking about Donne. In an earlier part of the poem, when Prufrock asks, “Would it have been worth while, … To have squeezed the universe into a ball,” his words take half
their sadness and irony from certain energetic and passionate lines of Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” But the exegetical inquirer may wonder whether mermaids considered as “strange sights” (to hear them is in Donne’s poem analogous to getting with child a mandrake root) have much to do with Prufrock’s mermaids, which seem to be symbols of romance and dynamism, and which incidentally have literary authentication, if they need it, in a line of a sonnet by Gérard de Nerval. This method of inquiry may lead to the conclusion that the given resemblance between Eliot and Donne is without significance and is better not thought of, or the method may have the disadvantage of providing no certain conclusion. Nevertheless, we submit that this is the true and objective way of criticism, as contrasted to what the very uncertainty of exegesis might tempt a second kind of critic to undertake: (2) the way of biographical or genetic inquiry, in which, taking advantage of the fact that Eliot is still alive, and in the spirit of a man who would settle a bet, the critic writes to Eliot and asks what he meant, or if he had Donne in mind. We shall not here weigh the probabilities – whether Eliot would answer that he meant nothing at all, had nothing at all in mind – a sufficiently good answer to such a question – or in an unguarded moment might furnish a clear and, within its limit, irrefutable answer. Our point is that such an answer to such an inquiry would have nothing to do with the poem “Prufrock”; it would not be a critical inquiry. Critical inquiries, unlike bets, are not settled in this way. Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle.

Notes


4 As critics and teachers constantly do. “We have here a deliberate blurring….” “Should this be regarded as ironic or unplanned?” “… is the literal meaning intended…” “… a paradox of religious faith which is intended to exult…” “It seems to me that Herbert intends…” These examples are chosen from three pages of an issue of *The Explicator* (Fredericksburg, Va.), 2, no. 1 (Oct. 1943). Authors often judge their own works in the same way. See *This Is My Best*, ed. Whit Burnett (New York, 1942), e.g., pp. 539–40.

5 A close relative of the intentional fallacy is that of talking about “means” and “end” in poetry instead of “part” and “whole.” We have treated this relation concisely in our dictionary article.


8 For the relation of Longinus to modern romanticism, see R. S. Crane, review of Samuel Monk’s *The Sublime*, *Philological Quarterly* 15 (April 1936), 165–66.

9 It is true that Croce himself in his *Aristote, Shakespeare, and Corneille*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (London, 1920), chap. 7, “The Practical Personality and the Poetical Personality,” and in his *Defence of Poetry*, trans. E. F. Carritt (Oxford, 1933), p. 24, has delivered a telling attack on intentionalism, but the prevailing drift of such passages in the *Aesthetics* as we quote is in the opposite direction.


12 And the history of words after a poem is written may contribute meanings which if relevant to the original pattern should not be ruled out by a scruple about intention. Cf. C. S. Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Personal Heresy* (Oxford, 1939), p. 16; Teeter, loc. cit., pp. 183, 192; review of Tillotson’s *Essays*, *TLS* 41 (April 1942), 174.

13 Chapters 8, "The Pattern," and 16, “The Known and Familiar Landscape,” will be found of most help to the student of the poem. For an extreme example of intentionalist criticism, see Kenneth Burke’s analysis of *The Ancient Mariner* in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Baton Rouge, 1941), pp. 22–23, 93–102. Mr. Burke must be credited with realizing very clearly what he is up to.


15 In his critical writings Eliot has expressed the right view of author psychology. See *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 139, and “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in *Selected Essays* (New York, 1932), though his record is not entirely consistent. See *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse* (London, 1941), pp. 10–11, 20–21.
Broken on Purpose

Poetry, Serial Television, and the Season

Sean O’Sullivan

Sean O’Sullivan is an Associate Professor of English at the Ohio State University. He is the author of Mike Leigh (2011), a volume in the Contemporary Film Directors series from the University of Illinois Press. His articles on serial narrative and television include such topics as poetic design and serial television; third seasons; episodic storytelling; modernist structure in Mad Men; and the television series of Ingmar Bergman.

Formalist criticism thrives in the field of television studies. Much of the work focuses on narrative structure, ranging from the smallest units of story-telling (“beats”) to the larger categories of seasons. Serial television in particular opens up space for formal analysis, drawing on the history of publication by installment, whose popular origins date to Charles Dickens and the nineteenth-century Victorian novel. Sean O’Sullivan’s essay argues that the segmented nature of serials connects to the segmented elements of poetry, including meter, line, and stanza. The essay claims that serials operate as a collection of fractures, rather than as single undivided texts, using the first season of The Sopranos (1999) as an illustration of the recent phenomenon of the “sonnet-season” – the 13-episode uninterrupted season that has become a recurrent form for many of the most ambitious television serials of the twenty-first century.

This essay has two goals. The first is to argue that serial narrative, and in particular serialized television drama, is a poetic enterprise. All serials, by definition, are broken; like poems, they are broken on purpose. This prosodic art, unlike the art of nonserialized fiction, calls attention to itself as an array of parts; it is the art of fracture, of separation, and it is the art of the energy required to stitch together those pieces, just as the art of poetry requires a persistent process of breaking and reconnecting sounds, lines, and stanzas. We need to understand the most ambitious serials of our current

gilded age – including such shows as *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, and *Lost* – as a significant branch in poetry’s genealogical tree. Although prose fiction has been commonly invoked as the clearest precursor to these televisual enterprises, in fact they recall narrative’s earliest traditions; specifically, they echo oral performances – narratives governed by metrical organization, iteration, and variation. Here I address two crucial pairs of terms – segmentivity and numbers, and meter and rhythm – that connect the infrastructure of poetry to the infrastructure of serial television; and I draw particular attention, by way of example, to the role of anaphora and caesura in the construction of serialized television episodes. In using these terms in the present pilot-study, I hope to do more than just demonstrate the pertinence of poetic structures for the study of serial narrative. Beyond this I aim to show what is distinctively different about some of the most compelling art of the present moment – art that has adapted an ancient cultural technology for innovative purposes.

The second goal of the essay is to argue that this process of adaptation has produced a new and significant unit of meaning: the season. When asked to think about long-form televisual storytelling, both authors and critics often have recourse to analogies with the novel; by this logic individual episodes are deemed to be like chapters in a long book (see *The West Wing* 2003; Ayres 2009; McGrath 2000). But the multiplot spectrum of characters, events, and thematic contexts in a single serialized episode far exceeds the ambit of a traditional novel chapter, which typically emphasizes one narrative cluster rather than the juxtaposition of several. A closer ancestor might be the weekly, monthly, or bimonthly installment of the nineteenth-century serialized novel, such as *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House*, and *Middlemarch*, respectively. These installments – called “parts,” or “numbers,” or “books” – more closely approximate the shape and variety of an episode; but those earlier installments worked together to serve one contiguous instrument, namely the novel as a whole – whose final length was anticipated by authorial convention (in Dickens’s twenty-part stories, following the 1836 success of *The Pickwick Papers*), or by prescriptive announcement (in serializing journals such as *All the Year Round*). Television, by contrast, operates from season to season – runs of episodes marked off by significant gaps. With each season separated from the next by several, or many, months, the promise of continuation is almost always in abeyance, vulnerable to cancellation or creative exhaustion. And although hourly television drama has long operated through the medium of seasons, until recently those seasons have been too long, and too irregular in their alternation between new and old episodes, to offer a sustained narrative experience. The last decade, however, has seen the advent of the thirteen-episode uninterrupted sequence, a system that most closely resembles the poetic stanza. I argue that we need to think of those thirteen episodes as lines of verse, and this new model of the season as something like a sonnet – a clear but flexible shape that both hews to established protocols and breaks those protocols when necessary. Consequently, my next section samples from several shows to provide an overview of how metrical structures (including the season) function in television serials, and my final section uses the first of the true “sonnet-seasons” – namely, season 1 of *The Sopranos* – to provide a more detailed case study. There I illustrate the role of such prosodic devices as enjambment, the turn, quatrains, and tercets in the design of this newest serial form.
Prosodic Structures in Television Serials

Segmentivity and Numbers

I borrow “segmentivity,” the first of these terms of art, from Brian McHale, who himself borrows it from Rachel Blau DuPlessis. McHale endorses DuPlessis’ proposal that we deem segmentivity to be the defining feature of poetry, just as we deem narrativity to be the defining feature of narrative, and performativity the defining feature of performance. As McHale notes, DuPlessis argues that “[p]oetry involves ‘the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap (line break, stanza break, page space)’; conversely, then, segmentivity, ‘the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments’ is ‘the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre’” (McHale 2009: 14). McHale’s brief is to bring renewed attention to the narrative dimension of poetry, and he notes that although segmentivity also operates in nonpoetic narrative – which “is certainly segmented in various ways, at various levels and scales” – segmentivity “is not dominant in narrative, by definition.” By contrast, he argues, segmentation “must always contribute meaningfully (for better or worse) to the structure of poetic narrative” (17, 18). McHale’s analysis sets an important precedent for exploring serial television as a shaped collection of pieces. In particular, his emphasis on “spacing” and “the negotiation of gap” (along with “gappiness” and “gapped lines”) provides elements of a vocabulary for studying the building blocks, and the blocks of omission, that govern serial television narrative.

On a quite literal level, the practice of making serial television often starts with a bunch of bits of stuff. For example, David Chase and Matthew Weiner, creators and showrunners of The Sopranos and Mad Men, respectively, begin thinking about each episode by subdividing the potential circumstances or scenes into “beats,” then listing them on a dry erase board or cutting them into small slips of paper, laying out those slips, and then moving those slips around (mentally and physically) in thinking about how to orient and present the forthcoming cluster that we call an episode (Chase 2002: ix; Chozick 2009). The beats of each episode – the separate scenes, sometimes less than a minute long, that are strung together in the narrative of an hour – move us from one location or plot strand to another, creating parallels, dialectical contrasts, and interruptions, in the manner of verse but always requiring us to see the pieces as pieces, independent contractors participating in a large project. I have argued elsewhere that the three key items of seriality are the old, the new, and the gap (or the “between”) (O’Sullivan 2006: 120–21); these are likewise three key elements of poetry, especially lyric poetry – with its emphasis on new versions of old forms (like the sonnet), and the gaps created by line breaks and stanzas. In many ways it is the articulation of the gap, the between, that animates the familiarity of old and new; the way in which a poem, or serial television, articulates those breaks makes that poem, or that unit of seriality, what it is. This is the discourse of segmentivity – parts, size, form – wrapped in the language of new and old, of the discovered and the familiar, defining itself through the logic of gapping and spacing.

The use of numbers, as a defining practice, connects poetry and seriality in the prehistory of television – since “numbers” is both the name given to Dickens’s monthly fictional installments and the synonym for “verse” deployed by, among others, Wordsworth. His negotiation, in the preface to Lyrical Ballads, between the mechanics of numbers (“the ease and gracefulness with which the Poet manages his numbers
are themselves confessedly a principal source of the gratification of the Reader”) and plain speech lead to his goal of fitting “to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men” (Wordsworth 1996: 174, 164). That same tension between numbers and mimesis obtains in television serials, as evidenced again in Chase’s formula of the beats. He explains that the template for every episode of *The Sopranos* is a system of “approximately 35 beats,” divided among an A and a B story (“thirteen or so” beats each), a C story (“five or six beats”), and the occasional D story (“a few beats”) (Chase 2002: ix); that same kind of division of labor, with local variations, applies to *The Sopranos*’ cohort of serials. Individual episodes may feature subtle fluctuations, just as lines of verse may scan differently from their putative metrical model; the dictates of arithmetic quarrel, as in poetry, with the local needs of story and character. This quarrel, as I’ve noted, makes us aware of the broken surface of the text, making us consider the multiple effects of each beat – not just its place in a continuing storyline but its possible tonal, visual, or thematic relationships with the preceding and succeeding beat. The beats of television serve differing narrative purposes simultaneously, as links in a narrative chain (or story) and as distinct agents colliding with beats from other chains, just as words in poetry serve simultaneously as meanings, numbers, and sounds.

Another art system privileging sound, and likewise predicated on the mathematical arrangement of distinct parts, is music – which when wedded to poetry creates songs, also known as “numbers.” This is no casual pun, especially in the case of *The Sopranos*, which uses numbers, that is, pre-existing musical selections, as its only nondiegetic accompaniment. In other words, the show rejects the signature of score – a symphonic form that connects, reminds, and familiarizes – in favor of a disconnected array of songs – ranging from rock to hip hop to opera – that add more broken pieces to the episodes. Each song brings its own meter and rhythm to each moment, sometimes suggesting clear rhymes or parallels between story and music, sometimes creating off rhymes or dissonances. The use of quoted, rather than original, music has become more and more prevalent in serialized television over the last decade, further emphasizing the numerical or metrical organization of the serials themselves.2

**Meter and Rhythm**

David Milch, creator of *Deadwood*, offers us a way of transitioning from numbers to meter and rhythm. Milch has claimed that “the highest form of storytelling … is mathematics – where literally the signs contain within themselves the most violent and basic form of energy. Einstein understood that if he was able to sign correctly he would experience the secret of energy” (Singer 2005: 204). This bridge between mathematics, or numbers, and the energy of storytelling – the raw energy of psychology and event – recalls Wordsworth’s effort to apply meter to the language of real men. More precisely, meter represents half of the mathematical energy of verse, since its prescriptive claim – that in the case of iambic pentameter a line will be composed of five iambs – is in constant conversation with the local demands of rhythm – the actual assembly of iambs, spondees, dactyls, trochees, and anapests that fill out a specific line. This is the fertile tension between plan and execution, or in somewhat grander terms, between Platonic conception and Aristotelian practice. In Hollywood’s economic model of industrial art, that tension translates into the master plans that the likes of Chase and Milch may cook up
Formalisms for a season versus the real exigencies of time and money that shape those plans. Serial television production offers a parallel to the Victorian pressure of weekly and monthly publication, since by the end of the season, the scramble to turn scripts into shots into episodes typically accelerates, as the gap between process and air time shrinks. Television in general operates on a much tighter schedule than feature filmmaking. The usual time frame for filming an episode is ten days, with five or six pages shot per day; by contrast, features aim to shoot one or two pages per day. That constriction exerts a much greater pressure to compress and improvise, especially in terms of how scenes are filmed, resulting in a constant negotiation between the intended meter of a scene and the eventual rhythm.

Milch addresses the clash between meter and rhythm in serial television art, or the tension between global designs and local possibilities, by citing poetic precedent. In the companion book to Deadwood, he states: “Melville said that any great poem spins against the way it drives” (Milch 2006: 17). Milch in fact re-appropriates the context of this citation; it comes from Melville’s 1860–61 poem titled — appropriately for our purposes — “The Conflict of Convictions,” wherein the speaker announces, “I know a wind in purpose strong — / It spins against the way it drives” (lines 63–64). The italicization of the word “against” is original to the poem and underscores the governing push and pull not only of the convictions advertised in the poem’s title but also of poetic construction itself, as segments argue with gaps, syllables argue with sentences, and lines argue with stanzas. McHale, citing the work of John Shoptaw, offers the term “countermeasure,” where “measure at one level or scale is played off against measure at another level or scale,” so that, for example, Emily Dickinson’s poetry “may be predominantly phrase-measured, but her phrases are also counterpointed or countermeasured at the level of line and stanza” (McHale 2009: 17). Whether we choose to call it meter and rhythm, spin and drive, or measure and countermeasure, both poetry and serial television explore this dialectic prominently through the tension between circular and linear patterns.

In poetry we might call the drive toward the end of each line a progressive one, as each word moves us forward in space, in narrative accumulation or lyric addition; but the end of the line often heralds a return (a spin), as much as a conclusion. In certain kinds of poems, we call the return (or spin) “rhyme,” an aural device that reminds us of a sound we’ve heard in the preceding line.

Consider, as an illustration of how meter and rhythm operate in serial television, two prosodic techniques: anaphora — which we might call both a driving and spinning force, since it creates a progressive structure while reminding us of each preceding iteration — and caesura, a harsher strategy that shatters the unity of the line by creating an end in the middle, a syntactical rhythm clashing with the requirements of meter. One manifestation of anaphora in serial television is the opening credits sequence, which serves circularly to remind us of the metrical conventions of the program. But there are in effect two beginnings to each program — the credits sequence (the spin) and the beginning of the show “proper” (the drive). Sometimes this narrative beginning appears before the credits and produces what is known as a “cold open,” as is the case with Lost and The Wire, and sometimes the credits precede the beginning of the narrative proper, as is the case with The Sopranos, Deadwood, and Mad Men. Not only do these alternative patterns for constructing anaphoric links offer quite different consequences for the beginning of each episode (or line of the poem); they can also operate as either a countermeasure to, or rhyme with, the closing credits. In this respect, the start and finish of Lost always work symmetrically. After the cold open, the title of the show appears over a
black screen, accompanied by the signature ominous opening music; at the end of the episode, the final credits appear over a black screen, accompanied by the signature ominous closing music. By contrast, each episode of The Sopranos, Deadwood, and Mad Men concludes with a new piece of music, one we have not heard before and will never hear again. In effect, these last-mentioned shows rhyme at the beginning of each episode, but not at the end. The Wire finds a prosodic middle ground, since the same song is played at the beginning of each episode, and the same instrumental piece (different from the opening song) is played at the end; but each season features a new version of that initial song, thereby creating spin and drive simultaneously.

For an example of caesura, the prosodic opposite of the framing devices in serial television, we need to think not of patterns but of exceptions—such as the storytelling rift in the middle of “That’s My Dog,” episode 5 of season 4 of Six Feet Under, which violates convention mid-way through by suddenly shedding the multiplot alternations of serial drama and confining itself for the rest of the hour to the uninterrupted carjacking ordeal of David Fisher. The episode caused a furor, ostensibly because the audience objected to seeing a beloved character unrelentingly brutalized; but that emotional shock was amplified by a procedural shock, namely, the sudden rupture of metrical expectation and the violation of rhythmic precedent, an abandonment of narrative protocol that forced viewers to wonder what, and how, they were watching. “That’s My Dog,” significantly, enacted not simply a caesura within its own narrative drive but one within season 4 as a whole, since its consequences transformed the trajectory not only of David Fisher but also of the central group of characters around him (Nussbaum 2004: 52; O’Sullivan 2009: 221–23).

The Season as Unit of Meaning

The double-consequence of this caesura in Six Feet Under, both for the specific episode and for the episodes preceding and succeeding it, provides a segue to my discussion of a relatively new lyric form: the season. Until 1999, the television season had operated purely as a system of production, numbering from as many thirty-four episodes per year for a show like Bonanza in the mid-1960s and tapering off gradually to the more recent convention of twenty-two episodes. This loose, baggy superstructure traditionally begins in the autumn and runs through late spring; the twenty-two-episode season unfolds in clusters of new installments—aimed around “sweeps” periods of the calendar, when ratings are tied to advertising prices—alternating with clusters of reruns. This model gives audiences a general sense of commencement and conclusion, with occasional spikes along the way; but each of these markers—commencement, conclusion, spike—is relatively “soft,” in a manner that is reflective of what Raymond Williams influentially referred to as the “flow” of television.

Williams suggested that the sequence of programs aired by any television station, and the collection of genres within that sequence, including series, commercials, promotions, and so forth, constituted a continuous stream; we do not so much shift clearly back and forth between sustained narrative worlds and interrupting advertisements as experience one sustained program of images and sounds (Williams 1974: 91–92). Jane Feuer has amended Williams’s argument, positing television as “a dialectic of segmentation and flow” (Feuer 1983: 15). Most recently, flow has been drastically eroded by the technology of the digital video recorder (DVR), which allows viewers to control what they
watch, and to become, in effect, bricoleur programmers – rather than passive recipients of program sequences constructed by executives. The twenty-two-episode season emphasizes a version of flow, at the expense of segmentation, since it is not so much shaped and bounded (i.e., clearly segmented and gapped) as arrayed in notional bunches. That ontological fuzziness of the traditional season underlies the recurrent critical emphasis on serial television as an open-ended enterprise; consequently, writers such as Jennifer Hayward (1997) and Robyn Warhol (2003), while interested in parallels to earlier serial forms, have concentrated televisually on soap opera, a continuous genre wherein the unit of the seasons is completely effaced.

In January 1999 HBO aired the first season of a new series, called *The Sopranos*, an event that generated a well-documented cultural tsunami. What has been relatively unremarked upon is the watershed created by the specific form of that season: thirteen episodes, aired in consecutive weeks, with no interrupting reruns. When I say that the pre–1999 television season was purely a system of production, I do not mean to suggest that the first season of *The Sopranos* was not also originally engineered to serve the financial and structural demands of a network. The thirteen episodes resemble the typical first batch of episodes that are ordered for a traditional twenty-two-episode season, with the succeeding nine episodes (or “back end”) ordered only if the ratings for the first batch warrant such an investment. But before *The Sopranos*, those first thirteen episodes had not been envisioned or consumed as a self-contained narrative cluster. The thirteen-episode uninterrupted complete season provided, for the first time in American television history, a distinct narrative form, one that was large enough to occupy significant time and space, but not so large as to turn into vague sprawl. Its close analogy, in length, to the fourteen-line parameter of the sonnet may be an industrial accident, since the proximate benefits of that first, shorter season were cost control and a convenient quarter-year of programming; but as so often in the history of American film and television, a corporate decision has had far-reaching artistic consequences.³

Before we address the particulars of this parallel between sonnet and season, let us remember the reasons for the sonnet’s own success – and how quickly both it and the thirteen-episode season caught on. The sonnet is long enough to develop an observation or a thought, flexible enough to be metaphorically prescriptive in the hands of William Shakespeare, and colloquially investigative in the hands of Robert Frost. Its end is far enough away from its beginning to suggest a change or translation, but not so far as to suggest a daunting journey.⁴ And just as Philip Sydney’s *Astrophel and Stella* helped kick off the sonnet craze of the 1580s and 1590s, so the first season of *The Sopranos* kicked off the thirteen-episode season (in some versions, the twelve-episode season) of our last decade. Since 1999, many series have followed this form, including such HBO successors as *Six Feet Under*, *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, and *Big Love* but also offerings on rival cable programmers, such as *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Dexter*. Even an over-the-air network show like *Lost*, whose first two seasons enacted the traditional twenty-two- to twenty-four-episode skein – dispersed loosely over thirty-six weeks of the calendar – shifted in its final two seasons to shorter sixteen- to eighteen-episode runs, crucially aired in consecutive weeks, with virtually no interruptions. The season, as a distinct, compressed, and contiguous entity, is no longer the exclusive province of “prestige” cable networks. Even the compact length of the sonnet-season may become part of the over-the-air lexicon, as evidenced in 2009–2010 by the thirteen-episode second season of *Dollhouse* on Fox.⁵
In this context it is important to mention again a key technological innovation that coincided with the advent of *The Sopranos*: namely, the digital versatile disc, or DVD. Like the sonnet-season, this innovation allows the viewer to contain the bulk of epic narrative. Consider what the consumer of television drama had to choose from in 1999, if she wanted to pick her way through the medium’s history. She could buy VHS tapes titled “The Very Best of *Hill Street Blues*” or “*Law & Order*: Producer’s Collection,” or the “Buffy and Angel Chronicles” within the corpus of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—cherry-picked assemblages of two or three cassettes that reflected putative thematic links, or apparent indexes of quality. The season as defining unit was essentially invisible as a consumable artifact. Even HBO failed to seize on that artifactual property at first, delaying the release of the first season of *The Sopranos* until December 2000, a few months before the third season aired. As late as 2005 the fourth season of *Six Feet Under* was not available until immediately after the airing of the fifth and final season, thereby keeping at bay the viewer’s full purchase on the narrative. Since then the dialogue between season and DVD has become explicit; no show of any stature fails to issue its preceding season on disc before the new season is aired on television. Now all seven seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are available in full, and even the thirty-two-episode megalopolis that is the first season of *Bonanza* was finally issued on DVD in 2009. The viewer’s ability literally to own seasons, in packaged divisions, has materially changed the narrative dynamics of the text.

*The Wire* exemplifies the consequences of the thirteen-episode uninterrupted season. The series ran from 2002 to 2008 and numbered five seasons, varying in length from thirteen episodes (seasons 1 and 4) to twelve episodes (seasons 2 and 3) to ten episodes (season 5). Each season began with a new performance of the opening credits song, “Way Down in the Hole,” as well as a new montage of scenes from the upcoming season; both the musical strategy and the visual strategy were unprecedented for an American television series. That teasing glimpse of what was to come supplied just enough information to convey a sense of how the storyworld would evolve over the course of the season, but not enough to convey specific trajectories of character and plot. This framing device is a direct descendant of Dickens’s serial numbers. The green cover of a twenty-part book like *Little Dorrit*, or the monthly version of a weekly like *A Tale of Two Cities*, featured an illustration of the major characters of the novel, organized on the page in graphical relationships that, retrospectively, could be seen to portend as yet undisclosed interconnections and consequences. But the difference, again, is that there is no equivalent to the “season” in Dickens’s work. *The Wire*’s decision to change covers each year, as it were, underlined the very different narrative focus of each season; despite the connecting threads of Baltimore, police work, and the drug business, the central narrative landscape constantly changed. Season 1 concentrated on housing projects; season 2 on the shipyards; season 3 on the political arena; season 4 on the schools; season 5 on the newspaper business. Given these radical shifts of attention, it is peculiar that *The Wire* has so frequently been compared to a long novel, since there is nothing comparable to this in any Victorian book, whether serialized or published in volumes. One might tentatively consider a massive project like Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine* as an analogue; but just as *Bleak House* is too small to serve as direct precedent, that ninety-five-title edifice is too big. *The Wire* is both more circular than Balzac in its use of structural tropes and more linear than Dickens in its changes of character and context. The prose genealogy, in other words, only goes so far; we need to turn once more to poetry.
Formalisms

A Case Study of the Sonnet-Season: Season 1 of *The Sopranos*

While the recent televisual wealth offers an array of candidates to illustrate the properties and possibilities of the sonnet-season, it seems appropriate to use the initiator of the form – namely, the first season of *The Sopranos*. It is a season particularly sensitive to the choices and effects of the thirteen-episode uninterrupted sequence, inaugurating the corona of sonnets that we call *The Sopranos*. My proposed homology between this form of televisual season and the sonnet – which we might frame as between twelve and fourteen – does tease us into speculation about connections between serial television and other inherited methods of segmenting experience and time, such as the division of years into months or of shorter periods into fortnights. But the parallel here is not limited to a similar number of lines. I want to spotlight three compositional strategies of the season, strategies that correspond to, but also re-invent, the motions and countermeasures of the sonnet: an initial experimental quatrain (episodes 1–4); two evenly spaced jarring interruptions, in episodes 5 and 10, each of which may be likened to a turn; and a closing tercet. That said, I am not claiming that this specific organization of segments is repeated precisely in subsequent seasons – whether of *The Sopranos* or any other series. The sonnet-season does not fall as rigorously into patterns as the three-quatrains-and-a-couplet form of the English sonnet, or the octave-and-sestet form of the Italian sonnet; rather, Frost’s formal experiments provide the closest model. While some of the prosodic maneuvers I describe may recur, the laboratory of the thirteen-episode uninterrupted season in the last decade has played with the possibilities of segmentation, numbers, meter, and rhythm, rather than follow codified orders. In other words, the spin and drive between rigor and freedom, between a fealty to clear rules and an impulse to break them, have become a governing dynamic of television narrative.

