Strange New Canons: The Aesthetics of Classical Reception in 20th Century American Experimental Poetics

by

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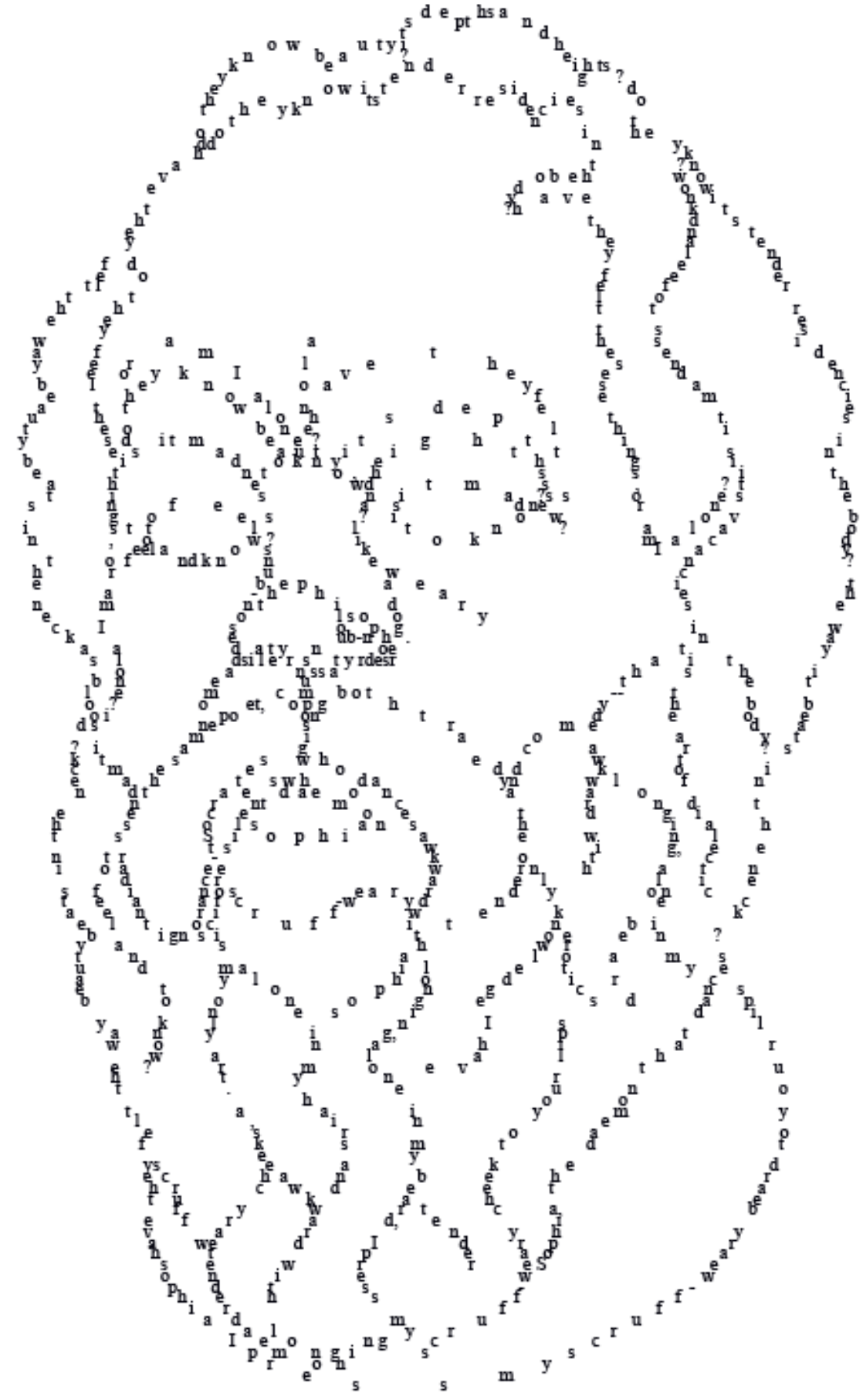
"Snub-Poemed"



for Carla—

ἀντι τᾶσ ἔγω οὐδὲ Λυδίαν παῖσαν οὐδ᾽ ἔρανναν.

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Introduction:

Literary Canonicity and Poetic Innovation

> The writer who shuns the deceptive aspects of tradition and assumes it no longer has anything to do with him still is constrained by it, above all through language. Literary language… derives its meaning from its history and this history embraces the historical process as such… To insist on the absolute absence of tradition is as naïve as the obstinate insistence on it. Both are ignorant of the past that persists in their allegedly pure relation to objects; both are unaware of the dust and debris which cloud their allegedly clear vision. Adorno, "On Tradition"[1]

Experimental poets after modernism in America turned to Greek and Latin texts as pretexts for exploding the ideal of the classical tradition, and explored, instead, the radical discontinuity and linguistic alterity of the classics. My dissertation brings together research into American avant-garde poetics and a set of concerns with ideas of tradition and "the classical" which proliferate in studies of modernism, but remain largely unexplored in studies of 20th century post- or counter-modernist experimental writing. By focusing on divergent but related modes of classical reception, I explore why "the classical" becomes a key site for experimental American poets such as Louis Zukofsky, David Melnick, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer, Charles Bernstein, and Susan Howe, and how these poets turn to classical Greek and Latin texts to play out questions of alterity, alienation, marginality, and the limits of representation. I argue that each of these modes, by alternate routes, destabilizes what is "classical" about the classical in

[1]Adorno, Theodor W. "On Tradition." *Telos* 1992.94 (1992): 75-82, p. 78.

order to arrive at a minor Greek and a minor Latin: minor, both in the sense of marginal and in the dissonant sense of a minor key. My dissertation therefore brings into dialogue a series of discourses that seem anathema to each other: novelty and tradition; the canon and the margins; the ancient and the modern.

Simon Goldhill, in *Who Needs Greek: Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism,* captures the multivalent indeterminacy of classicism as a site of both cultural hegemony and cultural contest: "The image of Greece becomes bolstered by idealism and fissured by lack and absence—a site of contention and difference as well as value and authority" (11).[2] Certainly, the overdetermination of Greek and Latin in high modernism was a commonplace.[3] William Carlos Williams described his fragmentary epic, *Paterson*, as "a reply to Greek and Latin with bare hands." [4] The wording and implications of such a description are enigmatic, rich with possible meanings. They encapsulate both an antagonism and an intimacy towards "the classical" in a single breath: a reply in the sense of a retort, with hands bare and ready to strike? A reply as a response of mutual longing, hands bare and ready to caress? A reply in the sense of homage or in

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[2] Goldhill, Simon. *Who Needs Greek: Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism.* Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[3] A number of studies have been invaluable in thinking through modernist classical intertextuality. Charles Martin's *Affecting the Ancients: Pound, Zukofsky, and the Catullan Vortex* (Buffalo, New York: State University of New York at Buffalo, 1987) and Diana Colecott's *H. D. and Sapphic Modernism, 1910-1950* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) both provide useful studies of the reception of a single classical author in critical modernist writers. Martin in particular helps to build a bridge between modernist and later modes of classical reception around the figure of Catullus, the reception of which is central to the dissertation's first chapter (see below). Goldman-Rosenthal's *Aristotle and Modernism: Aesthetic Affinities of T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Virginia Woolf* (Brighton, England; Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 1999) provides useful tools for understanding the impact of classical configurations of genre and aesthetics on modernism, and the reception of ancient philosophy in modernism. For studies which treat ideologies of the ancient in modernism more generally, see Jeffrey Perl's *The Tradition of Return: The Implicit History of Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) as an interesting treatment of the impact of various ideologies of "tradition" on modernism; and David Adam's *Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel* (Ithaca, New York; London: Cornell University Press, 2003) as a study of the intersections of ancient constructions of genre, the reception of epic, and colonialism.

[4] Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson.* Edited by Christopher J. MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1995, p.2.

response to linguistic beauty, ready to embrace? In keeping with Williams' presentism and commitment to the rhythms of natural speech, perhaps the crucial element is the hands' "bareness": Greek and Latin come to him gloved in their centuries of accrued history and veils of time, and he offers in response—as a mirror image? a reproach? a request?—hands stripped of history and mediation. With Greek and Latin stripped of their European and English sedimentation, dislocated from the rigid layers of mediation and reception, and configured as present, *Paterson* made these "dead" languages *living* according to a poetics of linguistic immediacy that composes the textual fabric of Williams' poem. For Williams, the "classical" was a vital site of cultural contestation; a battlefield on which high stakes encounters determined both the fate of contemporary poetics and the meaning of the past.[5]

The competing legacies of modernist classicism attest to the persistence of "hegemonic classicism" alongside the "demotic classicism" of a poet like Williams, as when Eliot decried the displacement of the King James translation: "in our headlong rush to educate everybody, we are lowering our standards, and… destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans."[6] What was at stake, for Eliot, is not at all the text itself of the ancient tradition, whether Biblical or Greco-Roman. The ancient texts themselves, after the vulgar drive of the demotic present has swept

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[5] Quartermain reads both the sense of retort and of longing as characteristic of Williams' "reply to Greek and Latin": "In deprivileging or perhaps reprivileging cultural icons, such a disturbance of settled hierarchies and authority is but an extension of William' refusal to let red and yellow mean anything but themselves… Hence *Kora in Hell* or the birth-of-Venus passages at the opening of *White Mule* are written… in opposition to a cultural baggage that impedes observation by inferiorising immediacy, making it stand for something else and turning it into a transparent window that seeks to deny it own existence through self-effacement" (16). Quartermain's description strikes me as absolutely correct, and yet it glosses over what is to me the most fascinating aspect of Williams' demotic "immediacy": its grounding in "cultural icons" such as "the-birth-of-Venus passage at the opening of *White Mule*." See Quartermain, Peter. *Disjunctive Poetics : From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*. Vol. [59]. Cambridge England ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

[6] Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. Harcourt, 1949.

away the sediment of its prior reception, are the "ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans." Eliot's moral qualm was precisely that the present would colonize the past, stripping it of its remoteness and "pastness," granting it an immediacy that would have made it available to all. For Eliot—and this may be characteristic of the methodologically conservative tendency in classicism in general—Ezra Pound's "make it new" came to mean "make it [the *pastness of the past*] new."[7] The job of Eliot's classicist is the continual renewal of the distance, strangeness, and cultural exclusivity of a classical past.[8]

The contemporaneity of a certain past was established or lost in the space of interplay between "Greek and Latin" and modernist poetics. For the modernists, the contemporaneity of "the modern" stood in an exquisitely complex relation to the contemporaneity of "the ancient," such that the "empty, homogenous time"[9] of modernity was a site of the instantaneously accessible archive of the historical past. Modernism involved a renegotiation of poetry's relationship to the past, sweeping away its historical distance and restoring the possibility of unmediated access. The "it" in Pound's "make it new" can be read as referring, not only to the aesthetic and formal dimension of language, but also to the past itself. Often, the implications of the classical in modernism had multiple valences similar to those of Williams and Eliot. Greek and Latin came to stand as both antagonistic interlocutors and figures for the crushing weight of a dead tradition, the response to which was the newness of modernist poetic idiom; and an object

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[7] Pound, Ezra. *Make it new*. Faber & Faber, 1934.

[8] Scroggins articulates "a brief taxonomy of modernist quotation" that is topical: "Eliot tended to quote previous authors in order to lend "atmosphere" to his own poetry, and to draw attention to parallels between what he described and what had been described before. Pound did the same, but more often he quoted what he called "luminous details," textual moments that briefly and memorably fix important cultural and historical facts" (417). Scroggins, Mark. *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky*. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007.