The initial stanzaic strategy of the first season of *The Sopranos*, the experimental quatrain, is a four-episode cluster unified by the story of Jackie Aprile, the head of a New Jersey crime family in which Tony Soprano and his Uncle Junior serve as high-ranking lieutenants. Over the course of those episodes, Jackie sickens and dies; the fourth episode concludes at this funeral. This quatrain corresponds to what is more commonly referred to as an arc, a sustained plot strand that moves the broader narrative along, with consequences both for plot and for character. Concurrent with this story cluster is what I will call a verse-structure, as each of these four episodes tries a distinctly different way of beginning.

The first episode, also known as the pilot, starts out in the waiting room of Jennifer Melfi, a psychiatrist whom Tony is about to meet as he seeks treatment for his panic attacks. David Chase has said that if no network had picked up the pilot, he could have added half an hour and released it as a self-contained low-budget feature (*Sopranos* 2001). Consequently the episode is less focused on creating a serial template than in telling its own story; for example, the first half of the pilot relies on Tony’s voiceover as a way of organizing and clarifying information – a technique never repeated in the show’s subsequent eighty-five episodes. A different narrative experiment inaugurates the start of the second episode, “46 Long,” which begins, unlike any other episode in *The Sopranos*’ six seasons, with a “cold open,” a pre-credit scene of little serial consequence – showing, in this case, the mobsters counting money and watching a Mafia expert talk on television. The third episode, “Denial, Anger, Acceptance,” begins with an enjambment. Here a lingering storyline from the final act of the second episode – the theft of a truck “belonging” to one part of the mob family by people affiliated with another part – continues
immediately, almost as if there had been no interruption, or gap, between episodes. (Such enjambment is extremely rare as a narrative strategy for the rest of the series.) By contrast with these “false” starts, the fourth episode, “Meadowlands,” begins with a device that will become a hallmark of the season, and the series as a whole: a dream sequence of Tony’s. As an initial gambit, it will be repeated at a parallel moment in a scheme of four-episode clusters, in the eighth episode of the season. But the second time around the dream sequence involves Tony’s nephew, Christopher – creating a kind of rhyme between the oneiric anxieties of these two characters. So, like a poem that begins its first four lines with four distinct sounds, images, or perspectives, the first quatrain of the season emphasizes the divergent over the iterative, the linear over the circular.

The second prosodic, season-dependent strategy under consideration – the interruption – manifests itself in sudden changes of style and direction at two parallel moments of the season: the fifth episode, “College,” and the tenth episode, “A Hit Is a Hit.” “College” is among the most celebrated of all Sopranos episodes, and Chase has spoken often of its importance to him, as an instance of his impulse toward anti-serial countermeasure, even as he was making a serial: “‘College’ comes closest to achieving my personal goal of making episodes that could be stand-alone films. It is self-contained” (Chase 2002: viii). The story of Tony and his daughter Meadow’s college tour through Maine, where he encounters and garrotes a witness-protection “rat,” is not serially anticipated by any of the preceding four episodes, and its serial consequences are minimal for the rest of the season. Less celebrated, but equally unintegrated, is “A Hit Is a Hit.” This episode begins (again, out of nowhere) with the killing of a Hispanic rival unfamiliar to the show’s audience and the discovery of a large pile of money, a share of which allows Christopher to try out a side career as producer for a mediocre rock band. The shared structural role of these two episodes would be interesting enough – an anti-serial hour walling off a four-episode proserial cluster preceding it – but the connections go much further. Each episode is about art and culture. “College,” which begins on a small college campus and lingers, near its conclusion, on an inscribed quotation from The Scarlet Letter, repeatedly touches explicitly on issues of verisimilitude, sculpture, cinema, and literary inheritance. “A Hit Is a Hit” is a narrative essay about the world of popular music, particularly the tension between early 1960s black acts (run and exploited by white managers) and late 1990s gangsta rap – with related attention to such cultural currency as bidets and imported Italian glass, as well as the contingency of stock values. How is art related to commerce? What are things worth? What is the value of formula, as exemplified, in one instance, by Beatles songs? How do talent and luck magically coalesce into that mysterious entity known as “a hit”? Just as so many poems are about poetic voice and the material nature of language, the first season of The Sopranos interrupts itself, twice, at regular intervals, to ask questions about the tension between design and accident, high and low art, the permanent and the evanescent – in other words, the basic cultural work of an ambitious television serial at the end of the twentieth century.

Finally, the closing tercet of the season – “Nobody Knows Anything,” “Isabella,” and “I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano” – returns us from the self-conscious reverie of “A Hit Is a Hit” to the insatiable drive of serials, as Uncle Junior’s plans to kill Tony, and the consequences thereof, take over. This tercet, like the initial quatrain, is united by a storytelling arc, in this case the gradual suspicion that Pussy Bonpensiero, Tony’s best friend, has turned FBI informant. The narrative join to “A Hit Is a Hit,” where Pussy seemed jovial and unanxious, is remarkably awkward; suddenly, an episode later, he acts furtively and walks with the weight of the world on his shoulders. The season, like those
schizophrenic works we call poems, refuses to hide the separation of its parts, fighting the requirement to conclude by emphasizing the cluster, or the segment, over the flow of the whole. The twelfth episode is especially jagged, since it interweaves a long-anticipated serial event – the attempted hit on Tony – with an episode-specific story wherein Tony believes that he has met a beautiful Italian housesitter next door named Isabella – a person who turns out to be completely imaginary. The audience is not explicitly clued in to this delusion until Tony is; this confusion of the subjective and the objective represents an elaboration of the dream trope seen earlier in the season, but now in a way that prompts the viewer to identify with Tony, rather than observing him from an external, rational standpoint. This shift to the fanciful late in a season, often in penultimate or antepenultimate episodes – whether in the famously “irrelevant” pursuit of a Russian in the third season’s “Pine Barrens,” which takes place predominantly in snowy woods for reasons that matter little to the serial context, or the astonishing twenty-minute dream sequence in the fifth season’s “The Test Dream,” a “Circe”-like reprocessing of a vast amount of narrative material – will become a Sopranos structural habit, slowing the serial momentum down just when it should be accelerating. These warring impulses offer a synthesis of two warring possibilities for sonnet closure: the summarizing, clarifying Shakespearean couplet that often tries to make sense of questions asked, or the darkening final movement of a Frost sonnet, translating an initial everyday observation into something restless and unresolvable.

What I have tried to offer here is a beginning but also a return – a beginning for inquiry into the new serials, and a return that grounds this inquiry in the prosodic structures of the most ancient forms of verbal art. Recent work has discussed the “complexity,” or cognitive challenge, that these serials produce, with good reason (Mittell 2006; Johnson 2005). But those studies have deployed the rhetoric of the new, rather than the discourse of the old – what is unprecedented within the realm of television or popular culture, rather than what is adapted from poetic practice. Serial television’s lexicon of segmentation, numbers, meter and rhythm, and the genre of the sonnet-season represent the return of verse narrative to its origins as popular art.

Notes

1 The segmented, narrated, and performed art of serial television, it should be noted, enacts all three elements.
2 The shock final ending of The Sopranos – its infamous cut to black – owes as much to the absence of music as to the absence of image. The final credits, silent for the first and only time, reminded the viewers of their dependence on meter and numbers; as with John Cage’s 4’33”, the absence of measure made measure the very subject of the missing sound.
3 The other fundamental variation from network practice was the absence of commercials – a countermeasure that undid the traditional multiple-act structure, studded with pre-commercial climaxes. So the uninterrupted episode and the uninterrupted season were as responsible for undoing ossified segmentation as they were for inventing new ways of breaking narrative form.
4 HBO did have internal business models for the thirteen-episode season prior to the debut of The Sopranos: three of the six seasons of The Larry Sanders Show (1992–98) numbered between eleven and thirteen episodes, and the first season of Sex and the City, in 1998, was thirteen episodes long. But these situation comedies, whatever their success and cultural impact, did not aim for the kind of serial season-long interconnection practiced by The Sopranos and its successors. While certain ongoing storylines involving principal characters did loosely knit episode to episode, they were also designed to be watchable out of sequence, in the tradition of television comedy. Sex and the City’s
interest in season-long, and series-long, serial throughlines did accelerate later on in its run — after *The Sopranos* had helped change the entire experience of serial television.

5 It is worth noting that, in Great Britain, each season of a show is called a “series,” and its episodes are presented in consecutive weeks, without interruption. This semantic difference, and this publication model, indicate that the distinctiveness, or separation, of the season/series unit within the entire history of a program has operated longer in the British context than in the American one. But the relative brevity of the traditional British series/season produces significantly different effects from the format initiated in the United States by *The Sopranos*. British dramas with serial components tend to run for six to eight episodes per series, creating a much more abbreviated narrative dynamic, with much less scope for the kind of metrical and rhythmic variety detailed in my examination of the first season of *The Sopranos* in the final section of this essay.

6 For direct comparisons between Dickens and *The Wire*, see Weisberg (2006) and Miller (2007). David Simon, the show’s creator, termed his creation a “visual novel” (Mittell 2009: 429).

7 Michael Newman discusses arcs and beats within the confines of what he terms “mass art television” (2006: 17), in contrast with the more experimental series that I have been examining.

**Works Cited**


Tropes

Traditionally, literary tropes have been considered ornamental devices that supplement or supplant ordinary meanings in ways that both deviate away from and add to what is being said.¹ In Milton’s Paradise Lost there is a famous epic simile in Book 1 that compares the fallen angels to autumnal leaves that have fallen into the brooks around Vallombrosa, a locale south of Florence, Italy. The simile might well remind one of embroidery, which is to say, of an ornamental stitching of comparisons into the text. The simile occurs when Satan calls up his legions who “lay intrans’t …”

Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks
In Vallombrosa, where th’ Etrurian shades
High overarch’t imbow’r; or scatter’d sedge
Afloat, when with fierce Winds Orion arm’d
Hath vext the Red-Sea Coast, whose waves o’rethrew
Busirus [Pharaoh] and his Memphian Chivalry,
While with perfidious hatred they pursu’d
The Sojourners of Goshen, who beheld
From the safe shore thir floating Carcasses
And broken Chariot Wheels; so thick bestrown
Abject and lost lay these, covering the Flood,
Under amazement of their hideous change.²

(ll. 302–13)

Clearly, Milton wanted to compress much information into this diversion away from Satan’s action, a prolepsis to a peaceful pastoral moment near a Catholic monastery in Tuscany. Psychologically, the purpose of this sort of epic simile is to forget the traumatic present by substituting something rather remote, natural, and pleasant in its place, in this case brooks bestrewn with leaves in autumn. As it happens, the simile is echoing similes of fallen leaves in Homer, Virgil, and Dante, which gives it a sort of ritual significance or, at the very least, the depth of literary precedent. And the simile generates a parallel simile within it that speaks to the destruction in Exodus of the Egyptians on chariots pursuing the Jews in the Red Sea. The basic associative chain is: Devils = Dead Leaves = Broken Chariot Wheels. What is remarkable is how Milton at the end of the passage manages “so thick bestrewn” to have a double reference, to the wheels and the leaves, and in addition a third reference back to the ostensible object of our attention, “these” (the Devils strewn in Hell). Notice too that Milton wanted to inlay a bit of Greek myth in the midst of all this with reference to Orion, who, in one of the myths about him, walks on water, which makes one realize that he is a prefiguration of Christ and of God’s might and mercy.

This epic simile is quite an embellishment. It takes us far afield and puts together rather heterogeneous elements, a scene of falling leaves near a monastery, mention of Orion, the aftermath of Pharaoh’s defeat, and the devils abject and lost on the fiery lake at the foot of Satan. Of central importance in considering this and other figures, generally, is the fact that they tend to both compress and compare, and to lead away from and then lead back again to something.

Figures embellish and ornament a text, much as Milton’s simile does, but they also amplify and can multiply registers of reference. It’s hard not to notice that Milton’s simile is pithy: it’s very compact and dense and is made up of large and small fragments that do and don’t quite go together. Leaves and chariot wheels aren’t something we’d usually equate. But Milton makes this work by way of subordinating the power of association to the rhythmic patterning of the words. In other words, the lines build up rhythmic momentum and carry us along in a way that extends over the different elements of the content. Milton does this quite a bit in other parts of the poem, too. Bits that don’t really cohere more or less fit because the rhythm of the language overwhelms the discrepancies. Plus Milton is good at the figure known as syllepsis. He can let a phrase ambivalently refer to two objects but choose only one of them to advance. This occurs with “so thick bestrewn / abject” which refers to both the broken army of Pharaoh and the devils before Satan, carrying onward from the latter reference.

At this point, it is helpful to offer a definition of a literary figure. It was formulated by a French scholar, Pierre Fontanier, in 1830. “Figures of discourse are the traits, forms, or turns that are more or less remarkable and that have a more or less happy effect by means of which discourse, in the expression of ideas, thoughts, or feelings, distances itself more or less from that which had been a simple and common expression.” Earlier, the Académie Française had followed an older tradition that goes back to antiquity in which a division was made between grammar (ordering isolated ideas) and rhetoric (propositional thinking, expressions used in discourse). On the grammatical axis, “an arrangement of words [gives] force or grace to discourse,” and along the rhetorical axis “a turn of thoughts [creates] a beauty, an ornament in discourse.”

All of this supports what we have seen in the epic simile of the leaves of Vallombrosa. In fact, what one has there is grammar (the ordering of the narrated units: the brooks clogged with leaves, the Jews being pursued by Basirus (Pharaoh), the saving spirit of
Orion (Christ), the broken chariot wheels, the languishing abject devils on a burning lake in Hell) and *rhetoric*, the parenthetical expression of these units as sequential propositions (thick as ... where th’... or scattered ... when with ...). Both grammar and rhetoric are animated by sentiment or what Fontanier called “passion” (in our case, the rhythmic force). Of central importance is that all this is supposed to distance itself from simple and common expression. That it teaches, delights, digresses, beautifies, ornaments, embellishes, complicates, plays logical tricks, references far flung texts, says the impossible, obscures, tantalizes, seduces, compresses, ambiguates, and whatever else figures do is all to the good, especially when, as the Académie argues, the result is felicitous (*heureuse*).

As to particular types of figures that turn up in discourse, Fontanier covers pretty much everything imaginable in his *Figures du discours*. Here are just some of the examples he covers: abruption, adjunction, allegorization, alliteration, anacolouthon, catachresis, conjunction, counterfision (*contrefision*), correction, dubitation, enthymemism, epitropism, imprecation, license, litotes, metalepsis, metaphor, optation, paradox, paranomasia, preterition, repetition, syllepsis, synecdoche, topography.

Of interest should be that Fontanier’s understanding of these discursive devices requires a division into three types: figures that correspond (i.e. metonymy), figures that resemble (i.e. metaphor), and figures that connect (i.e. synecdoche). In the epic simile of the leaves of Vallombrosa, we have resemblance (the devils resemble leaves and broken chariot wheels with respect to their fallenness, brokenness, and death) and correspondence insofar as the devils and Pharaoh’s forces are both forces of evil and therefore actually connected by something they both have in common. In fact, Milton was probably thinking that Pharaoh’s troops are devils who will be doing mischief later in human history, and that Pharaoh will be none other than Satan disguised as the Egyptian leader. In addition we have Fontanier’s idea of connection in the simile, given that all the parts belong to a topos Milton calls Hell. Everything is connected to Hell because it is all a part of it, Hell not being confined to a time and place. This is a crucial point, because it overturns the impression that Hell has a confined locus and temporality: that it is a place like other places. In terms of Fontanier’s notion of connection, we have an extension of a type or genre of thing into things that are “of” that genre and even generally representative of it. Here, again, the broken army of Pharaoh comes most immediately to mind.

Something that Fontanier doesn’t stress is the fact that figures in literature often have to do with transformation, the change of one thing into another, the swapping of appearances, one thing being displaced by another, and so forth. Milton was greatly influenced by Ovid, who was the great poet of metamorphosis. Throughout *Paradise Lost* the devils keep getting metamorphosed into one thing or another. In fact, the whole epic could be said to be about metamorphosis: changes in state. In that sense, the simile of the devils being seen as autumnal leaves isn’t quite as decorative as one might imagine, though it is and remains an embellished ornament, in any case, a digression in which the changes of identity or of state can be pushed quite a bit further than they could otherwise. Recall the Académie’s point: figures enable the poet to discourse in a way that is not commonplace (i.e. “normal”). In fact, that means figures enable the poet to indulge in transformational flights of extraordinary fancy and skill.

One point to underscore is that it’s not always too useful to think of figures as separate entities whose definition we memorize so that we can identify them when they pop up in poems, plays, and novels. Rather figuration is quite protean and overlapping. In Milton’s epic simile we saw the extended comparison that was introduced with the word “as.”
This, obviously, is the epic simile itself; we saw ambiguity in the selection of that monastic site south of Florence which may be a nasty swipe at Catholicism or a tribute to Dante, Virgil, and Homer; we saw metaphor—one thing resembling another (devils = leaves = broken wheels); we saw metonymy—correspondence in which one entity is actually a part of another entity; and we saw synecdoche—the whole simile being a part of Hell that is representative of its various dimensions. We could have found irony in the comparison of the leaves, which are natural, peaceful, and predestined to die and the devils who are unnatural, troubled, and had the choice not to fall. And we could have noticed that Orion is a personification of the wind that walks and disturbs the waters. Or we could have noticed the use of euphemism and epithet: the Sojourners of Goshen.

Incidentally, reading by way of Fontanier, we would have to notice that Goshen, too, is a kind of Hell, that the Sojourners are doing exactly what the devils will not be able to do, and that they are doing exactly the inverse of what Adam and Eve will do at the end of the epic. That is, the Sojourners are leaving their Hell in Egypt for a promised land (a sort of Eden). Inversely, the devils will never get out of their Hell, and the parents of Mankind, in another sort of inversion, will be leaving Eden for a much less paradisal “World before them.” This inverse crossing is known as chiasmus. And in a way the Sojourners of Goshen do manage to figure or sign an invisible cross in terms of their crossing the paths of both the devils and the fallen Adam and Eve. And that would relate to symbolism.

In case one wonders why Milton’s epic, Paradise Regained, has lacked the popularity of the longer epic, it is because that later poem lacks the ornamentation and fanciful detail that Milton lavished on the story of the parents of Mankind. Probably, Milton envisaged the earlier poem as pre-Christian and therefore more in line with ancient epic devices, whereas Paradise Regained he imagined within a Calvinist aesthetic: pure, austere, minimal, pious, stripped of classical ornamentation and flights of fancy. Whether the Académie Française read Milton at all, I do not know, but I’m sure if they had, the determination would have been made that Paradise Lost has a felicity lacking in the more dour Paradise Regained.

Reading

Pierre Fontanier, Les figures du discours (1977)
George Puttenham, The Arte of English Poesie (sixteenth century)

Elision

That poetry is often telegraphic and compressed can be a source of annoyance to readers who find it frustrating to be caught up in a verbal game of “keep away” in which the poet manages to tease us with half-spoken messages. Notice the following riddle poem (# 1489) by Emily Dickinson.

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel–
A Resonance of Emerald–
A Rush of Cochineal–
And every Blossom on the Bush
Tools for Reading Poetry

Adjusts its tumbled Head –
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning’s Ride –

When Dickinson sent this poem to Helen Hunt Jackson in 1879, she wrote the following as a preface. “To the Oriole you suggested I add a Humming Bird and hope they are not untrue –”.

In collections of Dickinson’s poetry the poem is untitled, which suggests that editors are under the impression we’re supposed to be able to figure such poems out by ourselves, which may be somewhat unreasonable, given that Dickinson herself didn’t think people might be able to fill in the blanks. This speaks to a culture of poetry reading, not necessarily shared by Dickinson, in which the art of reading poetry is precisely that of supplying content that has been elided (withdrawn, kept back, skipped over). In “A Route of Evanescence” the subject of the poem is never mentioned, only some rather attenuated qualitative correspondences are given that have both metaphorical and metonymical significance. The route of evanescence itself is a metaphor for the darting around of the hummingbird; Dickinson seems to be asking whether hummingbirds make a route like other birds. The revolving wheel is a metaphor too, but it is also a metonymy. The wings in flight appear to be analogous to a revolving wheel (metaphor), but they are also a very distinctive feature of the bird itself (part for whole: metonymy). The emerald and red (Cochineal) are impressions of color that the poet sees as the bird feeds. There is then a shift to mention of the flowers upon which the bird is feeding, and one has to suppose we’re to guess what sort of bush this might be, or at least visualize something akin to what Dickinson had in mind. The bush is personified, that much is clear. Finally, there is a comparison with mail carriers and reference to where the hummingbird has migrated from: North Africa. Given the bird’s speed, it’s “an easy Morning’s Ride,” but this is intentional hyperbole (exaggeration). It’s meant humorously.

What many readers may not be aware of is that Dickinson wrote different versions of the same poems and, at times, couldn’t decide on particular words. Line two of “A Route of Evanescence” had variants in the manuscripts with respect to the word “revolving” (“With a revolving Wheel”). Variants included “delusive wheel,” “dissolving wheel,” “dissembling” (“With a dissembling”), and “renewing” (“With a renewing”). In those last two instances no mention of wheel appears. It’s elided. Here we can see that Dickinson had various other possibilities in mind with respect to content that she suppressed by using the much more concrete and literal “revolving.” But that too is an elision: a sort of suppression of suggestions the poet had in mind and might have liked to work out had the poem allowed it. This speaks to fit. What can’t be fitted into a line? And what if that material is important to the conceptualization of the poem?

Here are a few lines from “Maroon” by Chelsey Minnis, a poem that shows the blanks, as it were, by means of punctuation.

……………………my bloodthirsty…………………………………………………wet…………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………baby…………
…………..is……an auburn…………and……………….bloody……………beauty………

Minnis writes what is clearly a typical narrative sentence broken up with ellipses. But one has to wonder, is our skipping over the dots not a mistake? Isn’t the narrative closure here deceptive? We would naturally assume “baby” to be the subject of the sentence,
given its syntactic structure. But perhaps a sentence or two is missing here and what we take to be a continuation is a mistaken presumption. The dots in Minnis’ collection Zirconia, of which “Maroon” is a part, are not entirely unrelated to the dashes that Dickinson loved to use in her poems and letters: signs of absence.

In contrast notice how space functions in Jackson Mac Low’s “People Swamp” of 4–5 July, 1990.

People swamp flavor.

Iridescence knot ringdove end needle sieve.

Keeper encystment palliation aftervarnish creepiness instrument.

The obvious question here is whether these statements have anything to do with one another or not, let alone whether these are well formed propositions out of which a narrative could or should be constructed. “Swamp” could be a noun or a verb. In the first case one would be left with a nominative phrase or perhaps just three nouns. In the second case we would have a sentence with subject, verb, object. It sort of makes sense that way, but only sort of. In the second line the words “knot” and “end” also have this doubleness of being either nouns or verbs. But now there appears to be little gain in seeing them that way. However one considers the words grammatically, the sentence doesn’t quite manage to be a well formed statement. The same is true for line three. Is this poem just meaningless? Would it help if we knew what it’s leaving out? But how would we know if something is being elided here? By what test could we determine this?

In North of Intention, Steve McCaffery, himself a poet, quotes Leon S. Roudiez on the paragram: “A text is paragrammatic in the sense that its organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits.” McCaffery adds: “Paragrammatic wordplay thus manufactures a crisis within semantic economy, for whilst engendering meanings, the paragram also turns unitary meaning against itself.” The para-gramme in at least one of its manifestations posits a para-grammar, a pseudo-linguistic construct that elides conventional practices of making meaning – for example, the use of standard grammatical constructions. Rather, the paragramme constellates verbal entities or parts thereof in ways that redistribute linguistic combinations in ways that make up alternative signifying economies that are, for the most part, antisemantic. If Mac Low elides something, it is the function of standard grammatical constructions, something that turns against semantics: the function of words as transparently meaningful entities and the function of lines as complete thoughts. Here there is no narrative that exists in the wings waiting for someone to decipher it by means of a verbal game of hints and winks. But does this only obtain with poets like Mac Low? Couldn’t we read Edmund Spenser and John Donne paragrammatically as well? As it turns out, yes. But this would require something other than a literary historical approach that assumes all poetry is a translation of an a priori story into elliptical form, an encryption of ordinary language into poetic language.

Reading

Steve MacCaffery, North of Intention (2000)
Resemblance

As Fontanier noticed, poetry is largely the construction of resemblances, which accounts for the importance of figuration in poetry, but also relations of sound and sense. This section considers resemblance in terms of juxtaposition (adjacency), analogy (metaphysical conceit), allegoresis (allegory), emulation (sympathy), and imitation (mimesis). For a more in depth account of some of this, see Michel Foucault’s chapter “The Prose of the World” from The Order of Things. Foucault’s thesis is that in the later seventeenth century we can begin to see an “epistemic break” (or conceptual rupture) with Renaissance practices of signification that were analogy based, so that, for example, one shifts rather abruptly from a world in which everything is seen in hierarchical correspondence to a world in which one simply enumerates data statistically and then distributes it according to graphs whose purpose is to empirically measure and quantify the data. Whereas the Renaissance had a strong interest in qualitative relations among entities, which had moral and metaphysical significance, the Age of Reason had an overriding interest in quantitative relations among entities, which had statistical and empirical significance. The question that Foucault didn’t resolve is whether the arts can ever make that leap. Paul de Man’s influential paper, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” suggests not. However, this is also just plainly apparent from reading many twentieth century poets: T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Sylvia Plath, and John Ashbery, among them.

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition refers to how we make linguistic associations when poets simply put words, phrases, or sentences adjacent to one another. When Shakespeare juxtaposes swear and forswear – as in sonnet 152 – the result is a verbal matrix that serves as a sort of verbal engine for the poem as a whole. By juxtaposing these words, Shakespeare encourages the contamination of one by the other, which produces an overload of meanings.

As poetry became more compressed by modernist poets who had repudiated the rhetorical style of Victorian poetry, emphasis fell upon the juxtaposition of fragmentary motifs and images. Ezra Pound’s famous “In a Station of the Metro” is exemplary: it juxtaposes the image of faces in a crowd to petals on a wet, black bough. The mention of the petals on the bough is merely juxtaposed. Pound is not saying the petals are a metaphor for the faces. There’s no actual connection, just the association that we happen to make.

Robert Creeley’s “FIVE Eight Plus” (from the collection Windows (1987)) is composed of short juxtaposed bits that don’t make the sort of obvious association we saw in Pound. The following is just a short excerpt taken from the middle of the poem.

WINDOW
Up from reflective
table top’s glass
the other side of it.

AROUND
The pinwheel’s pink
plastic spinning
blade’s reversing.
Formalisms

EGO
I can
hear I can
see
.