[9] This designation of the peculiar temporality of modernity is most well-known from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. Anderson, in fact, borrows the term from Walter Benjamin. See Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread of Nationalism.* London, New York: Verso, 1991, p. 24 and *passim.*

of impossible longing which structured the modernist text with a desire to recuperate, revivify, and make *present* an idealized and remote elsewhere. The classical was both a means of shoring up a kind of cultural authority, through obtaining and demonstrating mastery over a tradition and multiplying allusiveness; but at the same time a means of displacing and disrupting cultural authority by rewriting the meaning of the classical. Paradoxically, a key marker of modernism's newness, presentness, and contemporaneity, for many key modernists, was the simultaneous recuperation of a previously alienated, fragmented past—a past as what has been lost—to the status of an embodied, available, lived present.[10]

In moving from pre-war to post-war American poetics, I am interested in exploring a different sense of the present in relation to a classical past. The domain of this dissertation is the "postmodernist classicism" of avant-garde verse after modernism, a phenomenon that remains largely undertheorized in studies of experimental American poetics. Beyond existing studies of classical intertexts for modernist poetry, the lives and afterlives of classical intertexts in postmodernist experimentalism also deserve fuller consideration. The citational sensibility of modernism, grounded as it is in a largely classical and Biblical intertextual horizon, lends a degree of specificity to questions of reference, intertext, reception, and tradition, which most studies of experimentalism after modernism have subsumed under the general rubric of history,

[10] I take the sense of "living" and "contemporary" classics to be a particularly modernist version of classicism. Ming-Qian Ma, writing of Pound's *Cantos*, characterizes modernist intertextuality as dependent on "quotations… forfeit[ing] their independence in use in order to facilitate a textual hierarchy" ("A 'no-man's land!': Postmodern Citationality in Zukofsky's 'Poem Beginning The'" *Upper Limit Music: The Writings of Louis Zukofsky. Ed. Mark Scroggins. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P* (1997): 129-153), and Sternberg, similarly, as a situation in which the montage of the modernist work dominates the quoted text and forcibly assimilates it to its own intrinsic order, in which "the inset is communicatively subordinated to the frame" (131). See Sternberg, Meir. "Proteus in quotation-land: Mimesis and the forms of reported discourse." *Poetics today* (1982): 107-156.

displacement, and newness.[11] Critics have examined these appropriations, recuperations, and classical citational sensibilities piecemeal.[12] I propose a more comprehensive treatment that grounds abstract questions of reference and historical displacement in the persistent presence of classical languages and intertexts in the American experimentalist tradition. Throughout, I use "classicism," as a value neutral term, referring to any meta-textual mediation of Greek and Latin material texts. Most often, I use "classicism" in its primary sense to refer to the discipline of academic classicism and its entanglement with the broader history of classical reception. I also use "classicism" to refer to the alternative strategies of textual mediation employed by the poets I examine as a counter to academic or institutional classicism. Thus, each poet in the dissertation takes an explicit stance vis-à-vis his or her perception and reception of institutional classicism—the materially and culturally embedded mediations of classics as a discipline and an ideology—and each poet develops and opposes an alternative "antagonistic classicism," which sets itself against the hegemonic mediations of classical texts and employs its own unique strategies of

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[11] In many ways, despite some methodological departures, the terrain of the dissertation shares deep affinities with the exciting work being done on English-language experimental verse after modernism. Although a complete survey would be impossible here, there are several studies to which my dissertation owes some of its primary orientations. Maria Damon's *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), is a methodologically ambitious study which frames a similar constellation of experimental poets (in terms of chronology and movement). For a rewarding philosophical take on the modernist and post-modernist avant-garde, see Krzysztof Ziarek's *The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001). Studies that were particularly helpful for orienting Language Poetry in its own context and in relation to previous experimental movements have been Barrett Watten's *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), a methodologically ambitious treatment of experimentalism after modernism with a particular focus on Language poetry in comparative context; and Juliana Spahr's *Everybody's Autonomy: Collective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2001) which underscores the political dimensions of particularly Language poetry. Michael Davidson's *The San Francisco Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) similarly positions the middle way experimental movements of the San Francisco Renaissance, thereby bridging the narrative from modernism to Language Poetry. See also Lynn Keller's *Re-Making it New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[12] See footnote three.

mediation. This is to say that I consistently employ the term "classicism" to refer to the intersection of the texts themselves and their formal and ideological mediations, rather than the bare or denuded reality of a "text itself." When attempting to make a distinction between this interface of text and mediation and texts as separate from that interface, I most often use terms such as "Greek and Latin and languages and literatures."

In this sense, "classicism" represents the interface between text and ideology that encompasses the series of ideas, practices, and institutional contexts that assimilate past authors into a "tradition," with Greek and Latin functioning as idealized test cases for the functioning of said inclusion. Thus, Greek and Latin literatures and languages are not the only nodes that make up the matrices of classicism, but they stand at the top of a hierarchy reaching to the bottom. It is important to note that classicism is not, or not merely, classical languages or classical texts, but these texts *taken along with the ways in which they imbricate* the ideas, practices, and ideologies of classicism. In this way, we can imagine two copies of an identical text, say, for example, two copies of a given version of Catullus' Latin lyric poems. Each text is identical, and yet one, if seen from within and alongside the accrued sedimentations of classicism, is "Catullus," and the other merely a formulaic collection of Latin words. I mean this to include not only the complex attitudes that we might clearly recognize as part of an ideological framework, such as an attitude valorizing the ideality of Greek philosophical culture, for instance, but also the transmission of the most basic tools of accessing and mediating a text, such as language instruction in a classroom setting. "Classicism" is far from an imaginary—or purely imaginary—force, but part and parcel of the very material processes by means of which we access any classical text, part of the materially embedded framework of understanding. Classicism I define as the invisible

remainder, in light of which a Greek or Latin text is in excess of itself, is more than itself as a collection of words and sounds.

Here, I want to anticipate potential confusions. The central critical usefulness of the designation "classicism" is in consolidating a multitude of shifting, hyper-determined, contradictory valences of a similar phenomenon (interface between idea and text of Greek and Latin) which more often appears under many separate names. Likewise, though my extensive use of "classicism" as a term is, as I suggest above, value neutral—it describes an engagement with the idea or presence of Greek and Latin text—this neutrality applies only to its critical use as a description. In practice, both the term and phenomenon of "classicism," and to a lesser extent, "canon," are rarely neutral. Indeed, classicism, vis-à-vis the poetics and debates I consider, is a hyper-determined designation of value, often with multiple, competing referents. When Ginsberg writes, "THEY CAN TAKE THEIR FUCKING LITERARY TRADITION AND SHOVE IT UP THEIR ASS,"[13] he vehemently rejects a certain classicism—the Columbia classicism of Trilling and Podhoretz, for one—even as he moves towards his own brand of the same. What I refer to as Bernstein's "classicism" merely describes his interaction with Greek and Latin, even though from a perspective internal to his poetics the term is an inimical designation, and describes a particular valence or ideology of classicism. Multiple distinct conceptions of "classicism" further complicate this characteristic division between an "institutional" or "hegemonic" classicism and an antagonistic or anti-hegemonic classicism. Each poet might associate a certain mode of classicism with a prior avant-garde, or multiple modes with multiple prior literary movements, figuring one mode as an example of error and another mode as a filial model to which she casts back. Grappling with a single writer's poetics of reception often requires distinguishing between many discrete classicisms: modernist classicism, Objectivist classicism, Great Books classicism,

[13] Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*. Da Capo Press, 2008, p. 206.

hegemonic classicism, feminist classicism, and so on. The situation is similar for canon, where I encounter examples that encompass the standard sense of "core texts," as well as practices of "marginal canons"—alternative canons valorized against particular institutional reading lists, in the way that the Language poets look to Laura Riding— and even "anti-canons," assemblages of authors a particular milieu loves to hate and hates to love. Thus, the multiple, competing, and often contradictory instances of "classicism" proliferate to such an extent that it is best to leave determinations above and beyond "interface with Greek and Latin" to the term's modifiers and given context.

My dissertation pairs two authors in each of three chapters according to the dual criteria of literary period and mode of classical reception. The literary historical narrative of the chapters traces the line of avant-garde practice that runs from the modernist, though the late modernist Objectivist movement, the poetic developments of the New American Poetry in the 1950's and 60's, and culminates in the Language Writing in the 70's and 80's.[14] The conclusion steps outside of this lineage to explore innovative developments in contemporary poetry. Chapter One offers a synchronic look at the broader literary historical arguments that develop across the dissertation's chapters. The first chapter sets up the transition from modernist to later classicisms, focusing on the late modernist/Objectivist Louis Zukofsky, while also offering a "preview" of the dissertation's broader chronological arc by pairing Zukofsky with the Language poet, David Melnick. Chapter Two's movement into the New American Poetry brings into focus new issues of media representation and mass image as it examines Allen Ginsberg, the most well known of the New Americans, and Jack Spicer, whose poetics offer a critical perspective on Ginsberg's version of classicism. The final chapter's movement into Language poetry grapples

[14] For a take on this narrative that not only rehearses but grounds its transitions in detailed analysis of Ginsberg's *Indian Journals*, see Watten, Barrett. "The Turn to Language and the 1960s." *Critical Inquiry* 29.1 (2002): 139-183.

with the institutional assimilation of experimentalism, contrasting Charles Bernstein's poetics of citation with Susan Howe's textual fragments.

At the same time, pairing authors according to shared modes of classical reception and mediation opens up insights into models of comparative grouping that offer unique perspectives on standard periodizing cleavages, and reveal novel intersections of poetic praxis. Each chapter takes up a particular mode of classical reception in order to map shifting parameters and diverse strategies onto existing literary historical narratives of avant-garde poetics; and simultaneously to revitalize those narratives by retelling and challenging them from the unique perspective of reception. I explore the evolution of classical reception in this milieu as it moves along a path of progressive textual or philological abstraction, from homophonic translation's "epitextual" engagement with classicism at the level of material language in Chapter One, through the "paratextual" investment in adaptive strategies in Chapter Two, and the "metatextual" negotiation of classical simulacra divorced from Greek and Latin texts in Chapter Three.

We might do best to approach—though not exhaust—these terms through the more tried and true designations of translation, adaptation, and invention as measures of linguistic and semantic directness to a source text. As a fixed designation of philological relationship to a source text, I intend epitextual, like the idea of "translation," to imply the senses of the Greek adjective and prefix *epi* ("the *being upon* or *supported upon a surface* or *point*")[15] and denote an instance of reception's direct proximity, dependence, and reliance upon a source text's linguistic forms as its sole or overwhelmingly primary means of receiving, translating, transporting, recreating or destroying its object. Thus, Chapter One examines the late modernist Zukofsky and Language poet Melnick's epitextual mediations of the static linguistic forms of Catullus' lyric

[15] Liddell, Henry George, and Robert Scott. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*. Clarendon Press, 1900.

poems and Homer's *Iliad.* In the same vein, I use paratextual (*para*: "beside; next to, near, from; against, contrary to")[16] to describe a host text's mode of reception which places it *beside* a Greek or Latin original, like adaptation implying a philological or linguistic relationship that keeps an original text's discrete linguistic forms in mind, even as it maintains various indirections and alterations of those forms. Metatextual resolves as perhaps the most numinous of the designations. Meta can take the genitive, dative, or accusative, and shifts wildly in meaning, both as a Greek preposition or compound and in the derivative senses it gains in English compounds. Meta can take us from the spread of cancer through the tissues of the system (metastasis), to the philosophical study of immaterial realities beyond the realm of physics (metaphysics). Meta as an English prefix can also signal abstraction or self-reflexivity, as in metapoetics, and is quixotic in its ability to function as a stand-alone adjective in English popular idiom—"That's so *meta.*" Though all these senses contribute to the idea of "metatextual," defining it primarily in terms of a mode of reception that operates *beyond* an originals' discrete linguistic forms—meta-text a tendency towards abstraction from the Greek and Latin text—greatly delimits its ambivalence.

At the same time, we might further complicate these terms by thinking of them as *directional* designations. It is possible to think of an epitextual practice as one that moves *towards* the objects which classicism gestures to as outside or beyond itself, its idealizations: the living person behind the Catullan text. Conceived in this way, Allen Ginsberg's early classicism appears as the most epitextual of all, despite its pointed non-equivalence with Latin material language and text; and Melnick, despite the epitextuality of *Men in Aïda's* philological practice, is an exercise in sustained metatextual divorce from the classical ideal—its living, breathing "Homer." Philologically speaking, both Zukofsky and Melnick practice epitextual reception: the object of their reception is the material, formal structure of the Greek or Latin original, its

[16] Liddell

language, diction, prosody, order, sound, etc. If, however, we think in terms of directional designation, Zukofsky's *Catullus* is decidedly epitextual, and Melnick's *Men in Aïda* is deeply metatextual—there is no Homer in his Homer.

As designations of textual practice—to describe analyzed modes of reception—my reader will encounter these terms in their primary sense, as measures of directness to the text of an original. My only word of caution is that, although approaching the epi-, para-, and metatextual distinction through the traditional paradigm of translation, adaptation, and invention brings us to a measure of linguistic directness, it also risks muddying the terms with the traditional paradigm's reliance on metaphorical implications of "fidelity" or "infidelity." This risk is particularly great due to the fact that ideas of receptive fidelity or infidelity often masquerade as "merely" philological distinctions, whereas the metaphors themselves function at the interface of text and ideology. "Translation," in this traditional sense, can admit neither Zukofsky nor Melnick's epitextual receptions into its rooms, despite the linguistic directness of source and host texts. Indeed, the indiscretions that might traditionally fall under the umbrella of "invention" could hardly bear to keep company with the outrageous epitextualism of David Melnick's *Men in Aïda.* As measures of linguistic directness, I argue that the movement through epitextual, paratextual, and metatextual reception describes a literary historical arc. Although the overlaps between period and mode of reception proliferate—in light of this argument, Melnick's "epitextual" translation of Homer appears as an exception to the tendency—I argue that these terms describe a shift in dominant tendencies of reception over time. One way to think about the arc of reception that progresses from epitextual, to the New American Poetry's paratextual, and finally Language poetry's metatextual modes of reception is in light of an institutional history of classical pedagogy. The history of avant-garde receptions follows the general movement of

institutional pedagogy, beginning in an "epitextual" phase of classical prestige and moving through its progressive decay. Like the progressive pressure on "canon" as a staple of the institutional reading list, wherein the presence of the classical continues to persist or even expand at the level of popular culture, film, and so on, "metatextual" classical reception persists in avant-garde poetics despite its progressive independence from the Greek or Latin text.

The particular poets I bring together in the dissertation offer a combination of poetic complement and antagonism with each other and the movements with which they are associated. A number of shared characteristics ground comparative analysis: Each poet 1) in some way inhabits or identifies with a marginal social identity, whether that of a Jewish student in Columbia's Great Books program (Zukofsky and Ginsberg), a gay anarchist expelled from Berkeley's Linguistics PhD program for refusing to sign the Loyalty Oath (Spicer), the daughter of a Harvard professor, both privilege and subject to a world that "*was* false if you were a girl or a woman who was not content to be considered second-rate" (Howe),[17] or a "tenured radical" working within the boundaries of the academy (Bernstein); 2) situates his or her poetic practice in light of a modernist lineage of formal experimentation; 3) inherits, adapts, or responds to some version of this lineage's subversive and anti-academic ethos—its institution of anti-institutionalism; 4) sees the formal and linguistic dimensions of poetics as efficacious, capable of affecting some alteration in the field of social and literary relations;[18] 5) takes classical reception as a critical staging ground in cultural and literary contests, and resists the equivalence of Greek and Latin with an imagined "western self" or a reflection of hegemonic values; and 6) last, but

[17] Howe, Susan. *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*. Wesleyan, 1993, p. 159

[18] For these poets, "literary form" is not a one-dimensional designation: Questions of linguistic and literary form reflect the social structures in which they take place; they also represent a dimension of social form, reflecting it, often in its service—poetic form is one dimension or expression of social form, and vice versa. They understand questions of formal aesthetics as reaching into social, material, and cultural structures, and social, material, and cultural structures *as* formal structures.

not least, each of these poets has achieved some measure of success—and occasional widespread canonicity (Ginsberg)—in carving out a position in the literary field. The role of "impact theory" in reception studies stresses "recognition of why [texts] become, or cease to be, matters of concern for their different reading communities over time" (Kennedy 88)[19] as a crucial element in understanding their relationships to the contexts in which they emerged and their continuing place in contemporary horizons of understanding. Thus, I am interested not only in the synchronic reception of classical texts by avant-garde poets, but in the diachronic reception of avant-garde poets themselves. With classical reception as a diachronic constant, I look at ways in which avant-garde poets interpellate themselves, their contemporaries, and their predecessors in avant-garde canons, and trace evolving genealogies of experiment, school, movement, and period. Tracing out ideas of canon and classic in successive avant-gardes offers a new angle on this particular literary historical narrative, and reveals strange continuities and disjoints in the experimentalist project as successive avant-gardes have received, inherited, challenged, revised, recuperated, and revivified it. Perhaps most importantly, reception studies offer resources for thinking about the idea of experimental lineage as itself a form of canonizing reception.

The context of the academy and academic classicism is a key figure of antagonism for each of the poets considered. Though each has some toehold within the academy, they stage the struggle with the academy or academic classicism as an event internal to their poetics and signal the imbrications of canonicity and institutional context, which demonstrate, as John Guillory has argued, "the school's historical function of distributing, or regulating access to, the forms of cultural capital" (vii).[20] In this study, I approach the figure of the institution both as an objective

[19] Kennedy, Duncan. "Knowledge and the Political: Bruno Latour's Political Epistemology." *Cultural Critique* 74.1 (2010): 83-97.
[20] Guillory, John. *Cultural capital: The problem of literary canon formation*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.

historical context (the academic institutions for classical education) and as the "reception" of institutional classicism (representations of "institution" in the poetry under consideration).[21] The figure of the institution as that which "performs the social function of systematically regulating the practices of reading and writing by governing access to the means of literary production as well as… the knowledge required to read historical works" (Guillory 19) provides a critical link that mediates between Greek and Latin in particular and ideas of "canon" and "cultural capital" in general. Scholarship has widely documented the "role that Classics has played historically in symbolizing education and culture as elite, remote possessions" (Greenwood)[22] in colonial literatures, and the historical role of Hellenocentrism in codifying a uniquely German national identity.[23] In the first half of the 20th century in America, in the midst of ongoing 20th century dialogues about Americanism, immigration, and language, a fundamentally Greek and Latin program of education was spreading through the country as a unifying means of creating a "neutral" humanist subjectivity. In key ways, the idea of Great Books, as well as the role of the culture and literature of Greece and Rome as Ur-models of "Great Books" in other national literatures, served as a possible model of a unity within plurality of the educational subject that shares many resonances and parallels with a discourse of "Americanism."[24] Thinking about the classics in the 20th century in the United States as a site of "value and authority" places discourses of language, linguistic and cultural fragmentation, pluralism, and immigration into

[21] As in the opening moments of "Howl", which narrate the unjust exclusion of "the best minds" from the academy: "who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull…" (Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl and other poems*. Vol. 4. City Lights Publishers, 2001).
[22] Greenwood, Emily. *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century*. OUP Oxford, 2010.
[23] "In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European colonizers appropriated the civilizational authority of Greece and Rome, and aligned these civilizations with modern European colonialism." (Greenwood)
[24] For a brief popular history of Great Books, see Beam, Alex. *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books*. PublicAffairs, 2009.

conversation with discourses of canonicity, pedagogy, and the formation of "Great Books" during the same period,[25] and offer a means of understanding the contexts that make it possible for "Greek and Latin" to function as metonyms for "canon."

Rethinking Reception Aesthetics: Methodologies and New Models

My theoretical and methodological approaches orient themselves within recent work in experimental poetics, and take many of their cues from the burgeoning field of classical reception studies.[26] From avant-garde studies, I draw theoretical models for understanding the critical and social functions of avant-garde art and recent extensions of these models into the

[25] Zukofsky's "Poem Beginning "The,"" for example, satirizes his experience as an undergraduate student in Erskine's "Great Books" class at Columbia University. "Great Books" comes into its own with the decline in philological study of Greek and Latin in the 20th century, presenting the classics in translation as necessary reading for the educated humanist subject. Both Columbia University and Erskine himself were innovators in and spokesmen for "Great Books" as a novel pedagogical model. Research into the intersections of this concrete institutional context and experimental classicisms—and modernist classicism more generally—could shed unique light onto the particular valences, reactions and counter-reactions to the classics in modernist and later poetry, as well as a particularly detailed account of one of the more influential "mediums" for the perpetuation of the classics as substrates for the subjectivity of the center. Allen Ginsberg, too, one of the subjects of this dissertation's second chapter, was a later participant in the Columbia Great Books curriculum.

[26] A number of edited volumes have recently emerged to throw the field into sharper relief. Although it focuses on models and modes of classical reception in the ancient world, James Porter's edited volume *Classical Pasts: The Classical Traditions of Greece and Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) establishes a number of practicable and portable methodologies of reception. The Blackwell *Companion to the Classical Tradition*, edited by Craig Kallendorf (Oxford, MA: Blackwell, 2010) focuses on the diachronic influence of the classical tradition in western culture. The most useful and instructive volumes which largely focus on examples and methodologies of classical reception in contemporary culture have been Blackwell's *A Companion to Classical Receptions,* edited by Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2011); and *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, edited by Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008). The most comprehensive single-author introduction to the present scope and function of the field of classical reception studies as a whole is Lorna Hardwick's *Reception Studies* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). For theoretical and methodological approaches to reception studies not limited only to classical reception, *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies,* edited by James Machor and Philip Goldstein (New York: Routledge, 2001).

terrain of identity politics, ethnicity, and the social margins.[27] Recent work has productively explored the relationship of established theories of avant-garde "*antagonism* or [its] *antagonistic moment*" (Poggioli 26) and "*stylistic alienation*" (119) to the experience of ethnic, linguistic, and identitarian marginalization.[28] Whereas Charles Altieri writes in general terms of the avant-garde revolt from "the authority of tradition,"[29] Maria Damon grounds the production of "truly vanguard literature" in the experience of "the marginalized, ostensibly most expendable members of the American socius" (xi); and Peter Quartermain's *Disjunctive Poetics* emphasizes the influence of "the agency of foreign immigration" on poetic innovation: "The increasingly uncomfortable misalignment, which relegated certain writers to submerged, eruptive, and insurrectional activity within and beside accredited modes, was exacerbated in America by the linguistic disruption and even demolition of empowered cultural patterns through the agency of foreign immigration" (9). These studies have proved an invaluable context for situating classical reception in terms of identity politics, and a basis for understanding the multiply American, foreign, straight and gay classics I encounter in the work of avant-garde poets.

Debates within avant-garde studies have also grounded my understanding of the critical and functional nature of avant-garde "negativity." Whereas thinkers such as Peter Bürger have confined the meaning of "avant-garde" to a discrete historical moment in the early 20th century,[30]

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[27] In addition to his scholarship in this field, I owe much to Joshua Miller for his timely insights and humane intellect at crucial moments while writing this dissertation. See Miller, Joshua L. *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

[28] Poggioli, Renato. *Avant-garde*. Harvard University Press, 1968.

[29] "Then [the 1960s postmodern revolt from modernism] consisted… above all in denying the authority of tradition and the balancing meditative mind while exploring directly religious sacramental aspects of secular experience." Altieri, Charles. *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry in the 1960s*. Lewisberg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1979, p. 15.