DAYTIME
It’s got to be
lighter

No doubt, we can try to link the texts in small capital letters as if they were keys to some narrative progression, but this will be less successful than looking at the poem as a modular series of juxtapositions in which the sections relate out of sequence. One could relate WINDOW with DAYTIME, for example. In such a case, the reader is actually selecting what goes with what by putting the sections together in whatever way makes sense to him or her. This is reminiscent of aleatory music of the post 1945 period in which composers were writing bits of music that musicians could play in whatever order they wished. Although no two performances of the piece would be the same, in all likelihood, the work still had its own recognizable sound texture. Suddenly, order wasn’t the determining factor of what a piece sounded like. Creeley’s poem participates in this kind of aesthetic.

Analogy

Analogy is easily seen in the poetry of John Donne. In “The Relique,” Donne compares himself and his mistress to holy relics that have been dug up at some future time after their deaths.

Then, he that digges us up, will bring
Us, to the Bishop, and the King,
To make us Reliques; then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;

In this case the analogy is transformative in that it makes the beloved into Mary Magdalen and Donne into Christ (the one to whom “something else” is referring). Donne can make that association, because the lovers have not consummated their love sexually, only Platonically. For “Difference of sex no more we knew, / Than our guardian angels do.” In Donne, emulation is not sufficient, for he generally seeks a translation of one thing into another that is transformative. This occurs again, famously, in “The Flea” wherein Donne’s mistress is about to kill a flea in bed that has bitten both of them and therefore could be said to contain “three lives,” its own, Donne’s, and the mistress’s. “This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.” Here again the analogy has logical consequences that the poet extrapolates in order to amplify if not to exaggerate the transformative effect of the initial correspondence. Lastly, in Donne these correspondences are redemptive. The transformation into Mary Magdalen and Christ, as well as the transformation into the marriage temple would attest to this. But notice, too, the redemptiveness of analogy in “Air and Angels.”
Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
Before I knew thy face or name,
So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame
Angels affect us oft, and worshipped be.

What could be viewed as a sordid relation between anonymous lovers is redeemed by means of comparing the mistress to an angel. Again, the exaggerations and implausibility of these comparisons raise the suspicion that these analogies must be ironical or satirical and that therefore their redemptive effects are dubious, however tempting it might be to accept them at face value.

Allegory

The extension of analogy into an isomorphic set of correspondences that substitute for the literal sense is known as allegoresis, something that Donne is broaching in the poems above. Indeed, if one extended the analogies of the relic, the flea, and angels to any great extent, the poems would turn into full scale allegories. Typical of allegory is the thirteenth-century poem on the art of love entitled the *Romance of the Rose* (Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris), in which a lady, allegorically personified by a rose, is being courted by a lover. A young man initially follows a stream to a large walled in garden, and upon the walls he contemplates personifications of various abstractions: hate, felony, avarice, covetousness, envy, sadness, and poverty, among them. That these figures decorate the outside of what is, in fact, a garden of delight, speak to those personal attributes that one should consider antithetical to pleasure and that therefore should be banished. These are the attributes that no lover ought to possess. Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, similarly, uses personifications in order to represent psychological human attributes, though in many cases the relationship between the person and the attribute are not in a simple one to one correspondence. Red Crosse Knight is a complex character that is not simply reducible to a religious redeemer figure, though he is certainly that, as well. Una, who represents the true church, is again not simply a walking abstraction. She is developed to the point that she is not just a convenient allegorical device whose function is to make an abstraction more comprehensible in human terms. Whereas Spenser’s allegorical depictions are readily comprehensible within both the Christian and Romance traditions, William Blake’s *Jerusalem* is a complex allegory that rewrites and revises the Judaic-Christian tradition in ways that reflect Blake’s idiosyncratic personal revelations. In such a case, the allegorical transparency of various personifications is diminished and readers are required to figure out precisely what Blake must have had in mind, since the meanings aren’t to be found in the cultural tradition.

Allegoresis occurs in more modern poetry as well. In T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the medieval topos of the waste land functions as an analogue to the condition of Europe in the 1920s. At moments within the poem, Eliot is referencing *Perceval* by Chrétien de Troyes (twelfth century), therefore using its story as the allegorical analogue for the twentieth-century spiritual condition of Europeans. But also notice the recent poem *Lip Service* (2001) by the Language Poet Bruce Andrews, which is keyed to the cantos of Paradiso in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Dante writes the following near the end of canto 33:
As is the geometer who wholly applies himself to measure the circle, and finds not, in pondering, the principle of which he is in need, such was I at that new sight. I wished to see how the image conformed to the circle and how it has its place therein;

And Bruce Andrews nearing the end of Lip Service writes:

geometry at total, raptures diaphanous closeout diagram
generalizes fingers arraigned as chocolate,
    adorable base alias reality image refusal emboldens
fetus using your body without your consent —
    its sweet front lathed with
this is something else;¹¹

Whether or how Andrews’ text is allegory or even just allegoresis is probably a matter for some debate; however, the fact that Andrews used Dante’s poem as a structural and thematic source (as he has pointed out and as we can see from the references in both poems to geometry) leaves open the question of whether we shouldn’t at least try to make the connection and pose the possibility that allegory is active, though not in ways we’re used to seeing in most poetry. Indeed, that there is an allegorical aspect to Andrews’ poem is perhaps self-evident, but whether it abides by any of the usual rules of allegorical procedure is open for discussion. It’s possible that what we have in Andrews’ poem is simply a number of tangential resemblances that posit the effect of allegory without its actually taking place.

Emulation

We have already discussed sympathetic analogies. This is what Michel Foucault was thinking of in terms of emulatio, or what we can see in the sympathetic correspondences in Milton’s Paradise Lost. Note that Eve is in emulative correspondence with Satan. In other words, of all the creatures in Eden, she alone could be sympathetic to Satan’s condition when he was a revolting angel in heaven, given that just as Satan felt secondary to the Son, Eve feels secondary to Adam, something that the moment she senses it, irritates her. Now, this does not mean that Eve is analogous to Satan, which is Milton’s subtle point in the parts of Paradise Lost leading up to the fall in Book 9. For if she were, she would have been created evil, which clearly wouldn’t make sense in the Pauline tradition within which Milton is working.

Sympathetic emulation occurs, quite noticeably, throughout much of William Wordsworth’s poetry. In “The Ruined Cottage” (1780), an old man whom Wordsworth, speaking of the poem, once identified as a peddler, has been witness to the economic ruin of a family on account of economic changes within England. The old man tells the poet,

Sympathies there are
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,
That steal upon the meditative mind
And grow with thought. Beside yon spring I stood
and eyed its waters till we seemed to feel
One sadness, they and I.

(ll. 79–85)
Sympathy in this case concerns the man’s capacity to feel what the family feels by way of experiencing the waters of the spring that to him are in tune or sympathy with his thoughts. “They and I” is somewhat ambivalent, referring at once to the family but also to the waters (nature) and the man. Wordsworth himself said that had he not been educated he could imagine himself very much to be someone like the old man who relates the story of the ruined cottage.

In “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” emulation is very pronounced in terms of the poet’s relation to his sister Dorothy, whose journals are so central to an understanding of this poem’s intensity, given that it is through her (and her writings) that the poet is shown once more how to experience rapture in the presence of nature, an experience the poet can not have without Dorothy’s example as a being-in-nature who experiences its sublimity in the smallest details of vegetative life. In Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journals* we can read: “I never saw daffodils so beautiful they grew among the mossy stones about & about them, some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness & the rest tossed & reeled & danced & seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the lake, they looked so gay ever glancing ever changing.” In such cases, consciousness is animated by nature’s emulation of what we might mistakenly assume to be exclusively human.

A final example of emulation is the close of Robert Lowell’s “Skunk Hour” (1959) when the poet notices a mother skunk and her kittens late at night rummaging through the garbage out in back of his house. What should be a low point for him in terms of the depression he feels and the situation he is in reveals a ray of hope in terms of something that stops quite short of analogy whereby the poet would be compared to being a skunk pure and simple. Rather, in stopping short of metaphor, Lowell emphasizes how the determined behavior of the skunk emulates something in the poet’s character that will save him: that he will not be scared off.

**Imitation**

Consider Ezra Pound’s poem about the Paris Metro mentioned above. In that poem the petals on a wet black bough do and don’t actually imitate (resemble) the crowd that one sees entering and exiting the metro. What about “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Shakespeare’s proposition in Sonnet 18 is that of a conceit that equates a period in a man’s lifecycle to a season, which can be done since the macrocosm of a human life is believed commonly in Shakespeare’s day to be equivalent to the microcosm of a year with its four seasons. But is the resemblance contrived? What about the opening stanza to “Lake Bud” by Ishmael Reed? Its subject is the great jazz pianist Bud Powell.

Lake Merritt is Bud Powell’s piano  
The sun tingles its waters  
Snuff-jawed pelicans descend tumbling over each other like  
Bud’s hand playing Tea For Two or Two For Tea

Here the lake resembles the piano just as the pelicans resemble the hands: Tea for Two = Two for Tea. Of course, we have to perceive the imitative resemblance, which requires knowledge of what Powell’s piano playing sounds like.
Imitation can also be structural, and here we should be reminded of Milton’s mirror poems “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” that are imitative in terms of structure as well as content. “L’Allegro” (the happy life) is the inverse of “Il Penseroso” (the melancholic life) in terms of content, but both are structurally symmetrical to a high degree. Structural imitation occurs, as well, in Dante and in Spenser. In recent examples of poetry, see work by Leslie Scalapino, whose first collection, Concerning How Exaggerated Music Is, demonstrates a high degree of structural imitation in the form of recursivity. This is a technique she has refined over some four decades to stunning effect.14

Reading

Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (1971)

Objective Correlative

T.S. Eliot, who was a critic as well as a poet, coined the term objective correlative, by which he meant an object, situation, or event (in the singular or plural) that functions as an adequate correlative to the poet’s emotions. A very good example is Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” (1851) in which the beach at Dover is a concretely experienced place that has emotional correlatives. As a setting, Dover Beach has a metonymical relation to the much bigger place that is England, if not, Europe. Dover Beach is the stage, as it were, for setting up an experiential analogue to what it feels like to be a European living in a time of vulgar empirical demystification and social leveling. The poem famously ends with a premonition of ignorant armies clashing in the night. What makes the poem so successful is that the correlative of the beach to the feelings of the poet and his concerns is not just apt, but revelatory, given our historical hindsight. Indeed, many poets since have repeated this sort of Victorian poem, among them, T.S. Eliot, whose The Waste Land, however more fragmented in terms of setting, still employs the objective correlative of the waste land metaphor to approximate the spiritual condition and feeling of the poet. For a poem to be successful, according to Eliot, the objectification of the emotions has to be convincing; that is, it has to convey the inner state of the poet’s feelings and, one might suppose, his or her psychology.

Apparently, Eliot imagined the correlative must be sincere, plausible, realistic, and serious in intent. But is William Wordsworth’s objective correlative of the cloud plausible, realistic, and serious in “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”? What about Emily Dickinson’s “I felt a funeral in my brain”? Is John Ashbery’s objective correlative sincere, let alone, plausible, realistic, and serious in “Caesura” (“Job sat in a corner of the dump eating asparagus …” from Shadow Train)? Indeed, Ashbery is quite a lesson in how far a poet can get in terms of mocking the objective correlative, but, Eliot might have countered, that is the objective correlative (the situation) for postmodern subjects.

The funny thing is, despite all the objections one could raise about what precisely makes up a successful objective correlative, we all know a bad objective correlative when we see or hear one. For example, consider the Country-Western lyric, “I flushed you from the toilet of my heart.” That’s not viable, is it? And yet, someone could argue that if the vulgarity of the correlative is so extremely insensitive that it ironically undermines the
sentiments regarding hurt feelings, we’ve in fact found a quite good correlative with 
respect to how people actually respond to betrayal: as hurt and angry; sensitive and 
insensitive.

What Eliot calls the objective correlative is, from another perspective, the controlling 
metaphor that captures the social subject’s actual relation at a point in historical time to the world. Of course, the identity of this social subject will be defined in terms of gender, class, ethnicity (possibly), race (possibly), and nationality (almost certainly). Yet, if this social subject lacks a certain generality or averageness, the objectivity of the correlative, as one that a wide diversity of readers could identify with, collapses in on itself. Sylvia Plath, for example, is a social subject who was white, female, well educated, and a poet who was part of the American “poetry scene” of the 1950s and 1960s. Many thousands of readers can and do identify with her. Even those of us who aren’t female can cross the bridge whereby her correlatives make sense as an experience we can imagine holding in common, for without that, the poetry would be merely sectarian.

As to the reference above to an “actual relation” to the world, it is important to point out that what Georg Lukács referred to as the requirement for realism in literature applies to poetry as well as to fiction – at least, in Eliot’s context. The objective correlative needs to be a controlling metaphor that discloses the social subject’s actual relation to history; otherwise, nothing that is said will have anything but subjective significance. When W.B. Yeats spoke in his poetry of the center not holding anymore, he perceived something quite major about what had changed with respect to people’s actual historical circumstance. Eliot’s waste land metaphor is a similar case in point. Eliot’s poem isn’t saying that the poet feels as if he’s living in a waste land; it is making the point that empirically Europeans had entered an age in which culture had turned into a waste land, because the culture was being turned into nothing more than the standard of living. In other words, culture is what people buy at the department store. There is nothing else, anymore. If this wasn’t absolutely true in the 1920s, the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, et al.) was predicting it would come to pass in the period following the Second World War, which has largely happened, in fact.

Have artists found good objective correlatives as good as the waste land metaphor in the second half of the twentieth century? As noted, Ashbery makes fun of this type of thinking, and he is not alone. There appears to be a widespread impression today that the world is so complex and logically impenetrable that it would be foolish to imagine an artist could sort it out by finding just the right correlative, the way Arnold did back in the 1850s, or, for that matter, the way Pablo Picasso did in the painting Guernica in 1939. But is this skepticism merely an excuse for not having managed to sort something out or not? Lukács thought that the worth of a literary writer was to be measured in terms of the extent to which he or she could understand society and history as a coherent totality and the special conditions that therefore pertained to the social subject as a historical personage. Whereas many contemporary writers may have abandoned this expectation, it turns out that the general public has not.

Reading

T.S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood (1920)
Language Poetry

Language Poetry is an avant garde movement of the second half of the twentieth century that has had roots in the high modernist writing of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Paul Zukofsky, and George Oppen, though a major influence was certainly Jackson Mac Low whose own work was indebted to the sort of procedural compositional practices initiated by the composer John Cage in the 1940s and 1950s. Cage’s work crossed boundaries between music, writing, painting, and what later came to be known as performance art. Many of his pieces are essentially directions of a rather general sort that a performer is being asked to realize with the aid of a page of instructions.

Mac Low often included rather detailed and lengthy rules of composition, to which he generally adhered. “A Note on the PFR‐3 poems” of 1938–1985 speaks of the use of a computer program to generate the poetry. An excerpt follows in which Mac Low addresses work he did at Information International, Inc., in Los Angeles in 1969 (!) “with the aid of their PFR‐3, a programmable film reader connected to a DEC‐PDP‐9 computer”:

Their [computer] program allowed me to enter as “data” a list of “messages”: originally up to 100 single lines, each comprising at most 48 characters and/or spaces. Later longer messages, though fewer at most, and ones having two or more lines, were possible. From any list the program randomly selected and permuted series of “message members” (characters, words, or strings of linked words, e.g., sentences, separated in the message by spaces) and displayed them on a monitor. When a lever on the control board was pushed, every tenth line appearing on the screen was printed out …

The poem itself has statements that read out as follows:

FURIOUSLY IDEAS COLORLESS SLEEPING GREEN
DEMANDING
FREEING BREASTS ROUNDED DEEPBOSOMED
CRUNCHING ABSENTMINDED PLASTIC
TASTY GRANDMOTHERS
ARE
HONEYMAKING ARE EUCALYPTUS DRAWING BEES

Readers unfamiliar with this sort of poetry immediately complain that “it makes no sense.” But in fact the lines are filled with suggestive words and odd juxtapositions that give rise to fantasies that pull together the disconnected bits by jumping over their asyn- tacticality. “HONEYMAKING … ARE EUCALYPTUS … DRAWING BEES” is really just very elliptical. And “FREEING BREASTS ROUNDED DEEPBOSOMED” isn’t at all hard to figure out. If “PLASTIC” is supposed to go together with “TASTY GRANDMOTHERS,” it’s a rather comical phrase. Mac Low himself argued that one had to adopt something akin to the Zen Buddhist conception of “no mind” when reading this kind of poetry. That is, one perceives each linguistic event as elements in themselves that arise and pass away without being gathered up into overarching meanings (sayings, propositions, arguments, stories).

When Language Poetry emerged, it constellated a number of significant talents: Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, Barrett Watten, Bruce Andrews, Clark Coolidge, Michael Davidson, Bob Perelman, Michael Palmer, Ray DiPalma, Steve Benson, Robert Grenier,
Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Susan Howe, Carla Harryman, Rae Armantrout, and Hannah Wiener, just to name the more prominent figures. In the seminal early anthology edited by Silliman, *In the American Tree*, Mac Low questioned whether Language Poetry is any more language centered than any other literature, contrary to what some were proposing. He admitted that many of the writers depart from normal syntax, that “the subject matter shifts rapidly,” and that indeterminacy and a de-emphasis upon the ego is noticeable. “Few of these works tell a connected story or support an explicit thesis,” and there is “lack of narration or exposition.” Moreover, Mac Low wondered, “Can these works be seen as imitations in *any* sense of the term?” He answers,

> Seemingly no. Often one word, phrase, or sentence seems to follow another with little regard for the recognized imports of these signs and strings. Their concatenation seems governed not by their referents, or by relations among them, but by features and relations intrinsic to them as language objects. Indeed, some practitioners … call such works “non-referential,” and one of them has mounted a brilliant seemingly Marxist, attack on reference as a kind of fetishism contributing to alienation. … [But] what could be more of a fetish or more alienated than slices of language stripped of reference? […] Attention seems centered on linguistic details and the relations among *them*, rather than on what they might “point to.”

Mac Low specified, quite rightly, that referentiality was very much a part of Language Poetry, but that it was structured in such a way that instead of communicating itself as exposition, argument, or narration, the perceiver is required to construct larger wholes semiconsciously. “The mind moves beyond the language elements themselves, impelled by a complex mélange of denotations and connotations and of remembered language experiences and life experiences.” In that sense Mac Low said such poetry was actually “perceiver-centered” as opposed to “language centered.”

Charles Bernstein and Steve MacCaffery have both been quite forceful on the point that Language Poetry should be thought of as superseding what they call Voice Poetry or, alternatively, Official Verse Culture, by which they mean the kind of poetry taught in Masters of Fine Arts Programs in the United States. Essentially, the model for this poetry is Plath’s “Ariel,” which is certainly a great poem. But the problem is that Plath perfected this sort of poetry and that already in the 1970s it was time to move on. An academy with poetry writing programs filled with students all trying to emote in poems that follow in the wake of Sylvia Plath or Robert Lowell doesn’t quite make sense some 50 years after these figures passed away. Language Poetry, by contrast, is not anachronistic aesthetically and attempts to innovate with language in quite radical ways that take it deep into realms of linguistic abstraction that aren’t imaginable within Official Verse Culture. But Language Poetry isn’t what lyric poets would consider expressive—at least not in the personal or psychological sense, if only because such poetry doesn’t believe in the authority of the self as a psychological being whose purpose or function is to express feelings. In other words, there is the concern that for the Language Poets there can be no objective correlative other than the various discourses in collision out there in the world. But is this sort of dialogism a sufficient condition for the writing of poetry?

A younger generation of poets who have brought lyric and language poetry together in interesting ways appear to have decided this issue for themselves insofar as they hold the possibility for an objective correlative open. A very strong example of this approach can be seen in Laura Mullen’s prose poem “Torch Song (Prose Is a Prose Is a Prose)” which brings diverse discursive formations together around one of those outrageously “senseless” crimes all too typical in America.
Re:Vision: As if made for a made-for-TV-movie the already tired scene played over and over: “She was so upset,” etc. (Question: How upset do you need to be to burn 137,000 acres?) The print is grainy. Did you see her, “in your mind’s eye,” with matches, crying so her hand shook too much to strike a light at first? Or do you picture her standing there, resolute, raising a lighter aloft like a concert-goer during the encore? “The only thing that is different from the one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything,” Gertrude Stein repeats (“Composition is Explanation”). The Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky dies in exile, his countrymen having refused his vision, even now some people say of his movies that there’s not enough story there. In The Mirror a drenched woman appears in the charred room of a gone house, a dream or memory, haunting the narrator. Homage: as if the word had a home in it. All the elements the filmmaker loved and lovingly reassembled are here: the woman, the forest, the tears … a letter on fire.19

Mullen’s poem is largely about “The Hayman Fire” that occurred in Colorado in the summer of 2002. The biggest fire that Colorado had ever seen, it was started by Terry Barton, a federal forestry officer who said that she was trying to burn a letter by her estranged husband. Barton was indicted on four counts of arson. Barton’s anger is the objective correlative that Mullen herself is setting alight in her poem, as the last sentence in the quotation demonstrates. The conflagration was a horrible tragedy for the state of Colorado, but it is also the objective correlative of the woman’s hurt and all the rage that women feel collectively in such situations. The act of burning some 137,000 acres is also one in which gross negligence, stupidity, and emotional overload meet as a response to the life world that, however mad, makes a certain sense as the only adequate response to it, given how anonymous, unfair, and uncaring that world is and how outraged and frustrated individuals feel as subjects who aren’t responded to and don’t see any other alternative than an apocalyptic response (suicide after murdering the whole family, campus rampages and massacres, the setting of massive forest fires). Mullen’s poetry is very much mediated by various discourses (media, academic, descriptive, lyrical) but keeps its distance from the kind of personalism and soul searching typical of Sylvia Plath, Denise Levertov, John Berryman, and their many imitators. Quite noticeably, Mullen doesn’t try to psychoanalyze or attempt to make sense of the absurdity of the forest ranger’s act. She respects the absurdity of the act and the events that led up to it even while offering decontextualized statements on other matters that do and don’t intersect with the life of Terry Barton, something that has the effect of challenging our ideas of what is and isn’t normal. “That’s the way fire does, it don’t have no rules to it. — Anonymous Firefighter, Summer 2002.”

Reading

Charles Bernstein, A Poetics (1992)
Barrett Watten, Total Syntax (1984)

The New Sentence

The new sentence was advanced by the Language Poetry Movement and refers to decontextualized prose whose syntax is used as if it were prosody. Unlike the sentence you are reading right now, the new sentence has no specific referential focus. Ron Silliman provides a useful example.
He lived here, under the elm trees
versus
He lived here, under the assumptions.

Silliman points out that in the new sentence the sentence doesn’t resolve the syntax. Silliman’s list of descriptors for the new sentence reads as follows:

(i) The paragraph organizes the sentences.
(ii) The paragraph is a unity of quantity, not logic or argument.
(iii) Sentence length is a unit of measure.
(iv) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity.
(v) Syllogistic movement is (a) limited; (b) controlled.
(vi) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences.
(vii) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work.
(viii) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader’s attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below.20

Apparently, in poetry that employs new sentences, the paragraph is an arbitrary container of a number of sentences that are to be seen as just so many units in the aggregate. Therefore, the paragraph is just a unit of measure and has no function as a structure within which sentences are subordinated logically. By altering a sentence structure by torque, Silliman means that it is changed by the rearrangement/substitution of elements that break with grammatical expectations and rules. Carla Harryman’s sentence, “The back of the hand resting on the pillow was not wasted” is a new sentence because the noun “hand” cannot logically take “wasted” as a verbal descriptor, whereas “washed” or “wished for” would have been all right. By syllogistic movement, Silliman means logic in terms of its pertaining to the unit of the sentence itself. The primary logic doesn’t overrun the sentence in order to unify a group of sentences, which focuses attention upon words (the morpheme) or small groups of them. There can be a secondary logic that works at the paragraph level or level of the whole, however. Silliman’s example of a group of new sentences comes from Harryman’s “For She”:

The back of the hand resting on the pillow was not wasted. We couldn’t hear each other speak. The puddle in the bathroom, the sassy one. There were many years between us. I started the stranger into facing up to Maxine, who had come out of the forest wet from bad nights. I came from an odd bed, a vermillion riot attracted to loud dogs.

In this example, the pronouns and deictic markers (there, on, of) help establish a sense of normalcy against which the so-called torquing (or deformations) take place. A more traditional term for this kind of writing is *parataxis*, unsubordinated prose. To this, the new sentence is adding the grammatical and idiomatic deformation of typical language use.21

Reading

Formalisms

Sound Poetry/Concrete Poetry

Both concrete and sound poetry have their inceptions as self-conscious artistic practices in Dada and allied movements within the European avant garde of the early twentieth century. If in the case of concrete poetry the visual dimension of the poem strives to achieve material autonomy, the same can be said for sound in sound poetry. Whereas most of the poetry one is likely to study can be considered a balance between sound patterning, verbal design, and denotation, in both concrete and sound poetry there is a tendency to alter the balance in a way that denotation loses its centrality as “the sense” beneath which everything else is to be subordinated. “Thus Adam to himself lamented loud” (Paradise Lost, 10.845) is visually shaped in such a way that “loud” receives end placement. We can also see the two l’s in “lamented loud,” which visually reinforces the stresses that the beginnings of these words will receive. But all of this works in the service of the denotation, as does the sound, which puts stress on “loud,” as if to make that word imitate its sense. Sonically, “loud” is loud. Here, of course, we’re examining a very commonplace example of what New Critics called “sound and sense,” the expectation that the sound will imitate the sense. In sound poetry, the sonic aspect of the poetry becomes so autonomous that it discards denotation altogether, while retaining the capacity to connote in its absence.

For most readers, Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” would be the poem that exemplifies the borderline between where sound and sense go their own ways. We can imagine what a Bandersnatch is, but there’s really no telling if we’d be right. Of course, Carroll allows us to “imagine” by means of borrowing from what we know, as if we were trying to find cognates among two different languages. “Frumious” sounds hectoring, probably because we can sense the word “furious” in it. “Jabberwock” is quite recognizable as a compound word with “wock” being a cognate for “walk.” But what about “talk”? “Jabber” itself is ambiguous because it refers to both jabbering (as in, jabbering and walking) and jabbing, which in the context of the poem appears the more likely meaning. The brilliance of this poem is how it keeps us betwixt and between language options, hence refusing us a definitive translation.

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!

Steve McCaffery tells us that the sound poem came in various genres back in the days of Zurich-style Dada in 1916. Chief among them was the “simultaneous poem” and the “poem without words.” The simultaneous poem was invented by Henri Barzun and Fernand Divoire and in it one could expect a sonic collage made up of “sound, text, discrepant noises, whistles, cries, and drums.” This contrasts with Hugo Ball, a major figure in Dada, who restricted himself to poems without words. Ball explained:

I have invented a new genre of poems, “Verse ohne Worte” [poems without words] or Lautgedichte [sound poems], in which the balance of the vowels is weighted and distributed solely according to the values of the beginning sequence.

Ball also wrote that
In these phonetic poems we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge. We must give up writing second-hand: that is, accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own use.

Such poetry was intended to defamiliarize and undermine ordinary language use and to reintroduce sense as something we intuit from hearing sounds whose ostensive meanings aren’t given. The sound poem, therefore, is very much like a foreign language whose sense we grasp through its sounds, even though we would be at a loss if someone actually required us to denote what was being communicated. Of course, onomatopoeia plays an important role in sound poetry to the extent that sounds are physical presences (in the form of vibrations) which prompt various associations: linguistic, psychological, etc.

Well known, too, is work by poets such as the Russian futurist Velimir Khlebnikov who is famously associated with the term zaum, a neologism in Russian that denotes transrationality. Russian futurism, much like Dadaism and Surrealism in Western Europe, had one thing in common, namely, the expectation that certain non-rational uses of language could trigger imaginative experiences that would break with conformist (that is, ideologically determined) ways of perceiving the world. Zaum enabled the individual to know that everyday consciousness must necessarily be a sort of false consciousness that represses creativity and the capacity to think differently than one’s neighbor. Klebnikov understood sound as material, hence arguing for sound poetry as a materialist approach to art that went beyond the bourgeois understanding of the sign in terms of a property relation in which the sign is in possession of its referent. In the context of Ferdinand de Saussure, one is reminded of that subtle interrelation between sound and thought before a moment when they are separated, the one brushing against the other at a moment when they are still fused. “Zangezi” (1923) was a theatre piece by Klebnikov staged by Vladimir Tatlin and included various invented poetic languages related to birds and gods. And here, of course, one sees how natural it was for sound poetry to be translated into performance art.

Unquestionably the most celebrated sound poem per se is Kurt Schwitters’ Ursonate (1922–1932), of which there is a re-engineered recording available on compact disk. “Ursonate” (Primeval Sonata) is actually not as primeval as one might think. One can sense musical sonata allegro form in the piece; in fact, it’s even written in four movements, some of which are paced like movements in a classical sonata. Moreover, the piece is as much sung as it is spoken. It makes use of pitch as well as rhythmic repetitions, which establish cadence and momentum. If “Ursonate” suggests some sort of primeval European language, it is, in fact, modeled upon Germanic languages that would include German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian. German and Swedish seem particularly pronounced, given Schwitters’ rather frequent use of the umlaut: rinnzkrrmiüüüü. Also pay attention to the rolled r and the use of the pf which is a characteristic of German pronunciation.
Although one might suppose the poem to be nonsense verse, there are familiar words that pop up every now and then. “Rum,” in German, could mean the liquor we know as rum, or could be associated with “herum,” the adverb for “around.” In this sense, “Ursonate” often communicates like some earlier form of a language we already know and think we can therefore decipher. The use of pitch, speed, repetition, reprise, cadence, and phonemic clusters generally associated with German, give “Ursonate” a highly crafted and purposeful sense that its sounds both advance and occlude in ways that are tantalizing for the hearer who can’t be sure whether he or she is listening to music or to language. Because “Ursonate” is a work of powerful expression in the absence of denotation, it has interested recent performance artists, who see it as foundational for work in which sound and sense are to be reconceptualized in aesthetic terms.

If sound poetry departs from usual expectations wherein sound and sense are brought into relation, concrete poetry departs from usual expectations wherein sight and sense are related. The following is a concrete poem modeled by myself on a work made by Francis Picabia, a visual artist of enormous originality who belonged to the European avant garde.

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-__  __  __
__  __
__  __
__  __  __
__  __
-__  __  __
__  __
-__  __  __
-__  __
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**Figure 1** Concrete Poem.

The point of such an exercise in Dadaism is to show how much poetic information or stimulus we get in a purely visual form even before we begin reading a word of poetry. Even without seeing a single word, but merely lines in their stead, regular readers of poetry will probably sense a signifying effect, because of the many poems that they have read whose powerful meanings are conveyed in precisely such visual forms. In other words, this sort of poem reveals just how behaviorally conditioned we are in terms of pattern stimulation. Notice that here too verbal denotation has been discarded. The design, however, does explicitly refer to the typographical shape of typical poetry.
And the lines also have connotative significance. The longer ones connote nouns, the shorter ones articles, conjunctions, and the like.

In fact, concrete poetry precedes the twentieth century. In a poem like George Herbert’s “Easter Wings,” the stanzas are put in the shape of angel’s wings. The 1633 edition of the poem situates each wing (each comprises one of the two stanzas of the poem) so that we’re required to read from top to bottom, or to turn the book sideways. We can see that the outer edges of the wings are longer, much as we would imagine angels’ wings to be, and it is clear, as well, that the visual element of the poem relates to mention of the lark. The first and last lines are the strongest, rhetorically, and Herbert is playing with amplification (the outer edges of the wings) and diminution (the place where the wings attach). He is also invoking the opposition of flying and falling. In fact, the second stanza (not reproduced) will indicate that the second pair of wings are probably those of the poet who wants to attach his wings to that of the angel. Since each pair of wings gets its own facing page in the 1633 edition, the book’s binding would represent this suturing of the poet to the angel.

Also well known for their visual appeal are Guillaume Apollinaire’s calligrammes from the early part of the twentieth century. These are pictures drawn in outlines that are made up of words. Perhaps the most successful of these is “Heart Crown and Mirror.” The mirror is a large oval outline composed of words that make up a circular sentence in which the end leads right back into its supposed beginning. As one reads this sentence the relation of its parts changes as one goes round the oval. Inside the space that is supposed to be the mirror surface we can read the name Guillaume Apollinaire. In this and other calligrammes, the figure appears to have the function of destroying linearity, because the figure’s purpose is more allied to figuration (representing an object or objects) than to organizing the words into well formed propositions. And yet, the place of the words in terms of the figural pattern isn’t arbitrary either, and tends to have optical significance in relation to where other words are placed.

Significant instances of concrete poetry are to be found in Charles Olson’s *The Maximus Poems* and various books of poetry by Susan Howe, Hannah Wiener, and Douglas Messerli. Indeed, the moment poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé began experimenting with typefaces, font sizes, and spacing of words on the page, concrete poetry

*Figure 2* George Herbert, from “Easter Wings” (1633).

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Till he became most poore:
... rise
As larks, harmoniously, and sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.
had been broached as an important dimension of new developments in the art of writing poetry. Certainly, what separates modern poetry (and its legacies) from earlier poetries of the past has been the considerable amount of attention paid to typographical layout and page design. Also of importance is the way in which page design has led to an interest in making artists’ books in which the difference between poetry and visual art is difficult to separate out. Tom Phillips’ *A Humument* (the entire book is accessible on the Internet) is a famous example in which each page of a novel has been drawn and colored over exposing only certain of the original words that when blocked out in this way read like poetry. Leslie Scalapino’s *The Tango* is an important poetic collaboration with artist Marina Adams in which the final product is an artist’s book in which what happens on the page visually is as important as what happens verbally.24

**Reading**


**Prosody**

In poetry there is a close relation between line, syntax, diction, and rhythm. Notice how Milton, for example, uses an iambic pattern to restabilize a passage in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost* in which Satan is being described as holding a shield; it’s a parody of the shield of Achilles in Homer’s *The Iliad* on which there is a complex design. The Tuscan artist Milton references is Galileo.

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the broad circumference
Hung on his shoulders like the Moon, whose Orb
/ / / / / / / / / / / / /
through Optic Glass the Tuscan Artist views
At ev’ning from the top of Fesole
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The regular iambic feet begin already at the end of the second line above with “whose Orb.” Notice that this is enjambed with the following line, that is, run together as if there were no break. Also notice how Milton stitches the diction together by repeating vowels. The “O’s” are quite dominant, but the “U’s” have their effect as well. What makes passages like this so interesting is how Milton both regulates and deregulates relations between rhythm, syntax, and line, such that one is moving between the effects of prose and poetry. “The broad circumference hung on his shoulders” is really a prose line. “Whose Orb through Optic Glass the Tuscan Artist views” is obviously iambic poetry (the repetition of two beats, the first short, the second long). Rhythmically, the iambic feet work to *slow down* the pace of the passage as well as to stabilize the rhythm so that there will be the possibility of counterpoint between regular/irregular. The enjambment, moreover, skews the balance in such a way that Satan’s wearing the moon as a shield is imitated in terms of its lopsidedness. One suspects the passage is mimicking Satan’s attempt to walk with this enormously heavy shield, a walking that is off balance but also in balance at certain moments. It is in passages like this that one can see enormously subtle relations between sound and sense (which in this case is quite visual).
Everyone has been taught the “feet”: iambic (short-long), trochaic (long short), dactylic (long short short,) and anapestic (short-long long). But what is usually not taught in the lower schools, or even in university, is how the meter comes into conflict with main line stresses. When we read, we tend to stress the words whose meanings are important to the sense of the line, but these stresses may well conflict with the stresses hammered out by the meter, so that there is a counterpoint between how we read the line for sense and what the meter of the line itself is doing. Examples abound, but consider Ashbery’s line from “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape,"

/ / / / / / / /
Be of no help to you. Good-bye…

The iambic pattern appears above the line and the main-line stresses are shown in terms of the underlined words. Now it has to be said that how one distributes these main-line stresses varies in terms of how we ourselves read. You may stress something differently than I would, which is what makes this sort of analysis a bit idiosyncratic. That aside, we can see that in the line above the main-line stresses actually predominate, though the iambic rhythm runs along like a sort of musical beat in the background.

For a slightly more complex example, notice Christina Rossetti’s “I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple tree” which is iambic throughout. Notice, however, that the alliteration of “plucked pink” and the elongation of “my” into “mine” works against the iambic meter. In fact, the trade off between the “p’s” and the “b” of “blossoms” (the phonemes are in binary opposition, but still labial) carries through an emphasis on the mouth, as if Rossetti was thinking of some relationship between herself and Eve with respect to tasting apples. The poem is entitled “An Apple-Gathering.” Throughout, Rossetti pairs words in imitation of the speaker’s relation to her beloved: “Lilian and Lilas smiled in trudging by”; “Ah, Willie, Willie, was my love less worth”; “Laughing and listening in this very lane.” Added to this is the fact that readers will impose main-line stresses, as well, that will serve to help imitate the speaker’s discourse in terms of an ordinary type of speaking. In other words, the main-line stresses work to naturalize or normalize the artificiality of the poem’s rhythm and its alliterative pairings and reaffirmations. “I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple tree.” No doubt, some would emphasize “blossoms” too since grammatically it’s the direct object. Yet, however we mark this line, the point is that main-line stresses are going to override the rhythm and even the alliteration, but that this isn’t in any way absolute, as the rhythm and alliteration are in counterpoint and exerting their own influence upon the overall aural texture of the lines.

To see a rather more complex example in the case of a contemporary work, here is a stanza by the British poet John Wilkinson.

I was. But she grinds in her condyl
all that’s known by heart
cloaks the tongue your counter-
poise would furl back. She refers
foreign calls to her program

This, at least, is how I read these lines in terms of the main-line stresses that have been underlined. Notice that “But she grinds in her condyl” (condyl is a medical term for a bone protrusion; perhaps a bone is out of joint here) is composed of two anapests and
that these fall in line with the main-line stresses. That second line is more iambic (“that’s known, by heart” is two iambics). But in reading it, the line seems to have but one major stress – at the end. The enjambment with the next line breaks the rhythm up quite perceptibly. “Heart/cloaks” is spondaic (two stresses together). But notice, isn’t that enjambment really a caesura (a break)? Alternatively, couldn’t it be either? There’s some imitation of stress between “heart/cloaks” and “furl back.” And “refers” imitates somewhat the ambiguity of the line break between “heart” and “cloaks.” We could read it as an enjambment and probably should, but I’m not convinced there isn’t the possibility of a caesura here. Given how the stanza reads in terms of its meaning, we needn’t be convinced necessarily that “refers” has to carry over to “foreign calls.” And yet the main-line stresses would suggest otherwise.

What we have in this stanza is a complex tapestry of inwoven metrical bits that mirror one another: iambs, anapests, spondees. We also have line breaks that manage to ambigu ate the enjambment/caesura distinction, as well as metrical line stresses that mark out the places where meaning would appear to be most significant. Perhaps the reader has noticed that in this poem we’re not so far from the world of Ron Silliman’s concept of the new sentence in which a complete thought never achieves the kind of referential resolution (semantic or logical) that enables us to correlate the meanings onto something altogether recognizable within the life world. And yet the stanza is held together by the commonplace dominance of a subject (in this case, “she”) that works to normalize grammatical expectations and to organize how words ought to relate, given ordinary language practices. However, this isn’t always strong enough to hold a mimetic sound and sense relation together, given that in spots the details conflict with the givens of the life world that we know. And yet, “She refers/foreign calls to her program” is a well formed sentence, and not a new sentence. This speaks to the sense one may get in such poetry that the words slip into and out of mimetic correspondence so that one is in a kind of borderland region between proper and new sentences. Maybe a better way to put this would be to say that we’re in a liminal zone between mimesis proper and interlingual imitation. Ultimately, this takes us back into the work of Gertrude Stein in which a delicate balance exists between overt referentiality and the sort of inter-lingual wordplay that threatens to annihilate reference, not imitate it. Stein:

Checking an emigration, checking it by smiling and certainly by the same satisfactory stretch of hands that have more use for it than nothing, and mildly not mildly a correction, not mildly even a circumstance and a sweetness and a serenity.26

Reading

Derek Attridge, Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction (1995)

Notes

1 See the quotation from Nietzsche’s “Of Truth and Lying in a Non Moral Sense” in 1.2 for an alternative understanding of figuration. Jacques Derrida’s “White Mythology,” in Margins of Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), develops this alternative view at length.
3 Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), p. 64. For those who read French, this is the most complete book on literary figures one is likely to encounter. There is no comparable text in English.


16 Mac Low (2008), p. 143.


19 Laura Mullen, “Torch Song (Prose is a Prose is a Prose),” in *Civil Disobedience* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2004), pp. 442–3.


23 Quoted in Steve McCaffery, pp. 120–1.


Chapter 8

Theory in Practice

“Look, Her Lips”: Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in King Lear

Michael Holahan

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I

Slack and sleeping senses must be addressed with thunder and heavenly fireworks. But the voice of beauty speaks gently: it creeps only into the most awakened souls.¹

Twentieth-century theorists have been severe with the notion of literary character. It does not speak strongly to post-Victorian souls— to this century’s skepticism toward moral and mimetic constructions. The New Criticism set character aside for finer patterns of imagery and wit or paradoxical structures of ironical tone. Myth criticism subsumed it in the more powerful archetype. Deconstruction, new historicism, and the related specialties of poststructural critique have viewed an obviously figurative construct with alert suspicion. It has seemed a rallying point for essentialist notions of the self, reinforcing a superficial moralism and commonsense psychology while all along remaining just rhetoric: ethos and pathos meeting in prosopographia. Nevertheless, the artifice of character is hardly a postmodern discovery.² In drama the issue is moot: there, within a constructed environment, the rhetoric of character is allowed to take on guises of truth because spectators can


Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in King Lear

willingly – and consciously – suspend degrees of disbelief. It needs to be added that suspending disbelief is not the same thing as becoming credulous.

Although no more than a literary device, composed of rhetorical elements, character has shown such persistence in literary and critical practice that it may well outlast theories that diagnose its death. The idea that literary character might remain one of the textual pleasures we seek out may be tested in the relentless assault on character we find in King Lear, which goes beyond character but uses the device itself to do so. Indeed, the play constitutes itself by dramatizing meanings and values that arise from various nodal locations set between literary devices of character. The play's disguising, for example, seems to flaunt such knotted intervals by calling attention to character put on, then off (3.1.20). “Poor Turlgod! poor Tom! / That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.20–21). Another example, and one central to my purpose of reconfiguring character here, involves the voicing-over of one character upon another: a juxtaposition and joining of two distinct figures – one with “something yet” in speech, the other with “no breath at all” (5.3.306). The interval comes down to this shifting, barely perceptible space between speech and silence, between one voice and an invoked voice no longer there. Topoi of speech, voice, and breath disclose an uncertain space between characters and suggest some moral arguments of acknowledgment that arise within it. These arguments extend from acknowledgment by a dramatic character to the particular kinds of acknowledgment offered in literary response.

This essay presents an interpretation of the value of one character, Cordelia, and the final relation of that value to Lear's last speeches over her body. My concern lies with a relation between characters at or near points of death and the issue of aesthetic closure. I find Cordelia's value located in her soft voice and “ripe lip” (4.3.20), and I wish to link these descriptions to Lear's final summons to our close attention: “Look on her, look, her lips” (5.3.309). This essay raises issues of stability of character, considering changes in the dying Edmund as preliminary to changes that occur for Lear. In my argument Lear changes by looking for and imitating Cordelia's soft voice; his character change is not solely a development of internal depth but is also an acquired responsiveness to another character. Character evolves not as a formation around a void but as a progressive delineation of spaces between or beyond distinct figures onstage. Instability in this case is no hindrance to character as meaning; it is a groundwork for varied effects of meaning. My goal is to emphasize this interpretation but also to keep in view a theoretical proposition concerning subjectivity. This holds that to term character “constructed” strips it of signifying value and reveals an emptiness of meaning in matters of subjectivity. Since character is nothing but marks on a page, such arguments run, it must be silent, seen but not heard. This claim is not so much a theorized objection to character as it is an evasion by reduction of the issue of meanings (and knowledge) generated by literary constructions.

Against this reductive claim I try to find within Lear's speech to the dead Cordelia a discourse that is dramatic in its concern with character, ethical in its judgment of value, and constructed in its establishment of a perspective not original to Lear. My purpose is not to offer a theoretical defense of literary character; it is, rather, to test the possibility that a traditional literary device has been set in an unusual construction and, in so doing, to articulate patterns of achieved bonds more than those of developed interiority. My concern is to detach subjectivity from an exclusive identification with inwardness and to attach it to forms of ethical perception that resist categorical explanation. I aim at a description of character, ethical value, and shaped perspective that is “thick” in the sense that it plaited these different languages into an “anthropology” of Lear's change. His character is complete, defined by death and the play's close, in moments of final
change and construction that embrace other characters. This is the antithesis to disguising, for Lear becomes most himself as he becomes more like his daughter – or, more precisely, like her only in the briefest of dramatic moments and in the delicate sharing of a single trait as he takes on her voice. This taking-on is contingent, tangential, yet so marked that it may well elude theory’s finest rigors. That is, precisions of a theoretical skepticism may not be the best way to recognize brief and delicate points of closure in King Lear. Moral inquiry, with its concern for the particular nature of exchanges between persons, is better able, I believe, to represent those qualities that summon, shape, and puzzle our attention.

Such an occasion of brevity and delicacy gains dramatic resonance within a large architecture that continually repositions eyes and voices in significant meetings of image, theme, and situation. The father finds himself by means of his child, for this least daughter’s voice has already taught him how to recreate certain bonds amid a ruin of doubt. The achievement in Act 5 depends upon an exchange in Act 4, where this poor sinner, once a king, claims nothing for himself except the name of his child. Yet his terrible weakness finds recompense in Cordelia’s immediate response as she enacts without hesitation the difference between laughter and gentle acknowledgment.

An effective brevity, Erasmus considered, is “so full of meaning that much more is understood than is heard.” The brevity of this lady/child makes up an affirmation that is richly understood, and her two qualities – simplicity and affirmation – constitute the “I,” also constructed, who identifies in gentle reverberation the family relationship and the proper name. Confirming herself, she confirms this abused “man” as father and king, a confirmation of identities and roles that will be brutally tested until simple assertions of existence can no longer be uttered. Yet Lear will recall Cordelia’s voice and proclaim its general excellence, joining two crucial inflections – distinction and type – in the value of character: “Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman” (5.3.272–73, emphasis added). The close of King Lear projects drama’s rich interrogations about being and presence. What does it mean to hold and consider such excellence? to recollect her saying “I am, I am” or “No cause, no cause” (4.7.75), only to listen and watch her die, unable to speak? The shock to Dr. Johnson is well known and was not endured again until he subjected the play and himself to editorial discipline.

II

Finis coronat opus.

The play has other patterns of character development to examine beyond those of disguising, personal confirmation, or spherical predominance. Edmund uses (without
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perhaps believing) a notion of historical conditioning or shaping. “[M]en / Are as the time is,” he notes to his captain after the British victory: “to be tender-minded / Does not become a sword” (5.3.31–33). He then sets his executioner a task that leads to rope and his own death from the old king’s sword. This is one of the many turns to the sword that mark the violence of this play. We never hear, and perhaps do not expect to, whether the captain had his own moment of tendermindedness as Cordelia’s death conjoined with his. Since all characters are not equally important, by extension, what is offstage and out-of-text need not exist for speculation. It is different for Edmund. He is attractive (as Harold Bloom assures us), desired by both evil sisters, and distinctive; the time conspires to grant him, before death at his brother’s hand, a final and surprising shift to kind intention. Moved by Edgar’s “brief tale” of their father’s end (5.3.181–99), he thinks of enacting a good. He reveals his “writ … on the life of Lear and on Cordelia,” offers his sword as a “token of reprieve,” and urges all to “send in time” (ll. 243–51). Time does expire for the queen. But what of her executioner, turned by voice, tale, and timing into a would-be savior: is his conversion legitimate or out-of-character? Is the problem one of ethics or aesthetics? What is the “time” of this character which leads him to this last effort at ineffective charity?

Does Shakespeare as well as Nature stand up for Edmund? Should we? Does it make a difference to condemn him for a writ on these two lives if he then goes on to mean well, despite his own nature? Cannot the end crown the work, the bastard speaking for, not against, Cordelia? Edmund’s attractiveness, for me, is theoretical in that he illuminates problems of stability and alteration in matters of character and ethical judgment. After 3.7 who could have thought that this young man had so much good in him? His Act 5 conversion is astonishing not only in itself but also as a prelude to more remarkable changes in Lear. They do share extremes of attitude toward Cordelia, even if last judgments on the two should not rest there. Nonetheless, an ultimate Edmund, unexpectedly tender, introduces a “new King Lear,” who brings his silent daughter to the stage and once again asks for her speech. As the play concludes, King Lear raises basic issues of character, acknowledgment, and exchange. In my sense of the play, change of character is directly related to processes in which characters gain or lose acknowledgment as their voices contend within dramatic time.

We like to view human character as stable, as fixed somehow in nature. Yet we know that it is not. It grows, or is constructed and reconstructed, to follow the signs of our time. In either case, a character must alter if ethical judgment is to do more than report on disjunct moments from the past when this or that agent performed well (or ill). That is, notions that a character can change yet retain a distinct identity are crucial to ideas of responsible freedom and their representation in literature. As Paul Ricoeur has remarked, one can distinguish between identity as sameness and as selfhood (a site for significant change) and in this distinction find occasions to weigh elements that do and do not change. In this sense, character is not at all an unequivocal formation but the name for certain continuing negotiations between stability and alteration. In turn, an ethical judgment must be supple over time as well as tolerant of the sudden changes that can come to one as attractive as Edmund. Literary interpretation is not alien to such latitudes of judgment, for this practice encourages varied readings rather than a unitary law. Here, ironically, an attractive traitor is reduced to a character function and his dying affords an aesthetic perspective on the royal characters whom he tries to murder, then fails to save. Edmund’s good serves the literary plot before any argument of ethics; he is neither center nor circumference of this work. He can usurp many things but not King Lear. It has its own way with a “ficelle” so winnily brutal. He is borne offstage toward his man,
to die—“a trifle” (5.3.295)—as his victims return to the center with a specifically dramatic power. This aesthetic shaping of dismissal and return does carry some relish of ethical value. Poetic justice remains a kind of justice, at least for Edmund. Conversion to a good only earns him Albany’s final contempt and alerts us to more striking transformations for Lear. The endings of the two men are quite different yet not unrelated, for each comes to a voicing of ethical perception as a sign of altered character. Such signs should not be mistaken; they may very well bring us to a deep sense of the continuity of characters within the play. This can be said in another way: that judgments made about one character are not made in isolation from judgments about other characters. To note the irrelevance of Edmund, even in his last muster of an ethical voice, is to register the final power of Lear and Cordelia. Appeals to aesthetic qualities cannot, of course, forestall other judgments, even as acts and performances said to be ethical can still be evaluated aesthetically. One language of judgment cannot preempt the other. Nonetheless, King Lear asks for both and torments our professional efforts at a strict discrimination of issues. We may deny “Edmund” any benefit from his conversion even as we appreciate its aesthetic virtues. Acting always as an end unto himself, he ends up as a device of the play.15

Literary critics as different as Harley Granville-Barker and Stephen Greenblatt have noted an odd circling in King Lear.16 Its action opens and closes with Cordelia’s silence, and it is the ethical value of those silences that I want to consider now, especially and obviously in their effects on Lear. The two silences are radically different, yet we know that difference to be the point of the dramatic action, language, and scene as these coalesce intensively at the end in general patterns of speech and sight.17 The old man bends over his daughter’s body, desperate to prove any signs of an invisible speech or breath. Now his concern is less what she says than that she says, and he dies in the act of acknowledging something intended but unspecified—except for location—about Cordelia. Beholders are asked to see what may not exist, for this is and is not Cordelia. Her character now appears only in an actor’s body’s mimicry of a past life—a striking union of death and theatrical illusion. Yet the rhetorical effect is one of intense concentration on “her”—by the king and, with him, by the watching armies. Lear ends in a passion of seeing and commanding sight, with his own mortal period and point of exclamation: “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there! [Dies.]” (5.3.309–10).18 As before, he desires her speech and gains nothing. Shakespeare reconstructs his design so that this last question and command extend from the stage groupings to us as readers or spectators. We are asked to see and told to look. To do so, we must read Cordelia’s lips, her father’s anguish, and our own capacity for compassion. Ethical judgment is contextual; it must include the object of value, the affect of those interested, and the skills of the judge. Lear can be held to these standards, for he comes to a profound revision of the value of his daughter and her gender as he asks her not to go. In Act 1 he bribed Cordelia to speak her love; then, when she would not (or could not), he ordered her to go. Here, as the circle closes, he utters a plea of love that asks only for softest speech—speech he must then recreate himself. We could say that Lear mistakes silence in a new way. Or perhaps we are struck by his belief that speech remains possible. In either case, the process is one of naming, address, and characterization with an intensity that few works match. The old king’s voice has changed.19 An imperative “stay” begs. The original command—“Speak” (1.1.85)—is here a gentle question, although he himself is certainly not gentle in stopping Edmund’s man. Nonetheless, he has learned to plead with silence—the figure he now holds, addresses, and describes. His language becomes briefly a caress, softness itself.
Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!
What is’st thou say’st? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.
I kill’d the slave that was a-hanging thee.

(5.3.271–74)

Edmund was wrong about the time. Here a sword has indeed become tenderminded, for Lear has not always spoken so well of this woman, let alone all women. The rack of the world has cracked his darker purpose as well as the misogyny in his own hangman impulses: “the great rage, / You see, is kill’d in him,” the doctor told Cordelia as she bent over her father (4.7.78–79). That rage was an exiled, exposed man’s frenzied madness. It followed and enlarged the earlier rages of an angry father and monarch. The arc of those emotions brought Lear to his own silence, an exhaustion between sleep and death. A medical diagnosis, however, was hardly enough to represent this condition or its outcome.