[30] Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-garde*. Vol. 4. Manchester University Press, 1984. The static nature of this concept of avant-garde has been addressed in part by distinguishing between the historical and neo-avant-garde—this does little, however, to extend the model *backwards* in a way that could recover avant-garde aspects of earlier texts. See van den Berg, Hubert. "On the Historiographic Distinction between Historical and Neo-Avant-Garde." *Avant-garde/Neo-avant-garde* 17 (2005): 63. Though not in

I have been drawn into progressive alliance with models that "underscore the dialectical—rather than purely oppositional—relationship between avant-gardes and institutions" (Eburne) while maintaining the capacity of avant-gardes to affect real alterations, however partial, in their context.[31] Thus, I embrace a more fluid model than Bürger's, with explanatory power that stretches beyond a particular historical moment or political content, and conceives experimental practice as "a history of repetition, where repetition is understood not as derivative, compromised, or emptied of meaning, but as central to the structure of avant-garde movements from the very start."[32]

From classical reception studies, I have gained an apparatus of discrete analytical and philological tools,[33] as well as a sense of both of the historical contingency and the historical

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terms of which art is covered by the concept of negativity, Bürger's view on the role of negativity itself as a determining factor in avant-garde art resembles Hans Robert Jauss's early position, in which, according to Irmgard Wagner, he adopts, "Adorno's "aesthetic of negativity," which considers as historically significant "avant-garde" literature only, at the expense of so-called affirmative literature, i.e. works which conform to their readers' horizon of expectation. By definition, a work can only be a classic when it is no longer avant-garde. Ergo: a classic does not meet the essential criterion of aesthetic quality, namely: negativity" (Wagner 1174). For a relatively stunning account of the chronological evolution of Jauss's thought and its various phases, see Wagner, Irmgard. "Hans Robert Jauss and Classicity." *MLN* (1984): 1173-1184. This account has been critical in my understanding of Jauss's thought, and in locating in the divergence between his early and late phases what I take to be discrepancies in the reception of his thought in classical reception studies.

[31] "[Walter Adamson] concludes by making a case for an immanent rather than oppositional avant-garde, one that acknowledges its own implication in the structures it contests and that retains a skepticism regarding the authority of its own solutions." Eburne, Jonathtan P., and Rita Felski. "Introduction." *New Literary History* 41.4 (2010): v-xv. See Adamson, Walter L. "How Avant-Gardes End—and Begin: Italian Futurism in Historical Perspective." *New Literary History* 41.4 (2010): 855-874.

[32] See Puchner, Martin. "It's Not Over ('Til It's Over)." *New Literary History* 41.4 (2010): 915-928.

[33] These borrowings range from the distinction between "explicit" and "implicit" intertextuality (Jenny, Laurent, and Richard Watts. "Genetic Criticism and its Myths." *Yale French Studies* 89 (1996): 9-25) to underscoring the distinction between "the whole gamut of citational techniques constituting what is usually addressed by "classical reception studies"" and the more diffuse, complex processes that "stag[e]… receptivity to the classical past… [on the basis of] the occupation of certain social, cultural, and political roles within a given society" (Dufallo, Basil. "Reception and Receptivity in Catullus 64." *Cultural Critique* 74.1 (2010): 98-113). Of particular interest to subversive reception is Wingrove's analysis of "the networks of literary transmission through which "illegitimate" speakers make themselves heard," both "synchronically—through linkages between printed, penned, and spoken words… and… diachronically, through appropriations and redeployments of stories, texts, and figures from a (real and

density of hermeneutics.[34] Casting back to Gadamer and, more centrally, Hans Robert Jauss, reception studies takes the literary work as implicated in the processes of historical change, and resituates the realization of meaning from the text itself as "a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence" (Jauss 1982, 21)[35] to the interaction between text, reading subject, and the horizon of expectations that mediates between them. The horizon of expectations itself is a constantly evolving historical phenomenon, accruing in layers over time, by turns carrying and burying its prior forms into the present, and encompassing: "the immensely complex network of mediations on which our sense of reality is constructed: institutions, items of equipment, pictures, and not least lots of pieces of paper filled with words, figures, and diagrams" (Kennedy). On the one hand, the contingency of hermeneutics, by implying that "there is no unmediated Greece" (Greenwood), displaces Greek and Latin from their ideality and universalism as "naturalized or otherwise congealed… metaphysical entities" (Martindale 1992, 14-15),[36] while also implying that there is nothing "inevitable" about their "embodiment of hegemonic cultural values." On the other hand, the same contingency asks that we acknowledge the sheer density of the historical sedimentation of Greek and Latin in a given horizon of expectations.[37] The idea of "the classical" encompasses some of the most persistent illusions in

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imagined) distant past" Wingrove, Elizabeth. "Philoctetes in the Bastille." *Cultural Critique* 74.1 (2010): 65-80).

[34] Though some have criticized the emphasis on hermeneutical contingency for its relativism, I see it rather as a form of epistemological modesty—as a thinking mind, I have no access to things as such, or to an "objective" meaning, if such a thing exists. In this light, reception studies acknowledges the limitations of critical consciousness.

[35] Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Vol. 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

[36] Martindale, Charles. *Redeeming the text: Latin poetry and the hermeneutics of reception*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

[37] Reception studies emphasizes the fluidity and cultural constructedness of a text's impact as it moves through, sinks into, shapes, and is shaped by the mediating interpretive and institutional frameworks into which it is received. Therefore a text that is taken up by successive generations of readers and interpreters will have both a synchronic significance: the ways in which its hermeneutical import is refigured and realized in the complex series of cultural networks that is the contemporary horizon of expectations; and a

the archive of cultural history, and represents "some of the most profoundly constitutive ideologies of modernity" (Porter 469).[38] The horizon consists, in important ways, in "classical texts" as those texts that have been incorporated into the historical present, and form the substance of its affirmative nature.[39] Very much because of their persistence as icons for the idea of literary tradition and as hotspots for ideological mummery, the reception of Greek and Latin texts in their countless variations are *present* within the context into which a work is received, or into which the 'reader' comes to be interpellated as a reading subject.[40] Classical reception's emphasis on historical contingency reveals the illusion of the classical, and its emphasis on historical density asks that we afford Greek and Latin texts a semi-privileged hermeneutical position. This is not a renunciation of radical historicity, but an inevitable consequence of its implications.[41] To steal a phrase from the dissertation's third chapter, classical texts are "sublime objects of bibliography."[42]

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diachronic significance: the history of its successive entrances into past horizons of expectations as discrete historical moments and as an accrual of their sum total.

[38] Porter, James I. "Reception Studies: Future Prospects." *A companion to classical receptions* 38 (2008): 469.

[39] Tempering the role of contingency in reception with its historical density can also moderate the temptation to celebrate reception qua reception as intrinsically critical. As Willis notes, "Hermeneutic and material power cannot be simply conflated—but neither, for the reasons sketched above, can they be simply separated. We cannot simply celebrate acts of reception as pure acts of political resistance, since reception is itself enabled and constrained by the archival apparatus of sovereignty; but by the same token, we cannot see the power of reception as entirely disjunct from the material-political power of the imperium" (Willis, Ika. "Iam Tum (nowthenalready): Latin Epic and the Posthistorical."*Cultural Critique* 74.1 (2010): 51-64).

[40] The sense of the contingency of hermeneutics can also produce what Harloe calls "Martindale's alternative fiction, "that texts can be appropriated for any position"" (Harloe, Katherine. "Can Political Theory Provide a Model for Reception?: Max Weber and Hannah Arendt." *Cultural Critique* 74.1 (2010): 17-31). Rather than an individual psyche, more apropos is Gadamer's understanding of historical understanding as "not an activity of the subject, but rather a placing of subjectivity into a process of tradition where past and present are constantly mediated" (qtd. in Wagner 1175). Reception studies' emphasis on the role of the read in the realization of meaning makes sense only if we understand "reader" as a historically constituted subject position: If we must describe the historical movement of hermeneutics, it would be better to do so in terms of glaciers.

[41] Jauss's final position in *Aesthetics* does not represent a return to a "naïve" embrace of canon, but develops within and from Jauss's keen sense of "the ruse of tradition." In "Tradition and Selection" Jauss

Though I draw on these critical discourses in important ways, my dissertation also addresses a critical lacuna or blind spot that is, I would argue, structural rather than incidental in each discourse. As I note above, the ways that the concept of avant-garde has evolved in the discipline has tended to delimit comparisons with classicism, classical, canon, tradition, etc. In classical reception studies, while theoretical accounts exists for subversive or antagonistic strategies in postcolonial literatures and the postmodernist classicism of mid-century and contemporary architectural arts (Kallendorf),[43] no similar account of "postmodernist classicism" exists for studies of the New American Poetry and the Language poets.[44] Critics have tended to either focus on the theatrical and visual arts, or to bypass completely the avant-garde "canon" of literary arts and artists that, for better or worse, tend to function as the objects of focus for theorists of avant-garde and experimental literature. I would like to suggest that the mutual isolation of these fields is an incidence of disciplinary specialization as they diverge from a shared set of theoretical and methodological concerns. The founding discourses of reception studies closely link the interplay of classical and avant-garde. For Jauss, "the history of the arts has always shown the swing of the pendulum between "transgressive function and interpretive assimilation of works":

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distinguishes between chosen and grown tradition. As Wagner characterizes the distinction, "Grown tradition derives from "latent institutionalization" in the shape of public opinion or school curricula, for instance. Here Jauss joins Jurgen Habermas' criticism of the Gadamerian concept of tradition as "enforced by pseudocommunicative means." According to Habermas, institutions such as schools and the media force the culture of the establishment onto the oppressed individual. Especially revealing is Jauss' loaded terminology here: in relation to the totality of existing works, this process of canon formation practices "reduction, simplification, and suppression." Jauss nevertheless rejects Habermas' radical criticism, on ideological grounds, of all tradition as false consciousness" (Wagner 1176).

[42] A pun on the title of Slavoj Žižek's *The sublime object of ideology* (Verso Books, 1989).

[43] Kallendorf, Craig W., ed. *A companion to the classical tradition*. Vol. 51. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

[44] Indeed, periodizing accounts of the postmodernist tendency in the literary arts in many ways owe their origins to an adaptation and extension of theories originally developed to explain architectural phenomena. For a detailed account of the interactions between architectural theory and both literary and general accounts of Postmodernism, see Perry Anderson's *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London, New York: Verso, 1998). There exists a lively theoretical account of postmodernist classicism in architecture.

> Older art also, which has come down to us with the halo of the classical… need by no means have merely affirmed and transfigured the state of a given society when it appeared. What may seem "affirmative"… in Dante…. may only have accrued to such works from the homogenizing power of tradition…To call them "system-stabilizing" blocks one's perception of their originally heteronymous intent, their norm-destroying or norm-creating effect. (16-17)[45]

In response to Adorno's aesthetic of negativity, Jauss postulates the "originally heteronymous intent" of the canon as artifacts of avant-garde moments; and likewise of avant-garde arts (Baudelaire, at least), as disruptive events whose negativity is in the process of becoming canonical, as its effects move through and affect restructuration in the horizon of expectations: "The quality of being classical is the paradigm par excellence of the cooption of negativity in traditions of social affirmation" (17). Here, avant-garde and canonical differ from each other temporally rather than substantively, and represent different phases in an ongoing dialectic of open-ended development.

Given the degree to which concepts of classicism and avant-gardism require each other in the founding discourses of reception studies, the mutual non-communication of these fields bears some investigation. A number of factors may have contributed to the elision of "the classical" as a methodological standpoint from which to view avant-garde writing after modernism, including 1) the historical appropriation of classical texts as collaborators in establishing discourses of race and nation; 2) the prioritization of contemporaneity and spontaneity as discursive tropes within the many elements of the avant-garde itself; and 3) institutional developments in the history of the canon wars over the last several decades. The first and most direct source of this elision is the self-conception of many avant-garde movements. Discourses of immediacy and spontaneity ground the poetics of many key writers who flung open the doors for the counter- or neo- or postmodernist flood. Daniel Belgrad, in *The Culture of Spontaneity*, has shown the degree to

[45] Jauss, Hans Robert, and Wlad Godzich. *Aesthetic experience and literary hermeneutics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

which discourses of immediacy and spontaneity figured so prevalently in counter-modernist experimentalism that they form a counter-cultural episteme of mid-century arts.[46] Belgrad has articulated the degree to which "spontaneity" and what Charles Altieri has called "denying the authority of tradition" formed critical artistic and cultural foundations of outsider arts at mid-century.