The play’s circle travels from and toward Cordelia by way of the king. Plot movement suggests an inner circle of characters bound together. We cannot understand the silence of the daughter without understanding the state or speech of the father. Lear’s health now rests with his daughter’s return and manner of identification. She must sweeten his imagination of “the sulphurous pit” (4.6.130), extending the motif of royal medicine by inverting archetypes of lost children and searching parents. Her character seeks out his – to say in Act 4 what could not be commanded in Act 1, and with a gentleness that can repair the “high-engender’d battles” of his storm and night (3.2.23). It may strike some viewers that Cordelia mingles qualities of passivity and power to such a fine degree that the first quality must enhance (not diminish) the second. Cordelia’s gentleness can be understood etymologically as a joining of social or family status and of personal qualities – a royal birth as well as a private sense of loving duty. The difference between Act 1 and Act 4 concerns a divergence, within this patriarchal system, between royal commands and paternal appeals to a complex gentleness.

An ethics without an objective standard must be trivial. In King Lear that standard – one concerning the worth of speech – is embodied in Cordelia, especially in her lips and voice. They both form the shape and sound of value in this kingdom and suggest its vulnerability. Ironically, the injury to value begins in the command to speak. Lear is not wrong to want to hear Cordelia’s love; he is wrong to command its expression as a condition of inheritance. Commodifying love is not a way to recognize this daughter’s worth. “She is herself,” France chides Burgundy – and Lear – “a dowry” (1.1.241). Since this wealth lies in a silent character, the real challenge is a difficult discrimination between softness and emptiness. Kent puts the matter negatively to the king, but he only begins a terrible process in which Lear learns to distinguish “low sounds” from the “hollowness” of least loving: “Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least; / Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness” (ll. 152–54). Kent’s “plainness” (l. 148) has no effect but to send Lear’s hand to his sword, while “low sounds” are indeed concealed by “hollowness.” A statement of Cordelia’s value is assigned to France, a monarch-suitor who provides a formal set of loving paradoxes (ll. 250–61). We in turn may decide that, if Cordelia is a center of value, her “low sounds” have yet to be constructed in an adequate rhetoric. The speech on duty which rings so coldly in Act 1 (ll. 95–104) requires later events to bring out its full tonalities. Her exile heralds a terrible void in Britain, one that is figured by chaotic sites and acts of terror – a wild heath, a blinding storm, plucked eyes. The challenge for ethical inquiry is to complete a
circle, to redraw that map of hollowness, to call a soft voice home. An acoustics of true reverberation is tested severely by the longest absence from the stage of a major Shakespearean character.

The construction finally occurs in 4.3, a scene omitted from the Folio and often dropped in performance, perhaps because its technique is indirect yet highly mannered in the fashion of the reporting scenes in the late romances. The scene may also seem irrelevant if one is unconcerned with Cordelia speaking or spoken about, with indeed the play’s reverberations of her presence and absence. But 4.3 does reverberate the scene in which Kent, while stocked, takes out Cordelia’s letter and prays for a “warm sun” to read by (2.2.162). In 4.3 Kent, turned auditor, listens to an unnamed gentleman describe Cordelia’s reading of letters about Lear.

GENTLEMAN  … it seem’d she was a queen
              Over her passion; who, most rebel-like
              Sought to be king o’er her.
KENT         O! then it mov’d her.
GENTLEMAN  Not to a rage; patience and sorrow strove
              Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
              Sunshine and rain at once; her smile and tears
              Were like, a better way; those happy smilets
              That play’d on her ripe lip seem’d not to know
              What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence
              As pearls from diamonds dropp’d. In brief
              Sorrow would be a rarity most belov’d
              If all could so become it.
KENT         Made she no verbal question?
GENTLEMAN  Faith, once or twice she heav’d the name of “father”
              Pantingly forth, as if it press’d her heart.…

(ll. 14–27)

Both scenes contain rebellions – Kent’s enraged attempt to punish Oswald, Cordelia’s better self-control. The gentleman’s language traces elaborate conceits of thematic bearing and a ceremonial description that offers itself as a part of its own gentleness. It is lettered artifice: a flourish of metaphors, an effort to state Cordelia’s full worth as ruler and woman while underscoring her absence. Here understanding is achieved by courtliness, not suffering, and by a language that asserts a virtue in surplus as King Lear’s plainest speaker listens. Although rhetoric, this is the antithesis of hollow speakers at court or of unaccommodated man, whimpering his folly before the elements. It is a revelation in figured meaning of what “play’d on her ripe lip” (1. 21).

The anonymous gentleman restates the Stoic ideal of self-government in a language of courtly richness. France’s metaphor of the self as dower is extended to issues of rule. This new rhetoric shows rebellion subdued by queenly patience, nature’s “sunshine and rain” bettered in the true daughter’s ripe lips and pearl tears. Her qualities still speak to this gentleman’s eye of recollection as he tries to convey to Kent the wonder of her presence. Here the power of her subjectivity is so well controlled that, in governing itself, it can lay claim to govern others, this unnamed gentleman or a would-be king of passion. The masculine title of “king” suggests that the implicit model may be Lear’s earlier usurping rage. A gentle microcosm suddenly takes shape in Cordelia’s rich sorrow, as if Act 3’s storm should be replayed now in precious miniature.
In addition to self-government, the gentleman describes an act of heavy lifting that Cordelia could not perform in Act 1: “Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth” (1.1.91–92). (In Act 5 that verbal action will pass to Lear in the literal burden of a dead daughter.) Here, before Cordelia returns to the stage, her authority in two bodies – as queen and as subjective person – is confirmed. Her majesty is not that of Lear’s raging nor that of her husband’s cool faith. She can project her heart in the name of her father. In the next scene she will begin a process of healing, advised by the doctor to “close the eye of anguish” (4.4.15). A court ceremony of bestowing jewels will be translated into a deeply emotional spending of attention and care. From Cordelia’s heart and eyes (as imaged by the gentleman), a royal progress travels by tears and lips to Lear’s own sight (as witnessed by the audience). A ripeness of language and spectacle is all in both plots of the play; acts of jeweled pathos – the queen’s touch in language – will reach an untender brother in Edgar’s words about their father’s “bleeding rings, / Their precious stones new lost” (5.2.11; 5.3.189–90). This iconic language gradually rules even Regan’s “sweet lord,” who absented himself from ring-pulling and delegated murders so attractively.

Cordelia’s “ripe lip” closes the eye of anguish to enable better seeing. She is “rare” not only because of her absence but also because of her own verbal translation of the gentleman’s jewel metaphors into healing medicines. Act 4 moves from Cordelia described to Cordelia present (yet without her father) and finally to her moment of awakening him onstage.

DOCTOR Please you, draw near. Louder the music there!

CORDELIA O my dear father! Restoration hang
Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made!

(4.7.25–29)

The simples of music and embrace lift him “out o’ th’ grave” and soothe the “molten lead” of his tears (ll. 45, 48). Act 1’s expulsion is under repair: having learned for himself to “say nothing” (3.2.38), the old man is reborn, recast. The natural relation of father and child is reconstructed as a relation of art. The void fills with gentle sounds. A counterpoint of music and the queen’s voice calls Lear from “the heaviness of sleep” to a restored vision of her as soul (4.7.21, 46). “[W]here did you die?” he asks her (1. 49), believing her to be the one transformed rather than the agent of his transformation. His phrase in Act 1 for a future with Cordelia could not have meant this scene, yet the scene does ironically reveal “her kind nursery” (1.1.124). Salving the hollow sisters’ “fangs” (3.7.57), the child brings the father to himself in a scene of waking and second birth as she heals a prodigal parent with an artful medicine of lips. The intimations of a romance recovery are strong but not strong enough to overcome the swords, writ, poisons, noose, and quick savagery of Act 5.

The gentleman’s account was static, ornamental; Cordelia’s address is dynamic, performative. “Restoration” is allegory, desire, and event. The paired speeches are complementary, not antithetical; both hang on her lips as she returns to her nation and to language. “Love, and be silent” was the first resolve (1.1.62); now her lips can be act and speech act, the kiss and the gentle speech of kissing.fragile and gracious, she is the real physician-antagonist to nature’s fearful storms. Such complementarity fits other
relationships. If royal authority is patriarchal, it still requires this daughter’s healing; the “reverence” she anoints is that of the unkind father and the injured monarch at once. It is both reconciliation and recoronation: “How does my royal Lord? How fares your Majesty?” (4.7.44). The construction of Cordelia’s value passes to her own speech and to the verb “repair” issuing in speech and kiss from her ripe lip; ripe in the senses of rich, red, full, yet ready for the reaping.\(^{28}\) The play sets the construction of value in the lady, dramatizing a worth to her objective presence in stages of absence, reported return, and actual appearance. It then reveals the force of her value and presence in the repair of Lear, which will survive further losses, including that of the lady herself. She returns to go about her royal father’s business and reapplies Luke 2:49 by subsuming in her “simples” the work of ideology in family, state, and belief (4.4.14, 23–24). Her character is at once value and value’s instrument.\(^{29}\)

A new power in that healing shows in the aftermath of defeat as feudal chivalry is put to one side. We are left to wonder whether Shakespeare’s feudalism works as a sign of bourgeois progress or as a dramatic frame for tragedy. We may even conclude that historical approaches, whether that of a history of ideas or that of a new cultural materialism, overvalue not the fact but the role of feudalism in the play.\(^{30}\) There may be some sense in following the lead of the characters. Lear does not regard this lost battle as he once did the loss of his knights, and we attribute the difference not just to the reductions experienced on the heath but also to the mingled strengths and tenderness given by Cordelia’s love: her emotions fill the spaces opened and exhausted on the heath. He has been – and will be again – “child-changed” (4.7.17). There may be traces of escapism in the lyrical speech beginning “Come, let’s away to prison” (5.3.8). Its assertive energies and purpose, however, stand in contrast to the weak, uncertain questionings in 4.7. Not so much distracted as prudent, it is the oblique, coded speech necessary before triumphant power.\(^{31}\) One of “Gods’ spies” (1. 17), distinct from Oswald, Tom, and Kent, Lear can speak to divine methods with an assurance that is resonant and vernacular, finding strange virtues in this necessity. Most kings enjoy a power over prisons; this one enjoys his power within and against the cage.\(^{32}\)

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Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The Gods them[sel]ves throw incense. Have I caught thee?
He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven,
And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes;
The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,
Ere they shall make us weep: we’ll see ’em starv’d first.
Come.

(5.3.20–26, emphasis added)

One can set Lear’s two earlier speeches banishing and recognizing Cordelia against this farewell to power that invites new bonds of intimacy constructed in speech. Even programmatic skeptics toward large claims for language might allow that one could speak for two here. A new authority in the king emerges in this speech to Cordelia. Something is “caught” in his discourse, despite defeat and prison. What it means to win and lose is now in process of reconfiguring.

The failure of public speech and understanding in Act 1 is past. These two begin to share an imagination of sacrifice that ranges from heaven to fox burrows and across the good years that devour. The point is tone, not prediction; an uncanny poise of force and
gentleness in which, although she says nothing – a strange prolepsis – we may hear the lady’s silent acceptance shaped in the address to her. Along with 4.3’s Gentleman, Lear also talks for two. The king’s speech is a harbinger – not the end but closer to the end than the plot is yet. Character effects – a rhythmical shifting of singular pronouns to plural – impart a sense of Lear’s stand against the cosmos. Invoked sacrifices lead to mysterious images of our triumph in providentia edax: “the good years shall devour them.” We are left uncertain, as we are later in the scene, of the exact referents of pronouns and thus of the vocalized space that is set for us. Lear’s language no longer divides the kingdom for others; it establishes a special space for his and his daughter’s understanding. Feudalism establishes bonds of service that carry authority due to an ordering of classes and property by means of kinship hierarchies and personal dependence. King Lear explores sacrificial transformations that disclose through subjectivities of speech a new and objective authority. Lear’s power rests in his speech, not in “champains rich’d” (1.1.64). His tones claim a vernacular emphasis quite new to him, although the accent took hold gradually in Acts 3 and 4. On seeing Gloucester in 4.6, he offered advice that seemed to amalgamate the experiences of both men: “What! art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears” (ll. 151–52). Lear takes his own advice in Act 5. His eyes and voice disclose together, beyond the pain of loss, the rough shapes of sacred violence. Yet this play does not allow private reconstructions to go unchallenged. However we may understand any testing agency ourselves, one appears in this play with terrifying economy and precision. This couple has been caught and shall be parted. An attractive character has had his own timely thoughts about the devouring to be done. As Lear and Cordelia exit under guard, Edmund signals to his captain and, by echoing “the old and miserable King” (5.3.47), extends the metrical line that Lear began: “Come hither, captain; hark. / Take thou this note” (ll. 27–28). The time is ripe for a brief lecture on tendermindedness and men who are swords – but it is delivered to a mercenary who is willing to hang a young woman in front of her father. Charity will later extend itself quite differently to Edmund. Here the postwar executions begin with an unattractive, banal exchange on postfeudal service – an administrator’s act of passing on a letter and a chore.

III

And the truth is, one can’t write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes…34

King Lear does not advance a single or unitary notion of literary character. It allows us to see characters made and unmade. A king is maddened but restored, only to face defeat, imprisonment, release, and stages of dying. The unmaking can be done verbally or violently, as a function of cultural practice or of physical assault. Cordelia’s place in Britain goes as quickly, as savagely, as Gloucester’s eyes. Throughout the play, we need to recall that Lear is the first to presage her death. In disowning her, his imagination inaugurates horror.

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this for ever. The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour'd, pitied, and reliev'd,
As thou my sometime daughter.

(1.1.113–20)

We can read the Marlovian simile one way before syntax adjusts sense to make Cordelia, not Lear, the savage cannibal. We may further note the peculiar form of high speaking that is involved in this citation of a helpless daughter for her supposed savagery. It is not simply that an error is made here. Lear’s speech reveals him as fully capable of evil – the evil of Tamburlaine, lord of “these barbarous Scythians,” who made his own child nothing, and who is present here as an allusive, usurping voice that reverberates, against historical time, within the British king’s words.35

Lear will be held to account for this disfathering voice that invokes, if only by simile, the monsters to come. He must know the force of “disclaim” in the feudal vocabulary of renouncing lordship, although he cannot know the parallel between what he does to Cordelia and what he is doing to himself. The irony in his speech is that the behavior attributed to Cordelia seems, in the gender and violence of his chosen figure, all the more his own. In one or another reading of “generation,” Lear seems determined to interrupt and unmake his creation.36 The simile of the “barbarous Scythian” seems at first to align him with the man who “makes his generation messes.” A surprise lies in turning from the three verbs of kindness to the brutal equation of Cordelia with that barbarity – the rhetorically dramatized consequence of being disclaimed by the king. The primitive fury stated here with deliberate and measured pace, Latinate diction, and calculated simile is – and ought to be – frightening. The voice is that of the savage father, wrathful beyond cause, demolishing all of the shelters of law and civilized existence as he learnedly denies his own child and, of course, himself. The agent of horror can be legitimate authority or not, a dragon or a dog in office. It makes little change: bodies, like kingdoms, were made to be torn apart, and other bodies are there to do what the captain terms, with brutal casualness, “man’s work” (5.3.40).37

There is a large difference, to be sure, between bodies and characters. This is clear with Gloucester, who does not begin to see until after his eyes have been put out. Lear, in turn, is thrust into the “eyeless rage” of the storm (3.1.8), but his eye of anguish can discover a new vision of Cordelia. Yet there should be no quick assumption that new visions are necessarily desirable. Lear must move relentlessly from seeing the child restored as a royal lady to viewing the strangled woman “dead as earth” – Cordelia’s character reduced to no more than the body of his sometime daughter (4.7.70; 5.3.261). At the end, he is beyond all issues of feudalism – not because society does not matter but because, as society’s head, he has already broken the bonds of blood, neighborliness, and pity. Feudalism ceases to operate as an image for social structure at his own behest. All come crying hither, and no one in King Lear can alter this condition of birth beyond tears that part, like guests or jewels, from eyes of anguish.

Lear can anticipate madness. He can imagine a long imprisonment, provided Cordelia is there. Her actual death is another matter. His imperious temperament still expresses itself in absolute judgment: “I know when one is dead, and when one lives; / She’s dead as earth” (5.3.260–61). But temper is now swayed by an intense love – one reconstructed from fury, madness, and exhaustion. Lear searches for Cordelia’s life with things as slight as a looking glass, a feather, or his own dull eyes, hoping for “a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt” (ll. 66–67). We must be struck by such contrasts
of frailty and subjective intensity, as Lear does find a woman whose value has been repaired and restored at a cost not less than everything. She is now everything but alive, and his judgment wrestles with this disproportion of all and nothing, juggling in his words a hierarchy of queen and missing fool.38

And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!

(5.3.305–8)

What value could come to something poor, absent, dead? How can so little earth on a map be worth so much? – no less than all the sorrows of an antic majesty, redeemed perhaps but not yet ended. His speech contracts from “no life” to “no breath at all” and then to “no more.” It is destitution’s language; all ceremonies of distinction vanish with Cordelia’s last absence, and what remains is ordinary or worse – dog, horse, rat. This is an agony of dying, one of such force that the negations, augmented in the Folio, are simultaneously denials and acceptances of “no life” and “Thou’lt come no more.” The half‐brothers’ struggle – a feudal contest of trial by sword and combat – is completely outdone, and within seconds the questions asked of Cordelia will apply as well to this speaker. Set in climactic position, the deaths of these two characters are given a greater significance than the conflicts of national armies or the ritual contests of the brother‐knights. Historical events and institutions, all arbitrations by sword, are subordinated to privileged characters and character relationships – everything that the new historicism argues is off‐center in such literature. Should constructed characters of royalty so center and command the field of history? The daughter speaks with “no breath” to her anguished father; Kent declares that he “must not say no” to a silent call heard only in his ear of loyal service (l. 322). Can meaning’s “something yet” ever come from so near nothing? Can history simply declare itself a privileged form of new or old interpretation and tell us what he might have heard? Now as then, Cordelia speaks only to awakened ears as the soundless voice of gentle ways, the softest mystery in all things. Her silence is not the feminine submissiveness that Catherine Belsey hears, for the quality of her voice has passed to Lear as an authoritative sign of her rule in his ethical growth. To trace the limits on individual character in this play, we must study the interplay of its characters and not just the paradigms of social structure.39

Ethical judgment in King Lear arises from and returns to literary character. Each is matrix to the other. It is not a matter of a moral allegory or a Greek etymology but a view of dramatic action. Drama allows us to watch a process in which the construction of character cannot be separated from the judgments made by the characters about one another. Plot is not the only binding; we see that ethos is ethics. Lear’s first address to Cordelia concerns his “joy” in her, but that is a love understood according to elements of hierarchy, competitions of kingdoms or sisters, and the property wealth of nations. He stages spectacles – first for the British court, then for neighbor rulers – as his desires interest the presumed greed of all.40 He can mention love, but Cordelia must speak for opulence, for rich lands in Britain and in France or Burgundy. As king and father, Lear defines her character as a subject‐daughter: she must, in nature, want what his speech dictates. His pride swells as he gauges the worth of his “last” and “least” to fertile nations elsewhere. The command to speak introduces what should astonish all: that when this
British king divides, more is created. It is no simple weighing of dukes and their moieties. His least is indeed most, as the powers of France and Burgundy await the verbal aptitude of a youngest daughter. Her speech is supposed to delight Lear, then re-map Europe. We watch a royal father who gives away his kingdom but tries to control the gift, who gives away his last daughter but makes that gift contingent on his command over her. The treatment of Cordelia replicates the treatment of the kingdom, as the use of heraldic crops and geographical titles to identify her two suitors makes clear.

\[
\begin{align*}
&\ldots \text{Now, our joy,} \\
&\text{Although our last, and least; to whose young love} \\
&\text{The vines of France and milk of Burgundy} \\
&\text{Strive to be interes’s’d; what can you say to draw} \\
&\text{A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.} \\
&\text{(1.1.82–86)}
\end{align*}
\]

The nothing of Cordelia’s silence reveals the failure in Lear’s speech, which has demanded that her voice fulfill ideological purposes. Imperial calculations like these are absent from Lear’s last speeches, although kingdoms remain at stake and the speaker can show his old temper. Cordelia no longer stands before and against him; she is nearer yet more distant. From her, still his center, he asks little: nothing formal, a short stay, a soft voice before the return to killing thoughts. The sequences of impotence and power in his address are rapid, intense.

I might have sav’d her; now she’s gone for ever! 
Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!
What is’t thou say’s’t? Her voice was ever soft, 
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman. 
I kill’d the slave that was a-hanging thee. 
(5.3.270–74)

As if beyond hearing him, “Cordelia” seems to move away. The effect rests in a turn from “thou say’s’t” to “Her voice” in line 272, as the dead body holds mimetic place onstage. Spaces open from his gestures of language, as intimacy suddenly generates – where no one is – a tiny dialogue of I and thou across a linguistic distance to death. Does one invoke Buber or Bakhtin here: the dialogue as a structure of intense, intimate relationships or as a structure of radical differences conjoined?41 The gentle speaker and the murdered hangman join in the king’s sentences: one death easily given, the other impossible to tell. Yet both figures have crossed to an undiscovered country whose nearest border is mapped by this final juncture of bent age and a least body. It is obvious to say that the play replaces Act 1’s literal map with one that must be intuited, less obvious to urge that the second map is one of language, one that can chart the spaces between the ferocity of the finite verb in line 274 and the desperate tendermindedness of the last personal pronoun of renewed address to the hanged woman.

This point concerns Lear no less than Cordelia, his own lips as well as hers, and the way he speaks about her “now she’s gone for ever.” The fate of the hangman reminds us – and Lear – of the persistent, violent energies of the warrior-king. Edmund’s sense of the times is not distant from this “good”: “I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion / I would have made them skip” (ll. 276–77). All the more remarkable, then, is the juxtaposition of another ethical character within the dramatic character’s speech.
This character is also Lear, but it has been constructed in the course of the play, as if being follows on speech. It has emerged after a natural schooling – in wild weather and in the abyss of madness. Howlings of storm and man still to a deep quiet. In this new character and experience, Lear can speak yet listen for the softest of gentle and low voices. Cordelia’s asides in Act 1 would be marked now. Her softness is not the king’s tonic register, but he has learned to speak within it and to hear it. He seeks Cordelia’s voice in his question, glosses her silence as her custom, and deflects the fact of her hanging into his execution of Edmund’s “sword.” In Lear’s own voice we find the changes worked by this child who can speak no more, as Lear performs her voice before “her” body. A strange dialogue across existential spaces and times joins two different characters, preserving a difference in speech yet folding the two voices into the one body of the king.

This is not, though brief, an event without context. In 4.7, when Cordelia bent over Lear’s exhausted face, she could see there, despite her absence and a reported reliance on letters, the storm and heath of Act 3.

… Was this a face
To be oppos’d against the warring winds?
To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
In the most terrible and nimble stroke
Of quick, cross lightning? to watch – poor perdu! –
With this thin helm?

(4.7.31–36)

Oddly, her gentle voice reproduced his voicing of the winds: the characters reunite in shared speech. A stylistic joining of epithets, battle imagery, and a foreign term allows us to register the presence as well as the absence of the lady at the play’s center. It must be a British princess and now a French queen who joins these two languages to lament her unconscious father – lost, then seen in marks on a page, now found in sleeping ruin: “poor perdu.” From his face she seems to read and hear the terrible sights and sounds of cosmic battle. Her gentleness and absence form no obstacle to understanding his great loss, which is summoned from the past in a near-Marlovian echo of a more distant struggle and a very different face. In 5.3 positions reverse as Lear scans his daughter’s face. Others tried to interpret Cordelia for him in Act 1; he assumes that role here as his right, whether as father or as king. His reiteration of “ever” transmutes his loss (“gone for ever”) into her enduring excellence (“ever soft”). The first silence is no longer “nothing”; what the angry father then disclaimed he now gives back in gentleness, her voice plaited within his own. Near death himself, yet still on watch within his thin helm, he completes a circle begun in Act 4, preserving in his speech the ever-soft voice of the absent–present dead, the character who is and is not there either at the play’s center or at its end.

The ethical value of Lear’s speech is located in three emergent traits of dramatic character. The first is flexibility. An otherwise inflexible man assumes another voice radically different from his own. In the process, he alters his violently expressed opinions about his least daughter and her sex. He racks himself into tolerance, stretching his character by taking hers on. The second is acknowledgment. At the moment of death, Cordelia’s presence is recognized as a value of utmost worth. Her body must be returned to the stage by the old man himself. After howling, he must bend over, cajole her into speech, and acknowledge the fact of her death and the equal fact of his passionate need for her
life. The third is reciprocity. It presupposes the first two but goes beyond them while
twining them together. In imitating and characterizing the voice of Cordelia, Lear
returns that voice to her in desperate gift and compliment. Her ripe lip repaired
and restored him to social exchange. His deictic rhetoric concentrates final attention on her:
“Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!” (5.3.310–11).
“[T]his” is “there” in all ripe presence and reverberation, much more than can be said;
and the corollary of such ripeness, now “autumn’s dust” (4.6.199), is a last reaping on a
site anciently named a seeing place. The mysteries of entwined lives meet in this
accounting of eyes and voices, opening the terrible spaces in a dialogue of one. He looks,
speaks, to her lips, there, “there.”

Shakespeare phrases Lear’s words so that no one shall see as much as the king com­
mands. We are told to look, and we are left. We can, however, see what he says and read
there the values in a committed attentiveness that bonds ethics and character in the
play’s eponymous construction. The ethical point of real importance is not whether Lear
is deluded as he dies. It is rather the register and quality of his voice as he attends
his daughter before he dies, his voice sinking toward hers as toward a shelter. No theory
or law, however powerful, gives access to this site. There is no hovel or vault that stage or
film can show us. It is the verbal space between characters that separates as it bonds them
on a terrain of meanings. It is the unnerving sense in Shakespearean drama of an intense
subjectivity showing its back above the language that it lives in. A gesture of direction is
made, “Look there,” and we reach it – there is no other way – by means of the ripe lip,
simples, and soft voice of interpretation. Death may end the lady but not other loca­
tions for her voice. The value of Cordelia is now a function in Lear’s speech, a last “trick
of that voice” (Gloucester’s phrase at 4.6.109), as if dramatic language could show, well
beyond both bodies and characters, a transpersonal soul or (in terms less metaphysical)
an ethical bond to a remembered voice. It is, as the gentleman said of the absent Cordelia,
a becoming sorrow, “a rarity most belov’d.” Subjectivity is sensed most sharply not
inside one character but in the intervals disclosed by the verbal response of one character
to another’s silence. H. P. Grice coined the term implicature to refer to the influence of
context on formations of unstated meaning. In King Lear, implicature locates subjectivity
powerfully within the spaces between speech and dead silence. Context allows us to
hear Cordelia in King Lear, and that response from us completes the protagonist-king’s
command.