However, this very emphasis on the rhetoric of immediacy tends to deemphasize the simultaneous tendency to ground immediacy and spontaneity in classical texts. For example, Charles Olson models his epic *Maximus Poems* as a destabilizing negotiation of epic themes and topoi, such that a poetics of immediacy and tradition exist side by side in a productive tension that constitutes the work. Bernadette Mayer, Charles Bukowski, and Robert Creeley—just to name a few—entertain long-term poetic affairs with Catullus. I propose to foreground the presence of classical languages in American experimental poetry after modernism by placing the radically discontinuous rhetoric of "tradition" and "immediacy" into conversation, thereby recontextualizing our understanding of both. The presence of classical languages and literary imaginations forces us to reconsider the hyper-contemporaneity of experimental poetics, and to recontextualize the historical displacement of "the new" in terms of a very specific type of cultural mediation and reception.

The second potential reason for this theoretical lacuna may be the apparently contradictory historical function of ideologies of "tradition" and ideologies of "experiment" and "newness" as they have functioned in experimental American verse after modernism. Whereas

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[46] Belgrad traces the various incarnations of spontaneity in mediums as varied as the ceramic and plastic arts, painting, music, dance, improvisational bebop and jazz, and the literary arts, thereby linking spontaneity to marginalism and struggles to decenter Anglo-American cultural hegemony: "Finally, spontaneity was a means for challenging the cultural hegemony of privileged Anglo-American "insiders," giving voice to artists and writers from ethnic and social backgrounds remote from the traditional channels of cultural authority" (Belgrad, Daniel. *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America.* Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 15).

scholars have tended to characterize experimental practice as antagonistic towards ideologies of "tradition" (Altieri) and "major" forms of identitarian, national, and ethnic power (Quartermain, Damon), the classical has functioned historically as an institutional framework for the codification and sedimentation of national, racial, or class identities and the consolidation of class boundaries.[47] Discourses of race and nation often seek to claim Greek and Latin as their own. For this same reason, the classical has been a contested site, where counter-discourses have sought to destabilize the grip of race and nation.[48]

Thirdly, debates surrounding the canon wars have tended to solidify the discursive equivalence of "classical" and "hegemonic." John Guillory characterizes the basic antinomies in the debate: "works cannot become canonical unless they are seen to endorse the hegemonic or ideological values of dominant social groups…Conversely, noncanonical works can be seen to express values which are transgressive, subversive, antihegemonic" (Guillory 19-20), and goes on to describe the phases by which canon revision has proceeded. The first phase of canonical critique argued for expansion of the canon and inclusion of formerly excluded perspectives, voices, and authors, according to the criteria of identity, race, and gender politics. The second phase of canonical critique places distinct syllabi of the canonical and non-canonical in confrontation. Within avant-garde studies, this means that the "canon" of avant-garde writers has

[47] Bernal's controversial work on the role of "classicism" in the codification of national and ethnic identities, his argument for the construction of an "Aryan model" of the ancient world especially by 19th century scholars of Germany. The truth or falsehood of these arguments is not central to the current dissertation: what is central are the ways in which, from a number of perspectives, the idea of Greek and Latin as "classical" has historically functioned as a site of cultural and national contestation and authority, but also of destabilizing, creative production. See Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization.* London: Free Association Books, 1987. For a perspective that focuses more on the role of classicism and class boundaries, see Hall, Edith. "Putting the Class into Classical Reception." *Hardwick and Stray*2008 (2008): 386-97: "Education in the ancient Latin and Greek languages has always been an exclusive practice, used to define membership in an elite, despite variations in the social and demographic arenas where the boundaries of exclusion have been drawn" (386).

[48] For a more recent take on the role of classical pedagogy and ideology in discourses of race and nation, see also the edited volume *Classics and National Cultures*, edited by Susan Stephens and Phiroze Vasunia (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

come to be taught as “canonically” minor or marginalized (“the marginalized, ostensibly most expendable members of the American socius have produced its truly vanguard literature” (Damon xi)). For debates surrounding the canon wars, the “classics of Western civilization” have often come to be synonymous with cultural conservatism and the regulation of social hegemony. Throughout, the poetics under consideration suggest that debates treating literary canonicity and literary avant-gardism as mutually exclusive categories have occluded important significances of each. The conceptual collapse of “canon” and “hegemony” belies the vigorous presence of canonical texts in “the truly vanguard literature” of “the marginalized, ostensibly most expendable members of the American socius;” the roles these texts have played “express[ing] values which are transgressive, subversive, antihegemonic;” and the regular non-coincidence of classical texts with the “values of dominant social groups” for which they are supposed to stand.

The rewards, insights, and implications of ending the isolation between avant-garde and classical reception studies are many, and I have attempted to identify several of the most important below. By addressing the absence of sustained attention to avant-garde poetry from reception studies, this project strives to recuperate the critical juxtaposition of transgressive and emergent with canonical and classical. By considering avant-garde works as “potential classics,” negative works prior to or not yet advanced in their interpretive assimilation, we gain new models for understanding canonical works as “originally heteronymous in intent” and thereby recuperate aspects of the founding discourses of reception studies. Sustained attention to “emergent” classics and the processes whereby avant-garde negativity transforms into canonical affirmation can enrich our thinking and understanding of “the canon” and its texts. At the same time, bringing 20th century American poetics as a subfield to reception studies moves beyond the singular sense of reception as a practice of “living classics,” as announced by the title of a

collection edited by S. J. Harrison: *Living Classics: Greece and Roman in Contemporary Poetry in English.*[49] It is striking that the essays collected in the volume do not consider the contribution of American avant-garde poets. A fuller consideration of their role in defining the (after)life of classics opens up a wide range of models and methodologies for classical reception: living classics as well as classics dead and undead, avant-garde and hegemonic, American and Yiddish, and so on.[50] Adding American experimental poetics as a context also broadens the ways to understand "colonial classicism" as a phenomenon that takes place not only on the geographical exterior, but also as creating exteriors within the shifting social relations of the geographical interior.

By considering American avant-garde poets in the new light of their sustained engagements with Greek and Latin text, I strive to contribute to our understanding of how ideas of lineage, canon, and tradition develop in avant-garde communities, reemphasize the importance of canon as an interpretive context, and reappraise avant-garde authors outside of the lockbox of the "canonically marginal."[51] The experimental negotiations of classical texts suggest modes of understanding legitimately avant-garde practice as bids for canonicity; and casts avant-gardism in the light of a struggle, not only to find negative and oppositional forms, but to situate those

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[49] Harrison, S. J. Ed. *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[50] The ideology of "living classics," although it may sometimes be a useful ideology, nonetheless remains just that: an ideology.

[51] It also offers the possibility of reading canon as a record of avant-garde works that have been assimilated; and likewise of avant-garde works as bids for canonicity or works in the process of becoming canonical. The compulsory declension as "marginal" of experimental poets is thrown into striking relief when juxtaposed with the relative fame and reading-list presence of some: "the book [*Howl and Other* Poems] has sold more than 1,000,000 copies, its signature poem has been translated into two dozen languages and is anthologized in high school and standard anthologies worldwide as a literary classic" (Ginsberg, Allen, et al. "From The Poem That Changed America: "Howl" Fifty Years Later." *The American Poetry Review* (2006): 3-10); and as David Gates notes: "'Howl,' for all its affirmations, is a profoundly oppositional poem, and it counts on being opposed. . . . It's a radically offensive poem, or used to be" (qtd. in Shinder, Jason. *The poem that changed America: "Howl" fifty years later*. 2006). There is something vital in that seemingly incidental "used to be" that points to the dialectical nature of avant-garde negativity and canonical affirmation.

forms laterally to the affirmative structure of the horizon of expectations in such a way that they might at some point become intelligible, perhaps assimilated into the whole. It suggests avant-gardism as a matrix of affirmations and negations: on the edge of the public horizon of expectations or at the margins of a hermeneutical context's threshold of intelligibility. Discourses of avant-garde exhaustion mourn that it "cannot escape its cooption" (Eburne), but *cooption*, despite the popular wisdom, is sometimes the goal of the avant-garde: incorporation into the literary field in a way that alters its relations and wins it apposition. "Avant-garde" often names the site at which a negatively charged poetics makes its bid for canonicity, staking its existence on the possibility of a future canon in which it is no longer marginal.

Finally, the poetics explored in this dissertation offer alternative modes of canonicity, and suggest a "third phase" of canonical revision. Despite the decline of the canon in university settings, in terms of "Great Books," "core curriculum," and the like, the cachet of Greek and Latin as markers of cultural capital persists at the level of American popular culture. From major movies, to campy appropriations by marketing and advertising campaigns, to classical intertextuality as a facet of political discourse, the continuing life of the idea of the classics would seem to suggest an embedded position in the broader cultural imagination that exceeds the reach of the institutional syllabus or assigned reading list. The canon wars notwithstanding, debating the continued relevance of the classics is similar to debating—hotly or calmly, aggressively or defensively—the continued relevance of adverbs: It does nothing to alter their presence. The dual history of "classicism" is a narrative in which, even as the idea of the classics persists or arguably spreads as an embedded site of cultural authority in the popular horizon of expectations, access to detailed knowledge or familiarity with particular texts, authors, or historical contexts evaporates.

The poets in this dissertation see canonical works neither as the cultural property of definitive identity groups, nor as fully assimilable to hegemonic constructions of cultural value. Their interactions with classical texts provide insights into alternate models of canon revision, perspectives on institutional context, and the nature and means of the avant-garde break with tradition; as well as instances of progressive poetics as *grounded* in struggles for mastery of cultural capital in the form of classical texts. This mastery appears as a potentially critical faculty that allows a poetics of rupture to find traction *within* the literary field. Seen from this perspective, the progressive distance and scarcity of the literary capital required to manipulate the image of the classical shuts down many valves of access to these broader, diachronic codes of literacy. Rather than accepting the ideological alignment of the cultural capital of classical texts with hegemonic class divisions, the poets considered in this dissertation exercise institutional literacy in a gambit to dislodge this alignment and expose the contingency of the classical text's relationship to the cultural hegemony.

Overview of Chapters

My dissertation seeks to fill a gap in critical discourses of the American avant-garde after modernism, which tend to take into account: 1. the displacement of experimental writing from tradition and the cultural status quo, along with 2. attendant and complex relationships to history, both displacements from hegemonic history and recuperations of alternate histories, without 3. maintaining the specificity granted to studies of modernism and history by the focus on classical

intertextuality and citationality. The dissertation thus seeks to extend a critical model for dealing with classical citationality from the modern to the postmodern. At the same time, this approach expands current models of contemporary classical reception theory, which—when dealing with accounts of the classics in experimentalism after modernism—often remain silent on the central authors and texts of the postmodernist avant-garde.[52] Specifically, the dissertation expands models of classical reception theory to account for American experimental poetry after modernism. The disciplinary extensions of the dissertation, then, are multiple, extending models of classical reception to account for the postmodernist literary avant-garde, and extending accounts of the postmodernist literary avant-garde to account for the lacuna of sustained thinking on the function of classical reception in the same.

Chapter One, "Translating Opacity: Homophony and the Material Text," previews the full literary historical arc of the dissertation, exploring the poetics of Louis Zukofsky, a key figure in the Objectivist movement, and David Melnick, a lesser-known poet often associated with Language poetry. Zukofsky occupies a critical and sometimes uncomfortable boundary between modernist and later American experimental movements.[53] In part because of his modernist credentials, and in part because of the pronounced material presence of Greek and Latin texts and intertexts in his work, considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the classical specificity of Zukofsky's engagements with history.[54] Both for this reason and because

[52] One only needs to browse the article titles of prominent edited collections to note this absence.
[53] Although directly associated with Pound and "first-wave" modernism, Zukofsky is well known for his role in guest-editing the February 1931 issue of *Poetry* magazine, now seen as the germinal document in the Objectivist movement. The Objectivists are a loosely associated group of writers—including Basil Bunting, Kenneth Rexroth, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, and others—who share a commitment to "the appearance of the art form as an object." Like Zukofsky himself, Objectivism stretches across the liminal space between late modernism and the New American Poetry. See Zukofsky, Louis. *An "objectivists" anthology*. Norwood Editions, 1977.
[54] To some degree, this is true of any of the many explorations of Zukofsky's Catullus or Plautus, cited throughout this chapter. For an article that more specifically situates Zukofsky's "classicism" in light of

of his sustained influence on the New American poets of the 1950's and 60's and—though in opposite ways—the Language-centered writers of the 70's and 80's, Zukofsky's poetry serves as an indispensible hinge-point for extending critical accounts of modernist classical citationality to postmodernist classicism.

Chapter Two engages the poetics of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Spicer, key figures in the New American Poetry and its attendant imbrications with the American counter-culture at mid-century. The classics during this same period enjoyed new degrees of democratic availability to the culture at large, as well as new criticisms and a growing displacement from their cultural centrality.[55] For Ginsberg and Spicer, the classics occupied a critical staging ground in the contest for the meaning of the past, and a window onto the processes that had helped to shape the cultural present. In regulating representations of the classical past and guaranteeing its status as "the origins of the Western tradition," classicism helped regulate the present, modifying its terms, images of itself, and the values, identities, and social realities which could "enter in" to its social matrix. Spicer and Ginsberg are particularly well suited to explore the limits of the New American Poetry and its response to classical texts: the rivalry between them was both legendary and public, and reflected a clash of poetics just as much as of personalities. By placing Ginsberg and Spicer's mutually critical poetics in a series of confrontations, I argue against homogenizing

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classics as a historical discipline and the ideology of the classical, see Eastman, Andrew. "Estranging the Classic: The Zukofskys' Catullus." *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal. Littératures, Histoire des Idées, Images, Sociétés du Monde Anglophone–Literature, History of Ideas, Images and Societies of the English-speaking World* 7.2 (2009): 117-129.

[55] Many of the reasons for this are well-known and documented: an influx of serious students at universities, encouraged in part by the GI education bill for soldiers returning from WWII. These are the same reasons John D'Emilio gives in "Gay Politics" for burgeoning resistance to the heterocentric social order: "WWII brought about a range of same-sex association and expanded the possibilities for homosocial—and specifically gay and lesbian—interaction. The sudden removal of men and women from small towns into "sex-segregated, nonfamilial environments" such as the armed services or defense industries provided new possibilities for same-sex contacts" (458). See D'Emilio, John. "Gay politics and community in San Francisco since World War II." *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian & Gay Male Experiences* (1981): 59-79.

models of the New American Poetry as a literary movement, and at the same time offer resources for thinking about competing New American responses to the question of the classics.

The third and final chapter, "C=L=A=S=S=I=C=I=S=M=S and Beyond," moves from the New American Poetry to Language poetry, and looks beyond Language poetry to developments in contemporary innovative poetics. The poetics thus far considered have figured their contests with hegemonic classicism as a contest with various forms of materially embedded disciplinary and academic power—a struggle to wrest the forms of cultural capital that regulate the reception and understanding of classical texts. Bernstein and Howe signal a distinct shift in the cultural pattern of the avant-garde towards assimilation into the broader institutional framework of academia. In general, the chronological arc of classicism in the dissertation traces a progression into the "imaginary" power of the classical. The focus is no longer the classical text, per se, but the mediums of inquiry and knowledge that attend on those objects: the ways that classical phenomena appear to disciplinary consciousness as if they were functions of and only of that consciousness.

This dissertation uses the concrete location of Greek and Latin in experimental poetry after modernism as a focus or meditational object in order to work through a number of related questions. It sees the classical in this period and in the work of these authors as a presence which is uniquely situated to throw into relief issues of cultural transition and mediation; linguistic alterity; the limits of language and representation; the relationship of the hyper-contemporaneity of the avant-garde to an idealized or vilified historical past; linguistic plenitude, loss, and fragmentation; and questions of race, gender, and identity configured as questions of language politics. My dissertation traces not so much a movement as a constellation of poets for whom the classical becomes an absence of historical, social, literary, human, and philosophical plenitude.

The dimensions of this line are fluid. One could stretch this line back through Gertrude Stein, and forward through emergent poets. One might even say that the idea of the classical as a placeholder for humanist idealism in Romantic poetry is a proleptic construction of future critics—but that is the work of another's dissertation. This dissertation traces the dimensions of a counter-modernist impulse which begins *within* modernism, and for which "the classical" reveals the uncanny presence of difference, absence, loss, and semblance. The writers under consideration in this dissertation emphasize the discontinuity of Greek and Latin from an imagined "Western self." They emphasize the alterity, marginality, and foreignness of these languages and textual traditions to the linguistic and cultural "center" which attempts to appropriate them. In this way, their work produces destabilizing and sometimes liberating effects. In this dissertation, Greek and Latin emerge, in an unlooked for context, as vital sites of cultural and poetic production, revealing the subtle but profound irreconcilability of Greek and Latin *texts*, in their material, phonic, and particularistic dimensions, with the *idea* of Greek and Latin as an Anglo-American cultural center. In the hands of the poets considered in this dissertation, "the classics" are radically discontinuous with "the classical."

Chapter 1:

Translating Opacity: Homophony and the Material Text

> Louis Zokofsky [*sic*], potentially our best poet or best lyrist, had come through with a small volume, *Anew*. It has some of the most adult lines written anywhere, after music, today. His wife Celia is a composer who has helped Louis greatly to get away from his fractured language and make soundable lines of his verse. Unless somebody *points out* Louis' accomplishments not one person will see them with the overlay of bad Aiken-Eliot-Perse putridity we labor in. There have not been intelligences enough here to perceive and make clear what the battle is *for*. Music, clarity, freshness: *Anew*. Poor blind Louis, a Jew, what chance has he to realize anything without help? No chance at all.
>
> Williams to Pound, March 29, 1946[56]

By means of extended engagement with Louis Zukofsky and David Melnick's homophonic translations of Catullus and Homer, Chapter One begin to characterize the "postmodernist classicism" of experimental verse in 20th century America, and finds that both Zukofsky and Melnick insist on the profound irreconcilability of Greek and Latin texts, in their material and phonic dimensions, with the idea of the classical as a site of "major" forms of identitarian, ethnic, and national being. These insights into a minor Catullus and a minor Homer reveal the destabilizing and productive tension that informs experimental poets and their engagements with modernist classical intertextuality. Turning from Zukofsky to the homophonic practice of David Melnick, a poet two generations removed, underscores the contrast between

[56] Witemeyer, Hugh, ed. *Pound/Wiliams: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams (Correspondence of Ezra Pound)*. New York, New Directions 1996. p. 219

Zukofsky's modernist-inflected classicism and its later iterations, and sheds light on the full range of Zukofsky's role as a medium between modernist and later experimental movements. Translation enacts the most concrete and elementary forms of classical mediation. It shuttles words and images from one language to another, opening a valve between the inaccessible foreignness of the past—its very pastness—and the transparent medium of the target language—its presentness and presence. This chapter begins with this seemingly most concrete of classical mediations, translation, and fixates on the gray space between modernist and later classicisms. The translations are "homophonic" in the sense that the translated text prefers English equivalents that mime in some way the sonic and metrical qualities of the original. Since both translators treated in this chapter are practicing poets, I explore translation in light of poetics, and poetics in light of translation. Poetic translation springs from its author's poetic sensibilities, both as a real condition of its composition and as a contextualizing framework in analysis. Therefore, I take at least one poetic work or volume as a necessary interpretive context for the homophonic classical translations of both Louis Zukofsky and David Melnick, and spend an appropriate amount of time examining both the poetic work itself and its interactions with the translation. Neither author would agree with the assessment of translation as a "transparent" or concrete form of classical mediation. In spite of the supposed directness of a translated text to its source—or, more perversely, *because* of this directness—both poets take translation as a medium uniquely situated to explore the indirectness and opacity of the relationship of the present to the past, of English to Greek or Latin, and of the text itself to the ideological accretions that attend it.

I contextualize Louis Zukofsky's homophonic translations in light of his poetics by exploring the early poem, "Poem Beginning "The."" Reading the homophonic Catullus translations themselves, I single out two undertheorized but vital formal elements: 1) their

reversal of priority in sound and sense; and 2) the progressive and building nature of the translations' foreignizing homophony. Zukofsky's translations reveal, in English, a diachronic host of Englishes, a lexicographer's dream of archaisms and strained syntactical structures. Even at their most unrecognizable, however, the Catullus translations remain true to English lexicography. What is remarkable is the degree to which Zukofsky produces *an English that is completely foreign to itself,* thereby exploding the "Western tradition" as a singular, unitary object, and finding difference buried in the seemingly transparent, universalist present of American idiom. Barrett Watten describes Zukofsky's Catullus translations as "mov[ing] from a mode of translation that bears a transparent relation to its Latin original to one where the translated text is almost entirely opaque, masking any relation to the original standing behind it."[57] To modify (and slightly disagree with) this characterization of *Catullus*, I reply that Zukofsky's translations, rather, reveal the many ways in which the supposedly "transparent" modes of transporting Catullus in fact conceal and overwrite their relationship to the original. The *Catullus* is not primarily a means of masking or obfuscating "any relation [of the translation] to the original standing behind it," but rather a medium that illuminates by revealing opacity. That is, for Zukofsky, opacity is the actual relation of a reader or writer to the material reality of a Catullan original and, more generally, to a classical past, and his work is to make opacity itself visible and accessible. Zukofsky's translations operate from a perspective of fidelity, seizing onto the opacity of material phonics as a point of access to the original that is *more* transparent and direct than the supposedly transparent Catullus of Quinn.[58] These translations in no way

[57] Watten, Barrett. *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics*. Wesleyan UP, 2003, p. 30-31.

[58] See Quinn, Kenneth. *Catullus, the poems*. London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973. The sentiment that Zukofsky abandons the Catullan text in translation—what many formulations of translation would label a betrayal of fidelity—is not a sentiment unique to Watten. See Paul Mann's

dismiss their original as Greek and Latin texts. Although few or none of his modernist counterparts was as poignantly aware of the inherent contradictions and impossibilities of their Greek and Latin sources or collage materials, Zukofsky pays homage to his source texts.[59]

Whereas Zukofsky's Catullus subordinates sense to sound, Melnick's Homer adheres to the material, phonic surface of language to such a degree that sense is lost. No amount of time with a dictionary can recover the direct relationship of Homeric sense to resulting translation. The translation takes the phonic contact between past and present—the point at which language in the present can touch and re-present the material reality of the past—as the only point of access to "the classical." In this way, the resulting translation both takes the light-hearted pleasure of linguistic play as an end in itself, and approaches a deeply pessimistic brand of historical nihilism. This "absurdist face" of postmodernist classicism, which some would identify with its central impulses is, however, but one among many.[60]

Two aspects of Melnick's translation and poetic practice become representative of one manifestation of postmodernist classicism: its anti-proceduralism and its plurivocality. Zukofsky's Catullus invites its readers to track down and identify the procedures and rules that

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"Translating Zukofsky's Catullus," in which, even in his defense of Zukofsky's translation, he describes it as a form of textual rape in which Catullus gets "fucked":

> One possible answer is that Catullus is himself an explicitly erotic poet and here he gets fucked by Zukofsky. If Catullus feels betrayed by his Lesbia he is also betrayed by Zukofsky for the sake of a special textual pleasure – the two betrayals run closely parallel and suggest the theoretical potential for an erotology of translation, a psychoanalysis along the most general and radical lines.