Characters mean marks and subjects of difference. Shakespeare constructs and posi­
tions them to reveal the palpable gaps in between – joining; interesting; investing as
though with rights, values, being – those same literary constructions that remain differ­
ent yet so remarkably combined in dramatic speech, death, and closure. It is not that any
one character per se defines meaning but that characters, stable or changing, have
agencies to perform in constructing those complex meanings that plays supply. They are
agencies that audiences do and theories should aim to read. The notion of an essential
self may well be delusory. It may also be a red herring. There is no cognate relation
between the philosophical concept and the literary construction, and the former’s pow­
ers of delusion only increase if invoking them can direct attention away from Shakespeare’s
inventions of character and the extraordinary relations between their sustaining words.
We repeatedly watch characters start out as données yet end as achievements, and such
achievements only heighten the interplay of pattern and distinction in structures of
language, character, and drama. When King Lear describes Cordelia as a voice – soft,
gentle, low – he also redescibes himself, binds a constant of her character to his own,
and enacts some small measure of the freedom to complete change at King Lear's ending. In the midst of "general woe" (5.3.319), a cracking and tearing of all given bonds, he performs something remarkable yet next to nothing, a shift of phrase and tone in four lines: "Few words, but, to effect, more than all yet" (3.1.52). The achievement may be slight in various schemes of judgment, including some within the play, but interpretations of it can still reward the effort. "Look with thine ears" was Lear's mad counsel to the blind earl (4.6.152), and the end of the play shows the king observing his own advice. What would it mean if we did not or could not listen? That the voice was not there? Or too soft for sleepers to hear? Even Nietzsche—the notable thunderer of my epigraph—knew to listen for soft sounds and a gentle voice.

IV

I don't really speak about what I see, but to it.  

Such is the power of artistic conventions, as E. H. Gombrich has shown us, that we are always completing patterns, designs, and forms in our minds. Characters only begin in marks on the page; they reach their ends in us, occasioning a more extensive text than appears on the page. Even if skeptical, we may still find it difficult to regard such signs without presuming an interior self continuous with the character we behold. Perhaps this is the point of the device. As we advance our own process of inner understanding, it may seem quite natural to imagine a similar process at work, especially onstage, in a vivid, powerful figure like Lear as he beholds Cordelia. And who is to say that such imagining is unreal or irrelevant? Why not call it a personal experience pressing toward conditions of knowledge, a speculative sympathy, an exercise in ethical imagination? Moral inquiry requires such attitudes of generosity, a speculative willingness to entertain the value of someone other who is only partially perceived. Much the same may be claimed for the literary interpretation of texts. An essay by Maynard Mack that I admire accounts for Lear's death as just such a complex of actions interior to one character. It creates meaning by making Lear's own vision, consciousness, heart, and hope trace a final plot of inner subjectivity. Seeing his daughter dead, the character is said to confront what he knows and has known of this world and so to strain the limits of his being. As his cogito disintegrates, he still

tries to hold … this painful vision unflinchingly before his consciousness, but the strain … is too great: consciousness itself starts to give way: "Pray you, undo this button: thank you, Sir." And with it the vision gives way too: he cannot sustain it; he dies, reviving in his heart the hope that Cordelia lives: "Look on her, look, her lips, Look there, look there!"

This is a forceful account of Lear's death, its qualities drawn from the confident use of texts and inward perspectives on dramatic action. Yet in it, the royal directive seems to point only toward Cordelia's lips. Its plot stands revealed as a subjective action in Lear's heart and hope, an inner space where, despite disintegration, both revive, as if only there they can unite, as if inwardness and subjectivity must be one space—the sole place to join the importance of speech to that of unity and termination.

My effort has been to look in a different direction: to study the fields of space around and between characters rather than within one character, and to consider acts of looking
and speaking as dramatic contractions of such spaces. A distinction from Wittgenstein has served as my prompt. I have concentrated on the energy and intensity of looking to, and the pattern that I complete involves Lear’s lips rather than his heart and a mimetic sentence that prolongs “a little” Cordelia’s vocal life. It is a voiceover of recognized otherness rather than one of interior expression, revealing a knowledge of one character embodied in the other’s vocal action. Because Lear knows this, and can say this, we now know a great deal more about his powers. What he achieves in his language – a combining of distinct voices – is not simply an interiorization of the other gained by inferences about that character’s subjectivity. His language is public, ethical, dramatic – meant for all audiences to hear, to understand as judgment, and to feel as the completion of a terrible circle. “Speak” was the imperative to Cordelia in Act 1. No one could then realize that his command would be obeyed only when she speaks at last in and through his voice, complicating finally the roles of speaker and listener as “she” mends his speech a little (1.1.93). Cordelia speaks there so gently and softly as to be heard and not heard, her lips’ motions seen and not seen. The end is thus a strange form of pleasure asking us to see exact yet wrenching constructions of ethos and pathos in distinct yet contingent characters who make little sense, have no life, apart from one another.

Precisely because it is a matter of characters, not one character, I cannot look through Lear’s racked body to his breaking heart, although that word has figured in the play’s language from the first scene. Stage directions signal a different turn and bond: “Enter Lear with Cordelia in his armes.” We are to witness an unexpected strength, endurance, and discipline as we measure finally Lear’s burdened acts of carrying, looking, and speaking. A broken heart may mark the end, as Kent prays, but it is only one sign of the ethical action that is at last painfully complete. I agree with the last speaker – Albany (Q) or Edgar (F): this king has indeed seen much and borne most. He has looked on Cordelia’s lips, and what he sees there, in the face of final silence, entails the play. He has borne to the stage not only this least weight of body but also a soft, gentle voice in his own child-changed character of speech. Lear speaks as father but also as king, surrounded by audiences but centered as before by variously gauged distances between his character and that of Cordelia. The spectacle is both domestic and political. Cordelia returned to a father and king: “How does my royal Lord? How fares your Majesty?” Lear and his play circle back again to divisions of kin and kingdom. Having much to answer for, he brings in the work’s grim harvest as two distinct changes in death and closure remain. They set him with his daughter in the namesake play and finish a father’s business in an achieved softness of voice: not “nothing” but “something yet,” a tonality struck by him that is not his alone, a voice literally now between their lips. Before the silences of death and dramatic closure, such shifting constructions of character let us hear fine lines of affiliation drawing a fullness and an emptiness in represented being. The study of character in King Lear need not restrict or simplify meanings; it need not return us covertly to Victorian codes of ethics and empire. It can enable the play’s richest meanings because the figures of character are thoroughly constructed and set within intimate companies and embraces of voice, though within, finally, no more than voice itself.

It is an ending that a later play repairs, although in a language of antithetical reverberation. Impossibility here is art’s easy making in The Winter’s Tale. There one king, urged on by another (“See, my lord, / Would you not deem it breath’d?”), can admire in a “dear stone” a queen’s true image: “The very life seems warm upon her lip” (5.3.63–64, 24, 66). Leontes, his lost daughter now found, can be moved to astonished questioning – “What fine chisel / Could ever yet cut breath?” (ll. 78–79) – and then to
genuine wonder. He affirms the lady who has preserved his dead wife’s character and statue so that image and figure, seeming and life, can be one. It is a resonant, happy metamorphosis of emotion, stone, and art; everything, in short, that cannot be achieved in *King Lear*.60

> What you can make her do,
> I am content to look on: what to speak,
> I am content to hear; for 'tis as easy
> To make her speak as move.

(ll. 91–94)

Contingencies, even of breath and speech, move oppositely in romance and tragedy. Ethical meaning in *King Lear* has little to do with assembled pieties or retreats into a fragmenting, solitary self. It has everything to do with the nearly ineffable value of life in a character who has none, and under this intense pressure the character who speaks of that life gives up his own, after commanding us to do as he has done. “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!” The force of this perception, which I have linked to moral inquiry, is such that we run the risk of becoming what we see, of speaking for ourselves the voice that we long to hear. There is, nevertheless, a greater risk: that of refusing sight and of regarding silence as if it means nothing at all. “Nothing will come of nothing,” Lear retorted earlier to Cordelia’s silence (1.1.90). By play’s end, he thinks differently, and that difference is a function of his character and hers over the time of the plot. There is “something yet” in the nothing of her death, and it is caught in, and represented by, Lear’s recollection of her voice.

My last point – that there is a function to characters – cuts against the grain of current speculation about literature. That speculation finds the idea of character too blunt an instrument for analytic work as well as too burdened with suspect categories of philosophical thought. In each case the objection involves attitudes toward literary construction. The first objection concerning bluntness may well seem true if certain instances of literary analysis are put on display. But since character is a constitutive part of the literary work itself and not merely a term of hermeneutic art, it cannot be the case that we ought to read a play and ignore its characters, no matter what else we or others choose to notice. It is precisely the construction that needs a finer study. The second objection concerning suspect categories is well taken, but only if the idea of character has been confused with ideological concepts of an impermeable, self-sufficient, or sovereign individualism. Lear may be every inch a king; it does not follow that he knows or rules himself. There is a clear remedy: study the construction, erase the confusion, trace the knots that bind characters. Toward that end, this essay has sought to understand characters within a play as one would words within language. That is, the meanings generated by characters are established by an interplay of difference and resemblance across protocols of custom and use, and the meanings so generated and established own their significance not within themselves but against ground-works of structure. The structure studied here is the voice of Lear as he comes to articulate the value of his daughter’s life in dramatic speech that shapes absence and presence at start and finish. Literary works are indeed structured like a language, and it is because of such structuring that characters, like words, enable a play of meaning – not in any absolute sense but in the varied and contingent senses of meaning that make up the difficult conditions of truth within time.61 Within those conditions, the “voice of beauty,” which is not the voice of any single
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can character, offers distinctive inflections and asks an acknowledgment of the crucial work of characterization, voice, and speech in *King Lear*.

Notes

Two seminars at annual meetings of the Shakespeare Association of America gave this essay its start: one on character led by Robert Knapp (1994), and one on *King Lear* led by R. A. Foakes (1996). I would also like to thank Walter Reed, who read an early version with care; my colleagues at Southern Methodist University; and an anonymous reviewer for this journal, who saw large as well as small problems acutely.


3 Maynard Mack treats an opposite arrangement: “umbrella speeches, [under which] … more than one consciousness may shelter” (“The Jacobean Shakespeare” in *Jacobean Theatre*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 1 [London: Edward Arnold, 1960], 26). Mack states his purpose modestly as a revision of Bradley, but his notion of speech as a shelter for multiple consciousnesses suggests a new view of language rather than a revision of ideas about character. One should note that New Criticism and postmodern theory do share some views: e.g., on the limits of character criticism. My italicized phrase notices the somewhat different qualities of density (*knotted*) and emptiness (*intervals*) that concern me.

4 Quotations of *Lear* follow the Arden Shakespeare *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1952). Muir’s is a composite text, based on the Folio with additions from the Quarto. I am grateful to the publishers of the Arden Shakespeare Third Series, who allowed me to see bound proofs of Reginald Foakes’s forthcoming edition, *King Lear* (Walton-on-Thames, UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1997). Bringing to bear a thorough knowledge of the textual issues, Foakes has chosen to present a conflated text’s “possible versions” (128). Quotations of all other Shakespeare plays follow the *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).


6 Character is usually viewed as a literary device that represents effects of consciousness – senses of coherent interiority and depth. Harold Bloom declares Shakespearean inwardness canonical; see *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 70–75. I do not deny such representation or its importance in *Lear*. I consider an awareness that seems to move among characters and not within one alone. “Thick description,” a term coined by Gilbert Ryle, is associated with Clifford Geertz’s “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” (in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* [New York: Basic Books, 1973], 3–30) and indicates accounts that are circumstantially specific and interpretive. By “an ‘anthropology’ of Lear’s change,” I mean that change in Lear’s character is best understood as a function of his bonds to
others, especially Cordelia. I use the term more narrowly than Louis Adrian Montrose does in “The Purpose of Playing: Reflections on a Shakespearean Anthropology” (Helios n.s. 7 [1980]: 53–74) to refer to a dramatic refinement of kinship relations. His concern is with larger implications of ritual and symbol in theater and society.

7 Paul de Man, for example, makes fragmentation a theoretical principle in his essay on Shelley’s Triumph of Life; see “Shelley Disfigured” in Deconstruction and Criticism, Geoffrey Hartman et al., eds. (New York: Seabury, 1979), 39–73. De Man’s closing abstractions assert a program of radical skepticism (68–69); in contrast, Shelley’s richly figured terza-rima stanzas lead to a break-off question. The distinction lies between unfolding a theoretical argument of skepticism and a poetic rhetoric of interrogation.

8 Desiderius Erasmus, On Copia of Words and Ideas, trans. Donald B. King (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 1963), 104. Kent likewise notes the value of brevity: “Few words, but, to effect, more than all yet” (3.1.52).

9 Cf. “The end crowns all” (Troilus and Cressida, 4.5.224).

10 According to Jonathan Dollimore’s materialist reading of Lear, the play confirms the dictum that men are determined by the time; see Radical Tragedy, 2d ed. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), 196. He does not put the theory in any qualifying context: e.g., Edmund’s own deviation from that time. At 1.2.124–40, Edmund mocks his father’s sense of heaven’s agency, as he would, no doubt, any similar dependence on history as an agent.

11 Harold Bloom suggests that Edmund is attractive because he is at ease in the world and able to articulate it as his own; see Ruin the Sacred Truths (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 77–79. Shakespearean character, Bloom argues, has come to model human nature; developing Chaucer, Shakespeare stages “the representation of change by showing people pondering their own speeches and being altered through that consideration” (54).


13 S. L. Goldberg emphasizes “acknowledgement” and the limits to meaning in An Essay on King Lear (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974), 30–34, 174, and 190. I admire this account but find a greater possibility for meaning in Lear’s sense of Cordelia’s voice than Goldberg’s essay allows. See also Emmanuel Levinas, Outside the Subject, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993), 121–25 and 34. Levinas adopts tropes of “the face” and “face-to-face” encounters to express issues of subjectivity and intersubjectivity.


15 It is formally neat as well as ethically appalling that Edmund is responsible for the deaths of all three daughters. Stephen Booth finds the proper end of the play in the deaths of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan (the end in poetic justice?) and declares the deaths of Cordelia and Lear to be “culminating events of [Shakespeare’s] story” that take place “after his play is over” (King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy [New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1983], 11). I am uncertain about the value of distinguishing between play and story.


17 Paul J. Alpers offers an interesting critique of the New Criticism; see “King Lear and the Theory of the ‘Sight Pattern’” in In Defense of Reading, Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier, eds. (New York: Dutton, 1963), 133–52. Alpers argues that treating metaphors as primary data (in place of characters and actions) yields unwarranted equations; images of sight (a function of metaphor) are made to represent insight (a function of character). Patterns of imagery intensify instead character bonds, “man’s actual dealings with other men” (138). Postmodernists, however, might question
any designation of character as primary with respect to other uses of literary language. The issue is whether literary study can accept categories other than those of language, whether hierarchies of categories are possible or useful.

18 These lines appear in F only (without exclamation point). They concentrate Lear’s attention on Cordelia and move forward the moment of his death. Kent’s reference to “the rack [“wracke”] of this tough world” (1.313) follows as choral commentary. In Q the death and choral commentary coincide, turning attention from Lear and Cordelia to Lear and Kent. Q thus lacks the intensity of structure in F. The treatment of death as a visual or theatrical experience is established by the managed suicide in 4.6.

19 Beginning with Alpers’s distinction between language and character, Stanley Cavell argues that King Lear avoids recognitions and thus love. A subargument treats character change; another considers what it means to acknowledge a person. Cavell treats character experience atomistically; he discusses Lear’s recognition of Cordelia but not, as a part of that experience, Cordelia’s response to her father. Cavell’s general view of the play excludes responsiveness and exchange; see “The Avoidance of Love” in Must we mean what we say? (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976), 267–353.

20 F gives woman; Q, women. It is worthwhile to consider both words in competition for textual space and the differences they suggest about general character. Editorial selection on display yields a richer end than does strict separation – here a generic, not a plural, term, marking Cordelia’s constitutive power. Such work with a conflated text and its apparatus can show the text to be more than marks on a page yet not mystify its origins.

21 Maud Bodkin’s well-known treatment of archetypes emphasizes a pattern of heroic suffering in the father, an emphasis that obscures Cordelia’s role in returning to vary the pattern of paternal suffering; see Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1934), 15–17 and 272–76.

22 For Elder Olson, France’s sketch of Cordelia as a value in herself anticipates Lear’s final intuition; see Tragedy and the Theory of Drama (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1961), 207–9. The conflict between Lear and Cordelia, he argues, lies between a feudal lord’s asking for one kind of love and a family member’s understanding of love not as formal pledge but as unspoken trust. Cordelia dies so that Lear can learn familial love; he dies in sign of the lesson learned. At 1.1.160, Rowe added the stage direction that has Lear reach for his sword.

23 Cordelia’s death enacts Kent’s point and turns her sisters’ early lies to her late truths. Goneril asserted “A love that makes breath poor and speech unable”; Regan claimed that Goneril names her deeds: “In my true heart / I find she names my very deed of love; / Only she comes too short” (1.1.60, 70–72). The older sisters’ speeches are validated by the youngest’s silence. Cf. Harry Berger Jr., “King Lear: The Lear Family Romance” in Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 25–49, esp. 46–49.

24 Such reporting scenes include Pericles, 1.4; Cymbeline, 1.1, 2.4, and 5.3; and The Winter’s Tale, 1.1 and 5.2. Sidney’s Arcadia is a source for this passage in Lear (see Muir, ed., 161n).

25 Sheldon Zitner dislikes the high style’s “emptiness” and “pasteboard prettiness” (“King Lear and Its Language” in Some Facets of King Lear: essays in prismatic criticism, Rosalie L. Colie and F. T. Flahiff, eds. [Toronto: Toronto UP, 1974], 6). These qualities – under other names perhaps? – are relevant to dramatic function in a sequence from description to appearance to act. Patricia Fumerton, for example, links uses of adornment to “the rise of the self” (Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991], 28). Marianne Novy traces an imagery of tears to develop themes of pity, mutuality, and forgiveness and comments acutely on Lear’s description of Cordelia’s voice in relation to issues of femininity and patriarchy; see Love’s Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984), 158–63.

26 Ernst H. Kantorowicz shows not only the constructedness of character but a full awareness and use of the issue in medieval discourse. He traces distinctions between the monarch’s political and natural persons or bodies, beginning his influential study of medieval political theology with Richard II; see The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957). In The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991), Richard Halpern approaches the issue
through a neomarxist economics, studying “the divorce between the signs and the material realities of royal power” (220). Constructedness, one concludes, is not an unconditioned idea; to own significance, it needs a specified historical context. To point out that an entity is constructed cannot by itself fix (or unfix) meaning, since construction is precisely the manner of creating meaning.

There is a marked orality to family relations in *King Lear*. One can give, deny, withhold, or destroy love by acts of voice, mouth, or lips. On fantasies of passivity and sadism in the oral phase of development, see Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Oxford UP, 1968), 34–38. F makes Cordelia the medical figure, replacing the Doctor with a Gentleman; see Foakes’s Arden edition, 349n.

The etymology of *ripe* includes Old English *rip* (harvest) and *ripan* (to reap, harvest). Cordelia describes Lear “crown’d” with weeds and sends a search party to “the high‐grown field” (4.4.3, 7). For *repair* and *rich*, see Gloucester to Tom/Edgar (4.1.76–77). Spenser’s account of King Leyr (reprinted in Muir, ed., 237–38) traces patterns of restoration, ripeness, and death; it ends, after the king’s death, with Cordelia’s overthrow and suicide by hanging. Redemptive readings of the Lear story antedate not only Bradley and New Criticism but also Shakespeare’s tragedy.

Studies of the play have treated feudalism variously. For a valuable contrast between the history of ideas and the new historicism, see Rosalie L. Colie, “Reason and Need: *King Lear* and the ‘Crisis’ of the Aristocracy” in Colie and Flahiff, eds., 185–219; and Halpern, 215–69. We may debate whether Shakespeare’s feudalism works primarily as a historical topic or as an artistic device to image historical settings of character. Is chivalry put aside a sign of bourgeois progress, a dramatic frame for tragedy, or some admixture? On the problems of using Foucault and Stone in commentary on Shakespeare, see David Cressy, “Foucault, Stone, Shakespeare and Social History,” *ELR* 21 (1991): 121–33.

Annabel Patterson shifts the study of censorship from a censor’s work to the author’s mediation of living with censorship; see *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1984). The point extends to characterization. Censorship becomes an issue in the play if one takes Lear’s speech as imagining a new life within conditions of imprisonment.

Marlowe provides a model for powerful helplessness. Bajazeth gains rhetorical power within Tamburlaine’s cage, where he is held with his wife for the spectacle of two onstage imperial suicides; see *Tamburlaine I* in *Christopher Marlowe, The Complete Plays*, ed. J. B. Steane (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1969), 4.4 and 5.2. Lear redirects atrocity in Act 5 toward the savaged emotional bonds between father and daughter, suggesting that the real prison and torture are a world without Cordelia: “he hates him,” Kent states, “That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer” (5.3.313–15).


Marlowe heightens the cruelty of his barbarous Scythian in *Tamburlaine II*. The captured Olympia utters this phrase while killing her son to preserve him from worse tortures (3.4.19); Tamburlaine

36 Muir, ed., gives examples of usages in which generation can mean parents rather than offspring (11n). Lear may intend a shock at the emergence of the former meaning.


38 Muir summarizes various speculations about Lear’s use of “fool” for Cordelia; e.g., Armin, playing the Fool, may have doubled as Cordelia (see Muir, ed., 217n). Sidney objected to kings and fools on the same stage; see Sir Philip Sidney, An Apology for Poetry, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (London: T. Nelson, 1965), 135. Lear’s king is called a fool by a fool; later, with a new tone and meaning, the king directs the term to his daughter.

39 A principal aim of new-historicist critique is to “decenter” the subject, to remove it from an unfounded place of privilege in the interest of redressing power. New historicism’s understanding of a work is thus frequently shaped by ideologies of power and victimization. Alvin Kernan offers a “Whitehall” reading of divine-right theory in King Lear, a sly marriage of the often-anathematized Tillyard to new historicism; see Shakespeare, the King’s Playwright: Theater in the Stuart Court, 1603–1613 (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1995). On the softness of Cordelia’s voice as a sign of feminine submissiveness, see Catherine Belsey, The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama (London: Methuen, 1985), 178. The issue of literary centering (e.g., on constructed characters) returns us to what Aristotle might mean by his observation that literature is more philosophical or universal (not simply abstract but putative, counterfactual, speculative) than history; see Poetics, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1927), 34–39.

40 The Latin term interesse acquired technical meanings in property law: to invest someone with a right to or share in something; to admit to a privilege. The word occurs in F (1623) but not in Q (1608).


42 Clifford Geertz points to the ethical dilemma of the anthropologist when recording yet thereby appropriating another’s voice; see After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 128–30. Literature generally, and drama in particular, offer significant violations of this code. Lear’s appropriation of Cordelia’s voice, however, seems to carry the significance of ethical perception rather than asserted power.

43 Cordelia echoes Lear’s language on the heath. The letters referred to in 4.3 lead one to expect her knowledge of wind, thunder, and lightning, but she adopts as well his epithets (3.2.1–9) and compound epithets (3.1.11, Q only). We are shown the storm as a continuing function in Lear’s mind that Cordelia can read, speak, and calm. Perdu entered English in the French phrase sentinelle perdue – an exposed or forward and hazardous sentinel post (or the sentinel himself). Such a post was the position of a scout or spy; hence the link of “poor perdu” to “God’s spies” (5.3.17). Cordelia’s use holds the military sense as well as the sense of exposure to the elements. For Marlowe’s Faustus and Helen’s face, see Doctor Faustus in Steane, ed., 5.1.97–103. René Weis notes the allusion and F’s abbreviation of this speech in King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition (London and New York: Longman, 1993), 269n.

44 Marjorie Garber discusses the equation of silence with death and Freud’s use of Shakespeare; see “Freud’s choice: ‘The Theme of the Three Caskets’” in Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers: Literature as uncanny causality (New York: Methuen, 1987), 74–86. Freud understood Lear’s entrance carrying Cordelia as his act of carrying death to himself; I understand it as Lear’s qualification of death by love. Cordelia is thus carried in an opposite direction to dying Edmund, an emblem with ethical and theatrical significance.
Theater, from Greek théatron, a place for seeing, a theater; from théomai, to view, gaze at, behold. On deictic rhetoric – language that articulates “the situation and ... the space in which it is pronounced” – see Serpieri, 122.


Getting the world right – and not merely interpreting it – is a traditional way of defining knowledge and philosophy. Considering the limitations of philosophy for ethical thought, Bernard Williams suggests analogies for similar limitations of other forms of theory in relation to interpretation; see Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985). The point is not to deny theory – it is a strong form of interpretation – only to question claims of governance over all methods of interpretation, as if theory somehow stood outside or above interpretation.

In arguing against Bradley’s notion of a deceived joy, Kirby suggests that what Lear sees is not an illusion of renewed life but a departing-yet-summoning spirit (156–57). Susan Snyder studies the play in terms of Kübler-Ross’s stages of dying; see “King Lear and the Psychology of Dying,” Shakespeare Quarterly 33 (1982): 449–60. She concludes that Lear and Cordelia die together and not as individuals; that the time lapse “allows Lear to do the impossible, to experience his own death and cry out against the terrible wrongness of it” (459). Roger Fowler introduces Grice’s term, summarizes his argument, and provides a bibliography; see Linguistic Criticism, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 135–36 and 159.

Jonathan Goldberg urges “the radical instability of character as a locus of meaning in the Shakespearean text” (“Textual Properties,” SQ 37 [1986]: 213–17, esp. 215). This claim may be true if one attempts to align particular meanings with particular characters. If one views a variety of characters as engaged in a process of constructing thick or clustered meanings, the case may seem less desperate, as Goldberg’s discussion of Malvolio suggests.

In view of such slightness, an objection might be put that I describe less than a change of character – merely a new element added to an existing character. Such an objection might encourage a review of basic terms – character, person, body, voice, change, event – and what we might expect of them in literary discussions of constructedness. I have found Bernard Williams especially helpful on physical qualities of a voice as mediations between body and character; see Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973), 11–12. Roland Barthes remarks on pleasures in “the grain of the voice” and “the articulation of the body, of the tongue”; his remarks suggest character’s presence in the physical or material voice (The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller [London: Jonathan Cape, 1975], 66–67).


See Gombrich, 181–287. Earlier he discusses the role of “schemata” in a process of stipulation, correction, and making in the visual arts (84–90), an exposition that can apply to other disciplines. Here literary character is a function of rhetorical and literary schemata, an author’s practice with them, and the contributing emotions, intelligence, and memory of different audiences. In this view, character could never be reduced simply to printed marks on a page.

In a recent issue of PMLA on “the status of evidence,” Heather Dubrow observes the value of “experiential evidence” and “personal accounts” (“Introduction: The Status of Evidence,” PMLA 111 [1996]: 7–20).

Mack, King Lear in Our Time, 114. Mack’s argument is larger than I have managed to suggest; he notes levels of meaning contributed by senses of “intimate humanity” and by various practices of literary history (78–80).
Elaborating on this distinction, Wittgenstein points out that a direction to see ought not to be confused with what is seen (176).