Mann, Paul. "Translating Zukofsky's Catullus." *Translation Review* 21.1 (1986): 3-9.p. 24

[59] In this, I am in agreement with Mark Scroggins: "No matter how idiosyncratic or willful the products of those translation might seem, Zukofsky always approaches a previous text with an attitude of *loyalty*" (*A Life* 378).

[60] For a staunchly critical account of postmodernism in theory and art as nihilism, see Christopher Norris' *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990): "In short, we have reached the point where theory has effectively turned against itself, generating a form of extreme epistemological skepticism which reduces everything – philosophy, politics, criticism, and 'theory' alike – to a dead level of suasive or rhetorical effect where consensus-values are the last (indeed the only) court of appeal" (4).

govern its various formal choices. No matter how strange the linguistic surface created by those choices appears, there are coherent rules governing its production. On the contrary, Melnick's *Men in Aïda* is actively "anti-procedural" in that it defers the possibility of identifying the rules that govern its creation, at all points suggesting stable rules at one moment and pulling the rug from beneath the reader's feet in the next. Postmodernist classicism stretches towards a heterogeneous plurivocality that embraces schizophrenic expansiveness of voice, identity, and mode of being. The absurd is one voice or face of postmodernist classicism that gains its full import only in the context of fragmentary mourning, ludic language play, radically formalist materialism, and the plenary cornucopia of competing particularisms and "cetera" that collectively speak its "proper name." In particular, David Melnick's *Men in Aïda* comes to have its full significance only in light of the poetic artifacts that precede it. Melnick's first volume of poetry, *Eclogs*, self-consciously places itself in relation to a classical generic and literary past with its title. Where *Men in Aïda* performs absurdist non-relations, teasingly defers procedure, and gives tongue-in-cheek commentary on obscured homoeroticism, *Eclogs* profoundly and mournfully explores the idea of a classical past as a desired but unobtainable object of longing. *Eclogs* encompasses the nostalgic recognition of loss and absence in its rapprochement of classical texts; and at the same time an ironic self-reflexivity that marks and mocks its own participation in creating the idealized "classical" object of mourning. Melnick traverses both extremes. The differences between the two works impress themselves so deeply that it is difficult to believe that they were written by the same author; or, if believed, difficult to comprehend *how* such a drastic oscillation in register and pathos can accompany poetic meditations that both attend on a classical past. This very "plurivocality," I will argue, comes to characterize postmodernist classicism.

"Askforaclassic, Inc.": The Classics and the Culture Industry

I'll tell you.
About my *poetics* —

An integral
Lower limit speech
Upper limit music [61]

Louis Zukofsky's influence on later generations of poets, from the Objectivists to the Language poets, is inestimable.[62] Because of the difficulty of his verse, its obdurate intellectualism, crisp linguistic precision, and commitment to the material embeddedness of language in history, Zukofsky's status as grandfather of the Language poetry movement is unrivalled by any but Gertrude Stein within his modernist peers. A poet's poet, Zukofsky's contemporary audience consisted of a relatively small circle of modernist heavy-hitters (Pound and Williams first among them) and connoisseurs of culture. In addition, despite a burgeoning of Zukofsky scholarship in the last decades, he remains a poet of academics and other poets.

My own understanding of Zukofsky's poetics owes a great debt to the work of critics such as Peter Quartermain and David Wray. Quartermain, in his nuanced and expansive

[61] Zukofsky, Louis. "A." Berkeley: U of California P, 1978, p.138.
[62] For a more detailed account of this influence, see Stanley, Sandra Kumamoto. *Louis Zukofsky and the transformation of a modern American poetics*. Univ of California Press, 1994.

Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe,[63] situates the disjunctive and disruptive poetics of modernist and later experimentalisms in terms of the cultural history of American immigration and second-language acquisition. For my purposes, Quartermain's arguments are essential to understanding both the initial stakes and broader implications of Louis Zukofsky's foreignizing homophony; and especially the ways in which his work takes "the classics" as a stage for exploring issues of assimilation, ethnicity, and access to the cultural center or exclusion to its margins.[64] Before moving to the Catullus translations, this section explores the ways in which "Poem Beginning "The"" thematizes the competing demands of assimilation and fidelity to a delegitimized origin, with Greek and Latin texts presented as a central staging ground for this contest.[1] David Wray's *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood* has enriched my reading of Zukofsky's Catullus.[65] Wray offers a lucid disciplinary history of Catullus scholarship and piercing insight into the particular historical discourses whereby Catullus comes to be constructed as "Romantic": the transparently biographical Catullus, the lyric poet Catullus, characterized by his "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."[66] Wray situates the history of Catullan scholarship—and therefore the ideological accretions engaged by poets such as Zukofsky and Ginsberg—in terms of a broader history of lyric theory. He cogently historicizes the "Catullus" deconstructed by Zukofsky and drawn on by Ginsberg, and thereby shows clearly the ways in which the Catullan text is a site of contest and

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[63] Quartermain, Peter. *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*. Vol. 59. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

[64] Several recent studies have taken account of the influence of American foreign immigration on modernist experimentalism, as for example when Charles Bernstein emphasizes the importance of reading modernism "within the context of the… prevalence of second-language speakers of English… and a generation of poets for whom poetry was as much an arena to resist cultural and linguistic assimilation as a place that marked such assimilation" (348). Bernstein, Charles. "Objectivist Blues: Scoring Speech in Second-Wave Modernist Poetry and Lyrics." *American Literary History* 20.1-2 (2008): 346-368.

[65] Wray, David. *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[66] Wordsworth, William. "1 Preface to Lyrical Ballads." *Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader* (2009): 21.

agonism for successive and cycling ideas of self, voice, and verse. In general, Wray's book helps contextualize what is at stake in any engagement with the Catullan text, and with Zukofsky's engagement in particular.

We might explain Zukofsky's choice of Catullus as the object of his translations in several ways. Catullus experiences the assimilatory pull of the Roman center. Catullus, as Zukofsky, inhabits a position on the fringe of culture, fighting to claim, own, and transform the cultural center; and having succeeded to such an extent that he is now regarded as a full representation of that cultural center. "Askforaclassic, Inc." completely effaces the ideological violence and blood of that assimilation. "Unless somebody *points out* Louis' accomplishments," wrote Williams in a letter to Pound, "not one person will see them with the overlay of bad Aiken-Eliot-Perse putridity we labor in." Williams both elevates Zukofsky as "potentially our best poet or best lyrist," and in the same breath marginalizes him, citing his tendency towards "fractured language": "Poor blind Louis, a Jew, what chance has he to realize anything without help? No chance at all." Zukofsky's ambivalent status as both poet's poet and marginalized outsider is something of a maxim for his life. Born to first generation Lithuanian Jewish immigrants in New York's Lower East Side, he first encountered Shakespeare as a child in Yiddish translation. According to Scroggins, his biographer, "As a child, he would stand on the Lower East Side street and recite Longfellow's *Hiawatha*—in Yiddish—to stave off gangs of Italian bullies."[67] This biographical snippet reveals in microcosm some of the complexities involved in Zukofsky's negotiation of the "Western tradition." The young Zukofsky's choice of poet bears consideration: while Longfellow was something of a populist poet, well respected in

[67] Scroggins, Mark. *The poem of a life: a biography of Louis Zukofsky*. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007, p. 3. This episode is first related in Zukofsky's autobiography.

his day, he was by then dismissed as "minor and derivative"[68] in favor of poets such as Whitman. Longfellow is a poet of the American center, responsible in some ways for shaping burgeoning ideas of Americanism with poems such as "Paul Revere." Zukofsky recites an iconically "central" and "major" American poet in an iconically "minor" language, Yiddish. He translates the American into the minor in such a way that the resulting speech is utterly opaque to his audience, the "gangs of Italian bullies." This anecdote reveals the young Zukofsky approaching a Western and American tradition as an outsider. As an outsider, the act of recitation translates the "inside" (of Longfellow's English) into the "outside" (of Lower East Side Yiddish), and brings a novel foreignness to an otherwise hostile audience which interpellate him as unwanted outsider.

Not only its narrative in Zukofsky's autobiography, but the event itself was "written" by the same mind that goes on to create *A.* That is to say, biography itself is in some ways a work of artifice. Not just biography or autobiography as they are translated into *textual narrative*, but as they are lived. The basis for my reading of this anecdote is a blurring of the boundaries between life and art. Paradoxically, we see Zukofsky embracing a denied access to the cultural center while at the same time claiming it as his own, translating the material of the center into the ghettoized margins of Yiddish and injecting the disjunctive foreignizing influence of the cultural margins into the heart of the center. In keeping with the quality Charles Bernstein describes as "the rebarbative anti-assimilationism of Louis Zukofsky's "Poem Beginning 'The,'" Zukofsky's corpus is at all points highly attuned to discourses of assimilation, whether in terms of an external demand to naturalize an idiomatic English, or in terms of the imperative to appropriate a

[68] Turco, Lewis. *Visions and revisions: of American poetry*. University of Arkansas Press, 1986, p. 33.

cultural center. [69] In many places, these tensions appear in the form of an interaction with the canon of Western literature. Zukofsky's relationship with assimilation, however, and with the canon that so often embodies the demand to assimilate, is complex and nuanced. In practical terms, the logic of Zukofsky's *Catullus* would leave him strangely friendless in the canon wars of the last decades. For his work would find it impossible to remove the canon—consisting as it does of dead white males—from classroom instruction, public discourse, or personal creation. Nor could it valorize the conservative position of the moral universality of the classics. Rather, Zukofsky's work moves towards a morbid fascination with the classics. This vision pierces the ideological shroud surrounding Greek and Latin—strips them of their aura—yet still hungrily orbits the remaining, denuded texts. Rather than escaping these texts—an impossibility—Zukofsky expands them. Zukofsky's work pierces the ideological sleight of hand of the "American" Catullus and finds in it a multitude: a Jewish Catullus, a female Catullus, a foreign Catullus, and so on. It is not only that Zukofsky is able to work through these canonical texts, but that these texts, precisely because of their role as placeholders of national and racial identity, are uniquely situated to decenter discourses of race and nation.

The convergence of abstract questions of textual mediation and concrete questions of ethnicity begins early on, with Zukofsky's "Poem Beginning "The.""[70] As his first major publication, this poem engages generic constructions of the classical past as a site of origins and inspiration. At the same time, Zukofsky interrogates ideas of a classical past in modernism. Formally, "The" satirizes Eliot's "The Wasteland," taking the classicism of "The Wasteland" as its primary interlocutor in engaging modernism's uses of Greek and Latin. "The" both criticizes

[69] In "Objectivist Blues: Scoring Speech in Second-Wave Modernist Poetry and Lyrics," in *American Literary History.* Volume 20, Number 1-2, Spring/Summer 2008. pp. 346-368. (347)
[70] Both "Poem Beginning "The"" and the Catullus translations can be found in Zukofsky, Louis, and Robert Creeley. *Complete short poetry*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

and entertains modernist classicism, by turns embracing, rejecting, seducing and being seduced by modernist constructions of a classical past. For Zukofsky, these abstract philosophical concerns are interchangeable with concrete, historically situated problems of race, national identity, language, and idiom.

As Schimmel, Tomas, and others have argued, Zukofsky's corpus remains deeply implicated in questions of Jewishness and Jewish identity, despite the apparent opacity of his later work towards them.[71] "Poem Beginning "The"" is a watershed of thematic orientation towards questions of Jewishness. This initial moment is also a time when a fundamental concern with center and margins—a concern that informs all of his work—is openly expressed in terms of Jewishness. "The" captures the dual senses of "assimilate"—in which one is absorbed by an intermediary substance, taken into it and made like it, but also assimilation as that which happens in eating: some external substance is taken into the self and made like it. In this case, assimilation is a cultural absorption, in which the generic substrate of "the canon" subsumes the "foreignness" of Zukofsky's Yiddish attachments—Yiddish consumed by the classics in English translation—and the simultaneous assimilation of the classics to the foreignness of the margins.