The stage direction is the same in Q and F (references to attendant figures differ). Muir’s Arden edition gives “Re-enter Lear, with Cordelia dead in his arms” (5.3.256 SD). Because Lear appears earlier in the scene, Dyce altered “Enter” to “Re-enter”; Rowe inserted “dead” to end uncertainty over Cordelia’s condition.

Albany speaks in the plural (“The oldest have …”) and presumably refers to both Lear and Gloucester; Edgar speaks in the singular (“The oldest has …”) and refers to Lear alone. The problem of the close is to adjust the Lear experience to the ongoing fortunes of the state. F develops Lear’s death by inserting 5.3.309–10, giving a firmness to the role of Edgar in closure. Thus, rather than the detached Albany, Edgar, who has been to the heath, speaks last in F to represent Lear’s influence on the living.

Hélène Cixous’s meditation on character as singular and repressive of genuine literary energies is both stimulating and provocative; “The Character of ‘Character,’” trans. Keith Cohen, New Literary History 5 (1974): 383–402. Although her essay can be described as against character, it requires the concept to drive its polemic.


For the analogy between characters and words, see Martin Price, Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1983), 55. I have benefited from this wide-ranging discussion of character in the novel.
Theory in Practice

*Romantic Rhetorics (from Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language)*

**C. K. Doreski**

Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry was written during the era when the New Critics were prominent in the American academy and were setting the agenda for how students were supposed to understand and read poetry. Poems were best when they achieved a unity of form and content, welding universal idea to concrete image. The best poems were embodiments and revelations of great truths. Often those truths had a spiritual quality, as was the case with William Wordsworth, who felt nature consisted of embodied spirit. Look at a flower and you see God. Bishop’s temperament was more skeptical and materialist. She delighted in describing the world, but she was reluctant to embrace the idea that the world embodied spirit. Indeed, in several poems such as “Crusoe in England” and “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” she mocks the notion that the world is anything more than world – simple material physical reality with no spirit in it. Moments of revelation when spirit supposedly intrudes in life are called “epiphanies,” and C. K. Doreski describes how Bishop, following Wordsworth, evokes the possibility of an epiphanic revelation of spirit only to disappoint that expectation.

Epiphany and the power of naming (which in the modern era begins by naming the writer-as-authority) are two characteristically romantic-modern rhetorical embodiments of knowledge. Bishop, who largely learned these devices from Wordsworth, manipulates their conventions for some of her richest effects, and also for some of her most intriguing complexities. As I have previously argued, resistance to language that attempts to delve into the psyche or the world of the spirit characterizes her poetry. The process of resistance itself, however, constitutes a powerful rhetorical structure that shapes much of her best work. The epiphanic mode, which this chapter will discuss first, requires the poet to transgress the text and explicitly share its self-realization, its transcendence of

language into immanence. Trust in the epiphany did not come readily to Elizabeth Bishop. As her poem “Santarém” warns, there is always the chance that the auditor might misunderstand the significance of the triggering subject and query “What’s that ugly thing?”, inadvertently mocking the ideational. What some critics consider Bishop’s extreme reticence and excessive decorum may be linked to her notions of decency and communion, and to her ultimate distrust of epiphany.

The challenge for Bishop was to use epiphanic staging (the means of preparing the reader) without violating her aesthetic of reticence (a literary more than psychological). Though often labeled epiphanies by her critics, Bishop’s gestures toward the Wordsworthian landscape of divine immanence do not usually function as such. In her encounters with the notion of a spiritual dimension suggested or revealed by landscape, the characteristic motion of her poems is a recoil from the beyond, retreating back into the poem itself.

This suggests the true depth of reticence in Bishop’s poetic. Epiphany would and should open up the poem to uncontrollable exterior forces, relinquishing the law of metaphor and imposing a dimension beyond the ordinary reach of language. Bishop, who viewed poetry as a limited, and fortuitously limiting, exchange, refused to acknowledge any pressure to contain, expand, define, or even escape life through art. From the shark-filled “spangled sea” of “The Unbeliever” to the sheltered interior of “The Monument,” from the road-checked interior of “Cape Breton” to the “armored cars of dreams” in “Sleeping Standing Up,” Bishop clearly defines the terms of commerce in part by delineating the interiority and the exteriority of, respectively, her presence and the poem’s surface strategies. Bishop’s decorum surely included a sense of propriety or decency. Rather than a personality quirk, deficient ego, or exaggerated morality, however, her reticence informs her original language and diction, and is the basis of her refusal of many conventional poetic motifs that would, if allowed to, render her poems almost ordinary.

Throughout her work Bishop explores various rhetorical postures that respond to Wordsworth’s epiphanic stance. At times she presents us with a natural vantage point, nature without human intervention. In “The Sandpiper” [QT], a creature scurries about in the midst of chaos; though “focused” and “preoccupied” he is not yet engulfed by the natural forces swirling about him. Unconscious of the threatening vastness, which humans might identify as epiphanic, he has developed a unique shoreline philosophy:

> The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.

[CP, 131]

At once a student of Blake (“in a state of controlled panic”) and Keats (“The world is a mist. And then the world is / minute and vast and clear”), the shorebird sees his random fate as one with the minute particulars of the “millions of grains” of sand. In his element, the sandpiper knows none of the frustrating dislocations of humans in the landscape and therefore sees no need to transcend them. The traveler–spectator Bishop, on the other hand, needs to correct and interpret, as well as frame the scene:

> He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.
– Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards.
Jealous of the bird’s complete concentration on the particular, the poet introduces a human measure of scale. After all, the bird is obsessed with the sand, not his toes. Unlike the fleeing creatures of “The Armadillo” [QT], the sandpiper runs in a world devoid of human presence and its attendant scale. The poem shares a view from above – or beyond – this obsessed bird’s seascape.

Though usually occupying a contemplative or a migratory presence in the landscape, Bishop occasionally assumes the advocacy-role of witness of human destruction of nature, the world of damaged shores. Exiled by her refusal of ordinary empathy, the poet grieves from a distance, regretting her undeniable kinship with destroyers. “The Armadillo” and “Brazil, January 1, 1502” confront the violent presence of humans in the natural world. Both deal with the role of Christianity in a fallen world in which humankind is a deadly presence. Bishop sees humans as oppositional, the only creatures capable of losing innocence. She traces sin to religion’s door, accusing Christianity of sanctioning, or worse, ignoring true sin.

The paired Brazil poems shuttle back and forth through time, refusing epiphany through shifts in tone and regressions into history. In “Brazil, January 1, 1502” [QT], even as Bishop forsakes the literal for the pictorial frame, she identifies her intrusive presence in Brazil with that of the sixteenth-century conquistadors who, like herself, “left home.” Perhaps like the wanderer of “Questions of Travel,” these explorers “[t]hink of the long trip home.” These men, unlike the poet, came to conquer, not to contemplate, and see their faith as the guiding spirit of their savagery. Leaving Mass, their celebration of interiority, the soldiers are heard

… humming perhaps
L’Homme armé or some such tune,
they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
each out to catch an Indian for himself –

[CP, 92]

Yet Bishop refuses to acknowledge their conquest, preferring instead to depict the ever-receding unknown of the tropical “hanging fabric.” The hellish pollution of the second stanza clearly emanates from these “hard as nails” Christians. This perception becomes the opportunity to capitalize upon Keats’s mistake:

Or like stout1 Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star’d at the Pacific – and all his men
Look’d at each other with wild surmise –
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

“On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”

Cortez (unlike Balboa, the true discoverer of the Pacific) leads the assaulting Christians of Bishop’s poem. Christianity here is part of that life “of wealth and luxury” that has brought death and destruction upon the meek. The voices of the vulnerable, miniature women mingle with the cries of the natural creatures of the interior world; they seek a protection in that world beyond humanity.

Escape into that world is not always possible, however, and epiphany may offer only the illusion of escape into another dimension. Within a few pages, Bishop returns to the unyielding persistence of human violence. Again Christianity, or the fragments of religious celebration, hovers in the background, sanctioning the disarray and cruelties of
the piece. Unlike the protective fabric of the earlier poem, the firelit landscape of “The Armadillo” offers no sanctuary for the beleaguered creatures. The poem offers a glimpse of a secularized religious celebration, long since stripped of intent and meaning; the “frail, illegal fire balloons” ascend toward a waiting saint. In ascendancy, the fire floats assume lives of their own:

> the paper chambers flush and fill with light
> that comes and goes, like hearts.

[CP, 103]

Unstable and undirected, these heaven-bound balloons, gestures of “love,” bear the potential of either love or war:

> Once up against the sky it’s hard
> to tell them from the stars –
> planets, that is – the tinted ones:
> Venus going down, or Mars …

Oscillating between the heavenly extremes, the “tributes” represent a kind of chaos, not order; terror, not relief and penance. Bishop suggests that their very uncertainty – “With a wind, / they flare and falter, wobble and toss” – aggravates earthly insecurities. Inappropriate celebrations, which are both blasphemous and ignorant, violate the sacredness of ritual and disrupt the relationship between culture and nature. Such violation is likely to provoke fate and turn “dangerous”:

> but if it’s still they steer between
> the kite sticks of the Southern Cross,
> receding, dwindling, solemnly
> and steadily forsaking us,
> or, in the downdraft from a peak,
> suddenly turning dangerous.

The final line plummets toward the grim consequence of a moment of particularized sensation – an actual event, not merely a condition. Yet Bishop turns this tale of fragile faith and false tribute not on the plight of humanity but of innocent creatures. As messily careless in descent as ascent, the fire balloon “splatter[s] like an egg of fire,” immolating airborne and ground-dwelling inhabitants alike. The scene commands full attention as the fire “egg” ironically brings death to the owl’s nest:

> The flame ran down. We saw the pair
> of owls who nest there flying up
> and up, their whirling black-and-white
> stained bright pink underneath, until
> they shrieked up out of sight.

> The appearance of the visibly immature (“short-eared”) baby rabbit captures the instantaneous transition of the setting:

> So soft! – a handful of intangible ash
> with fixed ignited eyes.
Even as the poem reaches for the airy substance of the hare it disintegrates into the elements, returning the speaker’s gaze with the steadfast certainty of death. An epiphany would reach for comfort and assurance, for insight and explanations through a glimpse of a dimension in which suffering doesn’t occur. The lyric hero, however, responds only to ignorance and fear. In the italicized exclamation of the closure, the poet challenges even the aesthetic posture of poetry; she cries out as one forever earthbound:

Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!
O falling fire and piercing cry
and panic, and a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky!

The harsh deformations reject all falsification and softening of reality. Invocation and resignation collapse together in an impotent outcry as rage displaces epiphany. Unable to transcend the horror of this awesome occurrence, yet unwilling to return into the experience of the poem, Bishop gestures angrily but agnostically toward the beyond, challenging the type and substance of the incomprehensible. Bishop, like Wordsworth, sees humanity’s dilemma as one of estrangement from natural vision; but unlike her predecessor, she has neither the ability nor the will to penetrate the other-world and confirm herself in epiphany, further distancing herself from such harsh realities. She can neither accuse nor ignore her own kind; she can only grieve.

In her distrust of epiphany Bishop, however, occasionally finds herself competing with and antagonistic toward the natural or phenomenal world, and that dramatic situation requires an epiphany. “The Fish” [NS], Bishop’s most frequently anthologized poem, relies upon a Wordsworthian spiritual exercise to justify a rowboat transformation from plunderer to benefactor. The collapse of distinctions between land and sea, the air and earth of the speaker, obscures the borders between life and art. Bishop perceives the fish in land-language of “feathers” and “peonies” and “tinfoil” and “isinglass.” Even as she works those changes, however, the fish works reciprocal wonders of its own. Passive resistance deprives the fishing poet of her triumph: “He didn’t fight. / He hadn’t fought at all.” She soon understands that her knowledge of the fish is inaccurate.

Evidence of past encounters – “two heavier lines, / and a fine black thread / still crimped from the strain and snap / when it broke and he got away” – tells of a different fish. Earlier seen as “battered and venerable / and homely” (the line-break softening the accuracy of description), the fish now assumes the mock-role of tribal elder and hero:

Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.

[CP, 43]

Deprived of the fight, the poet must contemplate her position as the harbinger of death. The “little rented boat” marks a closed world wherein the speaker represents the moral force of her species. Taken by the incongruity and insignificance of the colloquy,
the reader is swept from the sensuous into the psychological, then moved beyond earthly particulars to a spiritual whole:

I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels – until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

As in the Christian parable, the oil upon the waters brings peace. It also engenders communication with the otherworldly. Through a rare Wordsworthian “spot of time,” a genuine epiphany, the poet admits, somewhat reluctantly, a momentary conventional wisdom. This leap from perception to wisdom signals the arbitrariness so characteristic of the epiphany.

Though “The Fish” is certainly central to her canon, Bishop’s boredom and dissatisfaction with the poem suggests a fear that the poem settles into sentiment instead of expanding into true wisdom. The matter-of-fact weightiness of the fish, a real survivor, lured the poet beyond the limits of her usual work, and tempted her out of her characteristic reticence. Fully aware and thoroughly suspicious of the technique and purpose of epiphany, Bishop usually contents herself with a suggestive advance toward and a sly retreat from the world of imaginative fulfillment beyond the page. Most of her journeys circumvent the critical moment of epiphany. Even as the poem reaches a crescendo, the poet reverses the flow, forcing it back into the journey, back within the intended limits of the poem itself. As “At the Fishhouses” demonstrates, Bishop is capable of presenting a Wordsworthian landscape only to carve the mass into her own figure. The glistening eternal present yields to the recurring past participles and tide of subjunctives that transform an otherworldly scene into a shared earthly experience – bounded by knowledge that is “historical, flowing, and flown.”

The most useful examples of Bishop’s near-epiphanic mode are found in her journey poems. Her destined or indifferent traveler sets forth with an unvoiced program, an inescapable linearity, but remains uncertain of the destination. The poems never lack a sense of discovery, though the end looms invariably in sight. “Cape Breton,” “The Riverman,” and “The Moose” suggest that Bishop was always aware of figures in the landscape; the problem was to present them without invoking a facile sentimentality that would accrue through gratuitous access to epiphany.

An opportunity to read the landscape for significance without plunging into epiphany comes in “Cape Breton” [CS], which challenges the preconceptions and sensitivities of the reader as it prepares, shapes, and withdraws a glimpse of the otherworldly. Bishop expects her readers to recall the lessons of its neighboring poem,2 “At the Fishhouses,” and apply that knowledge to this place and situation. “Out on the high ‘bird islands,’ Ciboux and Hertford,” readers enter a world removed from and yet sinsterly impregnated by human habitation. The relatively comical “razorback auks and the silly-looking
puffins” stand as ceremonial guards along the cliff’s edge “with their backs to the mainland.” Humanity’s presence, however, is everywhere: in the “pastured sheep,” in the frightening airplanes that threaten them, in the “rapid but unurgent [pulse] of a motorboat.” More than humanity’s “unnatural presence” threatens the islands, which are surrounded and upheld by the heartless immensity of the Melvillean sea; as the ocean seems its calmest, it turns most hazardous. Effortlessly, Bishop draws attention from the placid uncertainties of the landscape to the more threatening uncertainties of the sea:

The silken water is weaving and weaving,
disappearing under the mist equally in all directions,
lifted and penetrated now and then
by one shag’s dripping serpent-neck. …

[CP, 67]

The times and tides of Bishop’s sea form and enact their own fate. Bishop does not rely solely upon the sea to produce such mysterious effects. The fog blocks the various natural penetrations and rents in the earth’s surface — “the valleys and gorges of the mainland” — further suggesting the difficulty of isolation peculiar to the islands. The poet introduces the spiritual, unearthly world to draw us toward but not into the formative, causative world beyond the poem. The essence of this otherworldly island world lies buried among those folds and folds of firs: spruce and hackmatack —
dull, dead, deep peacock-colors,
each riser distinguished from the next
by an irregular nervous saw-tooth edge,
 alike, but certain as a stereoscopic view.

Bishop points to origins with the processional solemnity of “dull, dead, deep,” but quickly returns to the constraints of the quotidian. Moore’s “A Grave” — where “The firs stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top” — and Stevens’s “Domination of Black” echo throughout this stanza. The “striding” color of “heavy hemlocks” and the cry of the peacocks in the Stevens poem suggest a sudden onset of perception and fear. Bishop’s descriptive language parallels Stevens’s imaginative world of tropes in acknowledging the interface between reality and the unknown, this world and the next. Stevens’s fear of the peacock’s cry stems from his discomfort with his ignorance, while Bishop allays a comparable anxiety by sharing the uncertainties engendered by the irregularities that characterize the scene. At the midpoint of “Cape Breton” Bishop seems willing to risk (in Keatsian fashion) the terrible revelations that occur when one “look[s] too far into” a landscape.

The third stanza opens with a reckless, if comical, abandon that indicates a radical change of tone or a penetration of the poem’s surface tension. Here lurks the first hint of the presence of humankind since the ghostly pulsations of the motorboat at the opening. Human works check the flow toward interiority. The island idles on this Sunday as its earthmovers stand driverless, but the mere presence of those objects tempers the movement toward epiphany. Not only has work ceased but so has religious activity:

The little white churches have been dropped into the matted hills like lost quartz arrowheads.
The churches themselves are relics of another age and spiritual condition. The road is not a thoroughfare but rather the borderline between the experiential landscape and the interior, “where we cannot see.” Within,

where deep lakes are reputed to be,
and disused trails and mountains of rock
and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches
like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones –

lies the earth’s own record. Bishop suggests, however, that by its very uninhabitable nature, the landscape defies translation. She suggests that the real story has passed; human life has occurred after the fact:

and these regions now have little to say for themselves
except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward
freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing
in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets.

Bishop does not share Keats’s view of the nightingale as “immortal Bird,” but she is well aware of the poetic convention of bird-song as a tentative link between exterior and interior worlds. In “Cape Breton,” though, the sparrow songs and the torn netting pull the poem in a direction Bishop does not wish to follow. The fishnet metaphor, derived from Penelope’s weaving and the handiwork of the Fates, engages the inarticulate, magical creative imagination. The introductory movement of “At the Fishhouses” acknowledges this ominous weight, and uses it to further explore the relationship between netter and net, and by extension, poet and poem. In “Cape Breton,” however, the metaphorical insistence of the nets seems beyond the intended scope of the poem. They and the dangling notes of the song-sparrows drift into and become one with the world beyond her poetry. This marks a turning point, requiring either transcendence or a naturalistic embrace of these natural hieroglyphics to honor, as Bishop always does, the legibility of the text. Drawing attention from the celestial distractions, however, Bishop shifts the focus to the road below, which in following an erratic but earthly course asserts the power of human culture, especially its most mundane occasions, to place natural transcendence under erasure.

As a figure of narration, rather than of lyric ecstasy or brooding meditation, this “wild” road serves as a measure of limits and capacities. The confines of the bus, “packed with people, even to its step,” frame the pilgrimage, “It passes … It stops,” and the availability of domestic knowledge:

… a man carrying a baby gets off,
climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,
which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,
to his invisible house beside the water.

The family life of the baby-carrying gentleman remains in the imagination; his house, literally out of sight, is unrealized. The poet curiously regards the other guardians of the interior space; just two more passengers, “but today only two preachers extra, one carrying his frock coat on a hanger,” no different really in capacity from, say, the weekday
“groceries, spare automobile parts, and pump parts.” Like the tiny churches littering the hillside, these men of faith seem anachronistic.

“Cape Breton,” like “The Monument,” repeatedly shifts its stance at the onset of epiphanic moments. Bishop is ostensibly shifting her viewpoint, but for what purpose? What does she hope to accomplish by moving from an island profile to a mist-shrouded glimpse of the settled mainland, and then to the departures and arrivals of a bus trip? In the final stanza, apparently on the brink of epiphany, an odd reversal occurs. Linked to the final lines of “At the Fishhouses,” the first line of the closure of “Cape Breton” – “The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts” – does not surprise. This assertive continuity is pure Bishop. Yes, the reader assents, this is true. Here, however, differing from more characteristic Bishop closures, an epiphanic suggestion of the otherworldly enters. The cloaking chill has its roots in prehistory, beyond “earthly trust.” How different the effect of the last stanza would be if Bishop had chosen to retain the final word, to deliberately limit her poem’s world:

The thin mist follows
the white mutations of its dream;
an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.
The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.

This remains for Bishop a rather open closure; the poem halts at a moment in which nature and culture seem in verbal congruence. The “ancient chill,” reminiscent of the “chill white blast of sunshine” in “A Cold Spring,” invokes the world of the unknown that engenders the brooks, calves, birds, and even buses of the phenomenal world.

When Bishop sorted and recast her memories of a bus trip from Nova Scotia to Boston, she made a poem of confrontation and exchange with nature that verges on epiphany, but retreats at the last moment into the natural domesticity of the creature world. “Back to Boston” (the working title for “The Moose” [G]) bears the lineaments of an actual bus trip, but turns into a response to romanticism and what she saw as its conflict with life. Situating the narrator in the trope of westward travel, she builds toward and then deviates from an expected epiphany; rather than fully develop her trope, she prefers to pause and reflect upon the “little of our earthly trust,” confounding nature and culture in an embodiment, a creature that is neither threateningly wild nor sentimentally tame.

The measured sestets replicate the moral increments of the human condition. Unlike the repeated sameness of “At the Fishhouses” (“I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same, / slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones”) or the monotony of the landscape of “Crusoe in England” (“The sun set in the same sea, the same odd sun rose from the sea”), the habits of the natural world of “The Moose” are vaguely reassuring, predictable, repeatable. The Möbius strip – winding and returning – six-stanza, single-sentence introduction creates a recognizable, though not necessarily specific, landscape. The scene defies placement on a map, but its characteristics are predictable. The world depicted in this journey-poem sustains the speaker with glimpses of domesticity to counter the dark and the unease of travel. Inhabited by consumers of “fish and bread and tea,” the landscape offers security in spite of the flux of travel and of the poem itself.
The herrings, the sun, and even the church depend on the will of the sea, which invests the land with life and uncertainty. The vulnerable landscape penetrates the very vehicle of discovery in the poem, the bus:

through late afternoon
a bus journeys west,
the windshield flashing pink,
pink glancing off of metal,
brushing the dented flank
of blue, beat-up enamel

[CP, 169]

The mortal substance of the bus reminds us of those “Under the Window” vehicles that so eloquently raised the issues of health and disease (the Mercedes-Benz truck with “Throbbing rosebuds” and the old truck with “a syphilitic nose”). Even as the bus displays a vaguely human anatomy, it reveals a relatively human temperament as it goes

down hollows, up rises,
and waits, patient, while
a lone traveller gives
kisses and embraces
to seven relatives
and a collie supervises.

The solitary traveler bids farewell to her kind, while the dog, a guardian of stationary domesticity, presides over the departure into the unknown. Linking the fixed and the mobile worlds in this genre scene gives the landscape an air of unity and harmony. By drawing the introduction together with a series of where and pasts, in the present tense, Bishop emphasizes the predictable, accountable, acceptable aspects of the scene.

As certainly as the traveler relinquishes family and home, the poem relinquishes the comfortable but momentary stasis of the genre scene, along with the scene itself. The true journey begins; the poem abandons the tropes of place-specific domesticity (elms, farm, dog) that embody family, home, and landscape. The mist, a painterly element, drifts in to shroud, enfold, and disclose the dislocating countenance of the natural surroundings. As the familiar world fades in the mist, the poem shifts its attention to a world of diminished scale and microscopic form:

The bus starts. The light
grows richer; the fog,
shifting, salty, thin,
comes closing in.

Its cold, round crystals
form and slide and settle
in the white hens’ feathers,
in gray glazed cabbages,
on the cabbage roses
and lupins like apostles …
The atmosphere, though hardly threatening, rapidly grows murky. The “sweet peas cling” to their strings and the “bumblebees creep / inside the foxgloves” for certainty and shelter. As the fog obscures it adheres, transforming phenomena and affecting behavior. Whatever predictability this world possessed in daylight has receded in obscurity. Potentially magical as this landscape had become, it in no way resembles the celestial world of “Seascape” or the iridescent world of “At the Fishhouses.” Bishop is determined to avoid tropes of sublimity (though toying with Wordsworth’s Snowdon mist) and make this bus–trip only as rich as everyday life.

The gradual descent into evening (announced by “evening commences”) occasions a renewed commitment to routine, which offsets the slide into the romantic otherworld of the fog. Frequent stops, signaling arrivals and departures, suggest the continued proximity of the familiar world. The routine of a household as “a woman shakes the tablecloth / after supper” adequately deters the Homeric sense of travel–as–epic. Evening domesticity, despite the passage of the vehicle, enacts its schedule, regular as the tides. Gradually, however, this artificial world yields to the unfocused (because sensory–deprived) world of disconnected sensations, a world unorchestrated by familiar motifs of order and routine:

The Tantramar marshes
and the smell of salt hay.
An iron bridge trembles
and a loose plank rattles
but doesn’t give way.

Destabilized by unexpectedly full sensory application, the poem drifts through a narrative of peripheral glances, partial appreciations. Even as the postprandial woman fades in that flickering instant, the bus slips into a cloaked land and sea world where the salt marsh sensationally reveals its true and frightening origins. Human structures quake in the uncertainty of this setting; they react in “fear” as they “tremble” and “rattle.” Though they stand firmly, if dubiously, those structures (and the traveler) feel collapse may be imminent. Once again the poem prepares the reader to meet the otherworldly. Though reduced to noting particulars – synecdoches of books and bark – the traveler attempts to impose some structure on a formless environment, and in doing so risks epiphany:

On the left, a red light
swims through the dark:
a ship’s port lantern.
Two rubber boots show,
iluminated, solemn.
A dog gives one bark.

This fixed, solemn scene is more than sufficient to trigger an epiphany and render the bus journey a romantic narrative into sublimity and otherworldliness; but the moment passes, ungrasped. The entrance of a particularized, characterized, destined human being interrupts the moment of epiphanic possibility. Her personal characteristics, as she enters “brisk, freckled, elderly” to encounter her fellow travelers, underscore her ordinary, reassuring earthiness, as if to assert in her bearing the sufficiency of this phenomenal world. With her words to the bus driver, “All the way to Boston,” the pilgrimage gains definition and a final destination. Having finally mapped the excursion and avoided premature closure, the poem returns to the preparatory atmosphere that clarifies even as it clouds.
Misty night landscapes and travel constitute a familiar romantic motif. Primed with specific literary sensations, the poem generates a powerful but familiar conjunction between the “moonlight and mist.” The landscape – “hairy, scratchy, splintery” – however, like the “brisk, freckled, elderly” traveler, resists the ascent into a symbolic mode. Eased by the consonantal texture of the material world, the speaker forsakes romance and allegory and reclines toward sleep. This moment of partial oblivion invokes the antecedent world of memory:

Snores. Some long sighs.
A dreamy divagation
begins in the night,
a gentle, auditory,
slow hallucination. …

Sprung from but simultaneously divorced from the surrounding matrix of landscape and domesticity, the poem now drifts into the language of ancestry and archetype. Though relying on unsorted and scattered particulars, Bishop relates her speaker to humanity as a whole, and more firmly anchors her in the historical world of culture, by means of an overheard, extended flow of anecdote and genealogy, narrated by anonymous yet firmly characterized interlocutors:

In the creakings and noises,
an old conversation
– not concerning us,
but recognizable, somewhere,
back in the bus:
Grandparents’ voices

uninterruptedly
talking, in Eternity:
names being mentioned,
things cleared up finally;
what he said, what she said,
who got pensioned;
deaths, deaths and sicknesses;
the year he remarried;
the year (something) happened.
She died in childbirth.
That was the son lost
when the schooner foundered.

Devoid of immediate personal significance, these recollections of strangers revolve upon the common organic insults of “deaths, deaths and sicknesses.” These consequential events, though requiring narration, stand isolated against the flow of history. Death itself, an abstraction commemorated in black-bordered obituaries is random and commonplace, yet humanly fascinating. Death occupies the poet’s attention in the way that births and marriages do, as dignifying aspects of the quotidian. Mention of the archaic tragedy – “the schooner foundered” – elevates the discussion even beyond the elevated quotidian to touch upon a mythic dimension and a classic sense of the tragic. Catastrophic events, however, derive their significance from their fatal outcome. The universality of
this closure makes it more bearable, more conversational, less newsworthy. Bishop notes the lack of impact of old news in her survey of “The Bight” [CS]:

Some of the little white boats are still piled up against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in, and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm, like torn-open, unanswered letters. The bight is littered with old correspondences.

[CP, 60]

Finally the tide of specificity affects only the living; a dreamy retrospect leaves us meditating dates that resonate – “the year (something) happened” – long after the significance of the event has withered. Shuttling pronominal exchanges invite the auditor into this world of common history, prompting recall of those universal characters who went “to the bad.” The tentacular frame of reference outlines a common family tree. Individuality, the raw particulars, dissolve in a repetitious history of insults, injury, and events. The drone of recurrence secures and assures the listener while imposing a sense of commonality through disaster.

The traveler in “The Moose,” withdrawing from recognition and resignation – “Life’s like that. / We know it (also death).” – cuddles down into a child’s secure understanding and relaxed confidence. Life passes in tranquillity, grandparents droning

in the old featherbed,
peacefully, on and on,
dim lamplight in the hall,
down in the kitchen, the dog tucked in her shawl.

Now, it’s all right now even to fall asleep just as on all those nights.

Though at first this dream-world excursion seems to reach beyond the phenomenal world, Bishop withdraws, reorders, and projects the dream into the quotidian world of her poem. In spite of the childlike acceptance of everything predictable and routine, the language of the memory-passages is that of adult recall. An earlier version shows that Bishop had originally intended a childlike passage similar to the innocence of “Five Flights Up” [G]:

Now, it is safe now to go asleep Day will take care of things.

[Typescript Draft]

The little dog next door barks in his sleep inquiringly, just once. Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires once or twice, quavering. Questions – if that is what they are – answered directly, simply, by day itself.

[CP, 181]
As Robert Hass⁹ suggests, these midnight inquiries reassure by firmly situating the poem in the conscious world—“being and being seen.”

The encounter with the moose coincides with and benignly disrupts a false and earthbound self-assurance. Rather than reaching for the epiphanic sublime, Bishop summons one reasonably modest (though impressive in its own right) particular of the natural world. In the context of expected epiphany, this creature seems reassuring, only modestly awe-inspiring. Like the Poundian periplum,¹⁰ the encounter is indeed a sighting, a looking on the horizon, but it is certainly not comparable to the grandeur and spiritual pretension of a Wordsworthian natural revelation, nor does it offer the psychological certainty of Joyce’s urban epiphanies. The moose initiates the exchange and actually experiences the bus:

It approaches; it sniffs at
the bus’s hot hood.

Lacking gender, the creature appears at first both otherworldly and threatening; it seems a force unto itself. The curious animal beckons the dreamy travelers to consciousness. Unlike the retreating farmhouses and churches of the traveler’s landscape, the presence stands solid, comfortable, and inspirational:

Towerung, antlerless,
high as a church,
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses).

“Towerung,” vaguely threatening, but “antlerless,” somewhat tamed, the moose straddles the worlds of nature and culture, embodying a domestic sense of wholeness. Dwarfed by the unassuming grandeur of the natural world, the passengers resort to childish utterances of the commonplace and obvious, further emphasizing the creature’s domestic appearance and demeanor:

“Sure are big creatures.”
“It’s awful plain.”
“Look! It’s a she!”

Unembellished nature on a scale both intimate and impressive startles the passengers, but their commonplace expressions help ward off the sublime. A mute and mild moose, with its relative bulk, silence, curiosity, and sex, affects but does not intimidate them.

The moose does not in the least resemble the battered, defeated fish (“I looked into his eyes … / They shifted a little, but not to return my stare”) or Crusoe’s goats with their blank, malicious eyes. Instead, like the seal of “At the Fishhouses,” the moose participates in a direct encounter and exchange. The moose “sniffs” and “looks the bus over,” as if in recognition of this fellow creature, vehicle and passengers complimented by its interest in their otherness. The casual yet intimate relationship between moose and travelers demonstrates how “earthly trust” includes all surface-dwellers; as the animal senses the people, so the Boston-bound passengers experience the moose:

For a moment longer,

by craning backward,
the moose can be seen
on the moonlit macadam;
then there’s a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.

The essential fact grows dim and is finally displaced by the smell of gasoline, which complements the moose’s own scent. Though posed for transcendence, the poem at the moment of confrontation retreats into domesticity and the commonplace, the marvelous transforming environment serving to sensitize and alert the travelers to the precious life they share without violating the poem’s essential self-containment by evoking the sublime.

Though suspicious of the romantic hejira and the epiphany, Bishop employs their strategies while avoiding the moment of commitment to the ineffable of the infinite. The otherness of nature is but half a perception; nature sees human presence as unnatural and curious. Rather than strive to penetrate or transcend the phenomenal world, Bishop attempts to define domesticity in relation to otherness, to learn by deferring the language of the interior to more clearly experience the language of the palpable world of surface and texture. Finally she asks, “What does nature make of us?” – underscoring the unbridgeable difference between the self and the exterior world.

Bishop attempts to pose an accurate relationship with the environment. Human limitations – destinations, schedules, births, deaths – mirror environmental complexities. Like Darwin, she delights in the natural world because it is natural; she sees the moose not as an emissary from the beyond but as a moose – and marvels at its “mooseness.” Generating a language of the environment without attempting to confound it with the self empowers the quotidian, with its hint of epiphanic possibility, which for Bishop is the proper material of poetry.

The act of naming, the other rhetorical device referred to at the beginning of this chapter, in romantic poetics begins with and requires the invocation of the social construct of authorship. Autobiography, a characteristic romantic-modern mode, enforces the notion of the voice of witness as one of authenticity and authority. This claim to authority, however, which was explored in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and claimed by modern poets like Robert Lowell, troubled Bishop. Her lifelong debate with herself concerning the tensions between life and authorship, autobiography and poetry surface repeatedly in her correspondence with Lowell. What she claimed of Marianne Moore in her memoir, “Efforts of Affection”), she would claim of herself: “to be a poet was not the be-all, end-all of existence.” In December 1957, when both poets were in the midst of their life studies, Bishop wrote to Lowell:

> And here I must confess … that I am green with envy of your kind of assurance. I feel that I could write in as much detail about my Uncle Artie, say – but what would be the significance? Nothing at all …
>
> Whereas all you have to do is put down the names! And the fact that it seems significant, illustrative, American, etc., gives you, I think the confidence you display about tackling any idea or theme, seriously, in both writing and conversation.

The seriousness of this lament is offset by Bishop’s “green with envy” sly aside. Though she sees a collateral relationship between “significance” and “confidence,” this does not confirm a sense of insecurity on her part. Rather, I suggest, she recognizes the need for
a different kind of authorial posture for herself. If name-dropping and historical context
will not work for her, what will?

Bishop requires a fresh approach to the question of authorial presence and its conse-
quences for a poetry conscious of the problems of naming and unnaming. She intuits
and anticipates the crisis of authorship and the literary text discussed by Michel
Foucault in “What Is an Author?” Foucault suggests that modern literary critics continue
to believe that:

the author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in
a work, but their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his
biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social
position, and the revelation of his basic design).

Like Foucault, Bishop challenges the romantic assumption of authorial presence. Further, she asks her readers to socialize the poem, to recognize its full range of signifi-
cance, in the absence of conventional authorial sanction. The confidence of these poems
derives from abandonment: the act of naming becomes one of unnaming. Biography,
social position (Bishop appears to be saying), as pre-existent constructs with authority
outside of the text, have no place in these poems.

“In the Waiting Room” and “Crusoe in England” – the opening poems of Geography
III – read intertextually reveal just how deeply and ironically Bishop engaged in the
relationship between the self and author, history and memory, orality and literacy,
naming and unnaming – indeed, in the binary oppositions of her aesthetic. It is this
rhetoric of unnaming that generates the complexity (not the debility) of self-reference
and the provisional meaning not only in her last works but throughout her career. Here
the poems beckon and then thwart the reader intent on finding significance embedded
in a life. The reader obsessed with the mock reality of life will never encounter the real
in Bishop’s world.

“In the Waiting Room” and “Crusoe in England” enact competing genealogies of
social and personal identity. Insofar as these poems may be read as poems of poetic call-
ing, they bear the testimony of a poet resolute in her determination to designate a fic-
tional self without recourse to the power of naming conferred by the social construct of
authorship, and to force authority, instead, from unnaming. This rejection of the self as
social construct and privileged naming may seem even more romantic than the solipsism
of authorship because it attempts to reinvigorate the originative power of naming.
Bishop, however, neither claims access to origins nor refuses the social meaning imposed
by language and culture. Instead she attempts to displace the romantic concept of autho-
rial autonomy, because it is a received and therefore logocentric social construct, and
install through unnaming and renaming a more broadly mediated sense of things and
experience, a socially rather than egoistically based phenomenology.

“In the Waiting Room” may be seen as a prelapsarian poem of anticipation of that
social state that precedes the acceptance of received namings; “Crusoe in England”
may be read as a postlapsarian meditation on the originating power of naming and
renaming. In reinventing the social world that connects the two, she seems willing to
reconsider all forms of “name” appropriation: place, family, sex, generation, things.
Discovering a world where (as Stevens found) “Mrs. Anderson’s Swedish baby / Might well have been German or Spanish,” she then rejects all such forms of
naming as well as (what Foucault calls) “author construction.” Each poem reenacts
“birth, procreation, and death” as a debate between naming and unnaming, the loss imposed by a social (i.e., authorial) identity.

In 1961, Bishop wrote “The Country Mouse,” a posthumously published memoir dedicated to her childhood return to Worcester, Massachusetts, after a lengthy stay with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia. Were it not for its startlingly revealing conclusion, the memoir, in spite of its abundance of details, would suffer from (by Bishop’s own standards) insignificance. In the final paragraphs, however, which constitute the nucleus of “In the Waiting Room,” Bishop begins to trouble over the obvious: the social obligation of being human. Having been jolted into awareness of her adoptive family’s class status (hers was a family with servants), she recalls with equal sensitivity the strangeness of being a human being. As she waits for her aunt in the dentist’s waiting room:

I felt … myself. In a few days it would be my seventh birthday. I felt I, I, I, and looked at the three strangers in panic. I was one of them too, inside my scabby body and wheezing lungs. “You’re in for it now,” something said. How had I got tricked into such a false position? I would be like that woman opposite who smiled at me so falsely every once in a while. [CPr, 33]

The history of identity is bound to the memory of its occasion. The response is visceral, not intellectual:

“You are you,” something said. “How strange you are, inside looking out. You are not Beppo, or the chestnut tree, or Emma, you are you and you are going to be you forever.”

It was like coasting downhill, this thought, only much worse, and it quickly smashed into a tree. Why was I a human being?

The fact of this prerational recognition scene resides in the primacy of childhood identity. The duplicity the child hears and sees in the adult world can only be named by those understudy pronouns: I and you. While dogs, trees, and even servants have names, this as yet unnamed child wrestles with but a taxonomic classification: human.

“In the Waiting Room” marks Bishop’s return to these issues of naming and unnaming, reading and writing, sounding and hearing. Though descriptive, the poem depends less on physical detail and more upon a dialogue between the unnamed (socially unrestricted) self – “I” – and the named (socially restricted) – “an I.” The child initially finds security in proper names: “Worcester, Massachusetts” and “Aunt Consuelo.” The certainty fades with the appearance of the intrusive, indefinite pronoun: “It was winter. It got dark / early” [my emphasis]. Bishop will rely upon the ambiguity of “it” and its corresponding reluctance or inability to name throughout the poem.

Left alone, the child “I” sees and reads the named National Geographic. Its “studied photographs” reveal an unpredictable, eruptive (prelapsarian) landscape. Literacy fails, except as an escape route, where metaphor is concerned. Investigating scenes from this magazine, she catalogues that which she can name: volcano erupting, Osa and Martin Johnson. Properly attired people bear names: “Osa and Martin Johnson”; dead people lose their names: “– ‘Long Pig,’ the caption said.” Orality and literacy compete for the child’s attention, each seductive in its way. But she mishears what “the caption says”:

“A dead man slung on a pole / – “Long Pig.” Mimicking the instability of spoken language and substituting a euphemism for a proper name, the conversational caption confuses the earnest student, who fails to understand that the dead man is here regarded as a food source.
The verbal unknown occasions further confusion as the child’s eye traces the physical, sexual uncertainties of uncovered women. So foreign are the native unnamed women “with necks / wound round and round with wire” that the child “reads” right through them: “I read it straight right straight through. / I was too shy to stop” [emphasis added]. Unable to name, the child resorts to the tense comfort of the unnamed: “it.” She retreats from the shifting planes of unnamed, unnamable uncertainty to the fixity of that which bears a name: “the cover: / the yellow margins, the date.” Such is the force of Dickinson’s notch in the maelstrom.

Unable to read her way into the larger constellation of human beings, the child nevertheless recognizes the sounded family identity when she hears it. Like the auditor in “The Country Mouse,” this child hears from the inside out. History and memory fuse, creating a new identity for her:

What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I – we – were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic,
February, 1918.

[CP, 160]

The intensity of this “it” draws upon the accumulated chain of reference: “winter,” “dark early,” “Babies with pointed heads,” “horrifying breasts,” and Aunt Consuelo’s “oh! of pain.” Acceding to the social demands, the effect of her aunt’s voice, the child involuntarily discovers her own collective voice: I becomes we. Dates, like names or Aunt Consuelo’s voice, momentarily pierce the surface of the “cold, blue-black space” – the sea of habit threatening the child’s consciousness. She has lost perceived autonomy even as she has gained a social identity.

Cautiously authorial, the child reads this new self as a mode of being. For the moment the discovery is personal, familial. This is not an attempt to place a “Bishop” in context; rather, it is an opportunity to feel a “self” move forward and backward into genealogy, into time:

But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.

Unlike the familial significance attributed to Lowell by Bishop, the effectiveness of Bishop’s self-reading derives from the strategic use of the second person. As if to demonstrate her presence in the text, she removes her self from it long enough to proclaim a social identity, to name her self. This somewhat grudging sensation, verified spontaneously by the child’s reaction to her aunt’s cry, suggests the child’s plight as it would seem from the outside. It recalls the Stevensian self: “Detect[ing] the sound of a voice that doubles its own.” However “unlikely” or “strange” these binding “similarities” seem to the child they are the social facts of her life. Though they seem to her unauthorized,
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breasts, boots, the National Geographic, and the family voice nonetheless constitute homogenizing social realities. By adhering to the laws of pronominal reference, Bishop intensifies the almost Ibsenlike (recall the Button-molder of Peer Gynt) threat to an artist’s emerging identity.

While “In the Waiting Room” has been routinely read as a poem of juvenile terror, isolation, and marginality, none of those readings account for the remarkable counterforce of the solitary “Me–Myself–I,” the artist’s isolated yet assertive self. Even if the unnamed self (as seen from the inside out) threatens to fail or consume, it remains the volatile poetry voice for Bishop. She may require (what Beckett calls) a “temporal specification”—“fifth / of February, 1918”—to allow her “to measure the days that separate [her] from that menace” (that which threatens identity). The “falling off” enacted in this poem is the fall into social identity, restrictive or inaccurate naming. The alternative seems to be the “big black wave” of annihilation or namelessness. To be “back in it” is to survive with a social surface—name, age, gender, place—at odds with the continually unnamed self. “The War was on” presages a career intensely committed to slipping the yoke of social identity and changing the rules of the name game.

The child of “In the Waiting Room” advances with uncertainty from the passivity of reader to the tentative aggressiveness of writer—to the authority of authorship. The socializing power of language itself lures the unnamed I into the realm of a given and feminine name—and perilously into the beyond of collective, pronominal identity: “one of them.” This rush of potential identities refuses to pause at the brink of authorial privilege—Elizabeth Bishop—and instead accelerates into the swirl of them. Refusing even gender specificity (recalling that in her memoir, Bishop ends with the more general “Why was I a human being?”), retaining no element of uniqueness, this identity is as good as none.

If the waiting room child must advance toward naming and its requisite social obligation, then “Crusoe at Home” (Bishop’s working title for “Crusoe in England”) has the life-won opportunity to revert to his unnamed I. Even as “In the Waiting Room” advances the cause of poetic naming, “Crusoe” champions the necessity of retreat. The child relinquishes ignorance for the sake of her name; Crusoe abandons the text and the very power of naming as if discovering the devitalizing force of individuation. Like other world-weary “I am” poems (John Clare’s “I Am,” Yeats’s “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” Wallace Stevens’s “First Warmth” or “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”), “Crusoe” makes its most compelling appeal for readership by its utter rejection of its social role.

The landscape seems familiar; yet this volcanic wasteland is “dead as ash heaps.” The colonial appropriators, or namers, are no longer in the characters of Osa and Martin Johnson; they have coalesced into the discovering and naming country itself: England. Decidedly postlapsarian, Crusoe both remembers and re-enacts that ahistorical, asocial moment of genuine love in exile.

Exasperated by the feminine, childhood aspects of the name game, Bishop turns from the dilemma of the given and family name to explore the old age of the retired adventurer. Crusoe, like Lowell, comes with his attendant significance—his fictive and historical authority. In spite of that burden, however, he shrugs off his social (i.e., linguistic) inheritance as irrelevant and inaccurate. Seemingly revisiting in memory the landscape of the National Geographic of “In the Waiting Room,” Crusoe dismisses everything the child struggled to acquire. Orality and literacy fail to capture the essence of his life,
which remains “un-rediscovered, un-renamable.” The authorial gesture of the poem depends upon the exasperation that “None of the books has ever got it right.” Like Ishmael, Crusoe knows that “true” places remain unnamed.

From Crusoe’s perspective, to acknowledge the shock of “waiting room” recognition is to acquiesce to the failure of language to identify. The core of the poem, preceded by the weary “Well,” charts the encumbrance of language in a solitary world. Relative scale (“I’d think that if they were the size / I thought volcanoes should be, then I had / become a giant”), proper names, aesthetics, categories of all kinds ring false in this underpopulated landscape of “one kind of everything.” Here the distinctions between ignorance and understanding, error and truth seem impossible to ascertain. Who would appreciate the act of delimiting that naming reflects? The landscape seems fated to the same oblivion as language as Bishop echoes “The Map” (where “The names of the seashore towns run out to sea”) in the volcanic landscape (where “The folds of lava, running out to sea, / would hiss”).

Like the speaker in John Clare’s “I Am,” Crusoe, too, is a “self-consumer of [his] woes.” Even in isolation this must be given a name and a circumstance: “‘Pity should begin at home.’ So the more / pity I felt, the more I felt at home.” Crusoe resorts to this colloquy with himself to externalize and verify the overwhelmingly interior sensation of pity. The physical remove becomes palpable as he conjectures: “What’s wrong about self-pity, anyway?” [my emphasis] Crusoe confesses his humanity through by naming his emotion. For as D. H. Lawrence asserts in his own “Self-Pity”21: “I never saw a wild thing / sorry for itself.” Locating his emotion in language denies Crusoe the spontaneity or wildness of the animal world.

Incapable of “looking up” that which he does not possess, Crusoe abides by the asocial strictures of solitude. An air of unreality pervades the intense reality of this itemized landscape. Like the waiting-room child, Crusoe “reads” the landscape and attempts to place through names its inhabitants. His solitary word games seek to defeat “the questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies / over a ground of hissing rain”: “Mont d’Espoir or Mount Despair / (I’d time enough to play with names),” but serve only to sound off: Names are rendered meaningless. Knowledge and language as social acts become nightmarish anachronisms:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{... I’d have} \\
\text{nightmares of other islands} \\
\text{stretching away from mine …} \\
\text{………………………….} \\
\text{……………..knowing that I had to live} \\
\text{on each and every one, eventually,} \\
\text{for ages, registering their flora,} \\
\text{their fauna, their geography.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

[CP, 165]

Such occupational investments in local identity terrify the stranded character. As the waiting-room child discovered, even local geography requires an audience to render the significance fixed.

The eight-stanza terror of the societyless residence is peremptorily displaced by Crusoe’s recollection of Friday. While language seems to have outlived its usefulness, Crusoe nonetheless fixes his “other” with a socially significant temporal marker: he names “Friday.” Even as Crusoe details the effect of this new society, the impoverishment
of language is complete. Declaring parenthetically that “Accounts of [Friday’s arrival] have everything all wrong,” he fails to meet the demands of language. Friday is “nice” and “pretty”; they were “friends.” Stripped of a linguistic interface, Crusoe appears to have met the private, unmediated demands of a relationship shared with but one. Language cannot intervene.

The authorial impulse to give memory a name by converting it into history is a commemorative one. With Friday’s deathdate comes the intrusive, factual marker – fixing in time the moment recalled, begging to be named. Crusoe’s/Bishop’s public and private artifacts seem destined for the Temple of the Muses: “The local museum’s asked me to / leave everything to them.” The human experiences of love and desperation coalesce about the devitalized remains: “the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes.” Like Yeats’s “Old iron, old bones, old rags,” the island artifacts sit unre-discoverable and unrenameable. In questioning the value of this hopelessly romantic, Emersonian art of naming, Crusoe challenges the public appropriation of named things even as he re-collects the private bonding of language to love:

How can anyone want such things?
– And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles
seventeen years ago come March.

Unable to thwart the named order of things – names, dates, countries, diseases – Crusoe can only recall a time when the world was unnameable but “nice.” Readers of Stevens will recognize both place and question: “These external regions, what do we fill them with / Except reflections, the escapades of death.”22

A reading of Geography III that considers the issues raised in discussing these two poems would presuppose a willingness to accept this paradox: that as autobiography abandons Bishop’s poems, they begin to live. In American poetry only Dickinson has been as successful in frustrating critics who need to use the life as a means of explaining. Bishop’s appreciation of Lowell’s “kind of assurance” drove her to assert her confidence from the “interior,” where, with due respect for the social and cultural energy that makes art possible, the poet is alone with the task of distinguishing her work from her self. Her life’s sad facts do not explain why “we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy” when reading her poems and correspondence. Critics too eager to privilege autobiography over other forms of fiction to satisfy current critical trends risk reducing these multidimensional poems to self-elegy. This lack of critical imagination unduly restricts access to a body of work demanding recognition of its, not the poet’s, authority.

The “old correspondences” littering Geography III can easily incite misreading, searching for poems definable by cultural or political communities Bishop herself rejected. Seeking the self Bishop deliberately withholds requires resisting a “knowledge … historical, flowing, and flown.” This resistance denies the power of her assertive unnaming, forgetting that to be at war with something (in this case, restrictive identities) is in fact to confront it.

Extending this reading method to the entirety of The Complete Poems, 1927–1979 reveals Bishop’s career-long desire to subvert the “author-function,” a desire largely fulfilled in the dialectic between autobiographical strategies and those of self-effacement. “Cape Breton” describes the resulting natural scene, which refuses the pathetic fallacy and turns a blank face to the viewer: “Whatever the landscape has of meaning appears to have been abandoned … these regions now have little to say for themselves.” The
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private life inspiriting Bishop’s poems cannot sustain them; they must live on their own, but they do so by first appropriating that private life and then placing it under erasure. The reader, faced with the transparent splendor of these poems, might wonder with the speaker of “Anaphora”: “‘Where is the music coming from, the energy? / The day was meant for what ineffable creature / we must have missed?’” As Foucault warns, “The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.” Thrifter than most writers, and anxious that neither name nor gender restrict the authority of her poems, she withdraws, through unnaming, the authorial privilege by purposing, then exposing the feigned naïveté of autobiography. The resultant fiction in its complex reflexivity is too self-possessed for the reader or critic to unmask, and paradoxically refuses either to confound life and art or to clearly distinguish them.

Notes

2 See typescript drafts of “Cape Breton” [Vassar]. Bishop notes in a piece titled “Bird Islands” that:

Giboux and Hertford, about six miles off the coast of Nova Scotia. During the war planes practiced dropping bombs on a rock between the two. The sheep pastured on them would get frightened and often stampede in a panic and fall over the cliffs into the sea.

6 See James McIntosh, Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974) for a detailed discussion of Thoreau’s “shifting stances” in the natural world with its implications for transcendentalism in general.
7 Working title “Back to Boston,” 27/403 [Vassar].
8 See File 27/403 [Vassar].

Being and being seen. R. D. Laing says somewhere that small children don’t get up at night to see if you’re there, they get up to see if they’re there. … Maybe our first experience of our own formation.

11 For a useful discussion of domesticity as topic in Bishop, see Helen Vendler, “Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly” in Modern Critical Views: Elizabeth Bishop, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), pp. 83–96. Once the only essay to make a compelling case for Bishop’s place in the canon, it now seems overcommitted to its theme. For example, in introducing “In the Waiting Room”:

No domesticity is entirely safe. As in the midst of life we are in death, so, in Bishop’s poetry, in the midst of the familiar, and most especially there, we feel the familiar as the unknowable. This guerilla attack of the alien, springing from the very bulwarks of the familiar, is the subject of “In the Waiting Room” (87). [emphasis mine]

A “dentist’s waiting room” does not seem to me to be “the very bulwarks of the familiar.” In fact, if we are to accept Vendler’s extreme depiction, it is just where one would expect the “guerilla attack of the alien.”
See “Efforts” [CPr], p. 156.

13 EB to Robert Lowell (December 14, 1957) [Harvard].


[U]nderstatement, so common in Bishop, gives words their full weight. As the fact of her own contin­gency strikes the child, “familiar” and “strange” become concepts which have lost all meaning. “Mrs. Anderson’s Swedish baby …”

17 Foucault, p. 151.


The self is a cloister full of remembered sounds
And of sounds so far forgotten, like her voice,
That they return unrecognized. The self
Detects the sound of a voice that doubles its own,
In the images of desire, the forms that speak,
The ideas that come to it with a sense of speech.


20 See 27/402 [Vassar].


23 Foucault, p. 159.

Works Cited


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PART TWO

Structuralism, Linguistics, Narratology