The poem's poetic texture is a shifting thoughtscape that "forms its visions think- / ing incessantly of the things" (ll. 69-70), characterized by abrupt shifts in subject matter and juxtaposition of disparate linguistic and cultural registers. "Poem beginning "The"" takes the idea of the past as created by received texts as its terrain. The poem itself is a collage of

[71] For more detailed contextualization of "Poem Beginning "The"" in terms of Zukofsky's Jewishness, see Schimmel, Harold. "Zuk. Yehoash David Rex." *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*: 235-245; and Tomas, John. "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Jew: Zukofsky's Poem Beginning 'The' in Context." *Sagetrieb: A Journal Devoted to Poets in the Imagist/Objectivist Tradition* (1990): 9-1.

quotations, allusions, and parodies. This mosaic-work[72] encompasses canonical texts of "the Western tradition," in its first handful of lines traversing the Biblical and High Classical "origins of Western thought": "The / voice of Jesus I. Rush singing / in the wilderness"; "Residue of Oedipus-faced wrecks"; as well as various registers of popular song and culture, minutiae of personal and family life, and modernist literature. A deluge of footnotes and attributions preface "The," rather than appearing at the end as they do in "The Wasteland." They arrive in random order, and consist of both actual glosses of source texts ("Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*—46, 47") and spurious or overtly vague, opaque, or satirical references ("Symbol of our Relatively Most Permanent Self, Origin and Destiny—Wherever the reference is to the word Mother"; or "The Yellow Menace—241-242"). "The" also satirizes "The Wasteland"'s self-canonizing affectation of numbering its own lines by numbering, not every ten lines, but each and every line. If line numbers signal the canonical presence of a text—the need to easily reference, comment upon, and pour over a poem's individual minutiae—then "The" announces itself as of ten times more historical and scholarly import than Eliot's "Wasteland."

In this way, "The" takes "The Wasteland" as its primary interlocutor in engaging with and questioning modernist uses of the classics, as in the following passage:

> 24 Kerith is long dry, and the ravens that
> brought the prophet bread
> 25 Are dust in the waste land of a raven-
> winged evening.
> 26 And why if the waste land has been explored,
> traveled over, circumscribed,
> 27 Are there only wrathless skeletons exhumed
> new planted in its sacred wood,
> 28 Why—heir, long dead—Odysseus, wandering of ten years
> 29 Out-journeyed only by our Stephen, bibbing
> of a day

[72] The phrase is Scroggins' as he describes Zukofsky's poetics of quotation as a "ransacking [of] the history of Western literature… [that] tak[es] the shiniest, most colorful materials for his own "mosaic-work"" (*A Life* 425).

Kerith is literally "a cutting, separation, gorge, torrent-bed, or winter-stream,"[73] as well as the name of the ravine brook where Elijah hides during the drought.[74] The "waste land" here alludes to the "Western tradition," consisting as it does of Biblical ("Kerith is long dry") and Greek ("Odysseus") intertextual horizons; to Eliot's poem; and by implication to the ways in which Eliot's poem—and Eliot's poem as a stand-in for modernist classicism—"explore[s], travel[s] over, [and] circumscribe[s]" the tradition. For "The," "The Wasteland"'s orientation towards and use of the tradition, its "shoring these fragments against its ruin"[75] is somehow abortive, a process of mining for value and meaning which exhumes only "wrathless skeletons." These lines signal and criticize the artificial character of a certain modernist classicism that plants its own skeletons ("new planted in this sacred wood") in the wasteland of the tradition it has created.[76]

The poem's opening lines initiate a recurring theme, in which the poem addresses the mother as a source of marginalized ethnic particularity that it must betray. Even in its betrayal of its maternal origins, the poem longs to maintain fidelity to them and transform its embrace of the cultural center into an act of ethnic loyalty:

First Movement: "*And out of olde bokes, in good feyth"*
1 The
2 Voice of Jesus I. Rush singing
3 in the wilderness
4 A boy's best friend is his mother,
5 It's your mother all the time.
6 Residue of Oedipus-faced wrecks
7 Creating out of the dead,—
8 From the candle flames of the souls of dead mothers

[73] Smith, William. "A dictionary of the Bible; comprising its antiquities, biography, geography, and natural history". Che'rith, the brook. Retrieved 12 Nov 2011.
[74] 1 Kings 17
[75] A paraphrase of Eliot's famous line in "The Wasteland": TS Eliot's famous line, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."
[76] Michael Andre Bernstein shares this characterization of modernism, describing the broader poetics of modernist classicism as "not so much draw[ing] upon a canonic tradition as seek[ing] to establish one" (78). Bernstein, Michael Andre. "Bringing It All Back Home: Derivations and Quotations in Robert Duncan and the Poundian Tradition." (1982): 176-89.

9 Vide the legend of thin Christ sending her
out of the temple,—

The poem blends questions of canon, tradition, and lineage as that which proceeds "*out of olde bokes, in good faith*" (itself a quotation proceeding from Chaucer)[77] with questions of familial lineage, the lineage of mothers to sons in particular: "A boy's best friend is his mother / It's your mother all the time." The emphasis on matrilineage opposes itself to a patrilineal configuration of tradition and literary inheritance in "The Wasteland," as well as suggesting a matrilineal Jewish inheritance, rather than the "Gentile" literary inheritance structure of Eliot's Anglophile poem. The lineage of literary inheritance cannibalizes the matrilineal tradition, "creating out of the dead / From the candle flames of the souls of dead mothers." The "Son of man" is not, as in Eliot's poem, the subject of these lines, but rather his banished mother. As in the gospel narrative, the inheritor / heretic of the Jewish tradition, "thin Christ," banishes his mother from the temple in favor of his disciples.[78]

For Zukofsky, the history of the Western tradition is a history banishing one's own origins, both "creating out of the dead" and cannibalizing the source of inheritance. At the same time, the poem thematizes questions of ethnic and religious marginality or majority in terms of the ability to claim a canonical center as one's own. The question of claiming a center that demands one abandon his matrilineage is troubled throughout. The poem identifies with Spinoza, the Marrano heretic Jew who even in his heresy and his claiming of the center, says "Rabbaisi":

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[77] From *The Parliament of Fowls*, ll. 2024.

[78] The reference is to Matthew 12, wherein Jesus prevents his mother from entering his company, supplanting familial kinship with a spiritual kinship that claims his disciples as "My mother and My brothers!" In "The," the episode functions as a figure for the assimilatory displacement of western texts from their source traditions.

"Do we dare say / With Spinoza grinding lenses, Rabbaisi, / After living on Cathedral Parkway?" (58-60).[79]

The following lines are worth considering at length, as they explicitly characterize issues of cultural minority and centrality as a question of access to "the classics" in translation, and outline the germs of a strategy in relation to these texts and to the cultural center in general which remain characteristic of Zukofsky's poetics throughout his career:

> 162 Is it the sun you're looking for,
> 163 Drop in at Askforaclassic, Inc.,
> 164 Get yourself another century,
> 165 A little frost before sundown,
> 166 It's the times don'chewknow,
> 167 And if you're a Jewish boy, then be your
> Plato's Philo.

This section models itself after Poe's poem "Helen," itself the product of an American classicizing impulse. It satirizes the elevated but artificial language of the classics in translation: "Thy," "Lo!" "bott'm." The poem here embraces the perspective of an outside ("the backseats which / Are no man's land!") that both desires and is repelled by the "center" of "Askforaclassic, Inc." This section satirizes "Askforaclassic, Inc.," characterizing the Great Books classroom and syllabus as a machine that creates of the classics a universal American cultural center, while at the same time de-Greeking and de-Latinizing the very texts on which it builds. In "The," Askforaclassic, Inc.—the Great Books classics of Erskine's Columbia[80]—empties classical texts

[79] Joshua Schuster explores Zukofsky's work in light of philosophical affinities with Spinoza in "Looking at Louis Zukofsky's Poetics through Spinozist Glosses." Schuster, Joshua. "Looking at Louis Zukofsky's Poetics through Spinozist Glasses." *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture* (2009): 127. Vibrant work in Spinoza scholarship has recently explored the cultural and ethnic dimensions of Spinoza's social role in relation to his abstract thought. Yirmiyahu Yovel, in *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason*, expands the social history of the "Marrano" into an argument about code-switching and cultural espionage in Spinoza's philosophy. These arguments could productively frame a reading of Zukofsky's affinity for Spinoza as cultural and strategic, as well as philosophical. Yovel, Yirmiyahu. *Spinoza and Other Heretics, Volume 1: The Marrano of Reason*. Vol. 1. Princeton University Press, 1992.

[80] See footnote twenty-four.

of their cultural, historical, and linguistic specificity and assimilates them into the "neutral" substrate of the educated humanist subject. Rather than an object of impossible longing ("the sun"), "Askforaclassic, Inc." offers mass-produced centuries. On the one hand, the poem criticizes the normalizing classicism of the Great Books classroom. On the other, it acknowledges the power of this normalizing classicism and seeks to gain entrance into its center even as it maintains an oppositional stance:

> 250 Assimilation is not hard,
> 251 And once the Faith's askew
> 252 I might as well look Shagetz just as much
> as Jew.
> 253 I'll read their Donne as mine,
> 254 And leopard in their spots
> 255 I'll do what says their Coleridge,
> 256 Twist red hot pokers into knots.
> 257 The villainy they teach me I will execute
> 258 And it shall go hard with them,
> 259 For I'll better the instruction,
> 260 Having learned, so to speak, in their
> colleges.[81]

The poem's subject takes on the character of the center it claims, even as it seeks to transform that center from within, to "leopard in their spots."

"The" narrates the story of the Western tradition as a story of assimilation, perpetually turning its back on its origins even as it uses those origins as a font of creation. "The" narrates the persistence of a kind of ethnic identity even in the face of crushing assimilation. The assimilating force of "the classical" is both the destruction of particularistic cultural identity—banishing the Jewish mother—and the force through which that identity will survive and resist, "leopard[ing] in their spots," and "better[ing] the instruction."

Zukofsky's "Poem Beginning "The"" establishes a series of concerns with assimilation, marginality, and the role of Greek and Latin texts as sites of cultural power that persists

[81] Shakespeare's Shylock is this passage's most obvious intertexts.

throughout his career. Certainly, the figure of Zukofsky "leoparding in their spots"—taking on the authority of the center and its texts while simultaneously re-writing their meaning—is an indispensible context when approaching *Catullus.* Louis and Celia Zukofsky's *Catullus* brings the negotiation of concrete attachments and contexts of universal ideas of race and language, as embodied in contemporary ideals of "the classical," to a frenzied perfection. Already a poet who "insisted … on the particular of the physical world, material daily living, and on the poem as material register of the poet's own registry of that world" (Quartermain 6), Louis Zukofsky develops attention to textual and historical materiality, in his translations of the extant poems of Catullus, into a translation practice with far-reaching consequences. Lawrence Venuti's basic categories of foreignizing translation—an idea borrowed from Friedrich Schleiermacher—and domesticating translation, developed in *The Translator's Invisibility*, have been helpful in thinking through the processes of Zukofsky's Catullus. Venuti's conceptual dualism, however, cannot help but level out the intricacies of Zukofsky's foreignizing homophony, seeing it as, "no matter how "close" to the Latin, enact[ing] an ethnocentric violence in its imposition of translation effects that work only in English" (220).[82]

Although the germ of the Catullus translations existed for some time—the product of nine years collaborating with his wife, Celia Zukofsky[83]—it was not until the relatively late point in his career of 1969 that the finished product arrived on the scene. Radical practices of translation, quotation, citation, and fragmentation of source texts already composed a major part of Zukofsky's poetics, and the Catullus translations represent an extended and exclusive

[82] Venuti, Lawrence. *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation.* Routledge, 2008.
[83] Celia produced a close English version and a trot, parsed each Latin word in detail, and noted the Latin versification and meter, and Louis worked this raw material into the resulting translation.

application of those principles to the practice of translation.[84] The turn to translation at this point in his career is simply a synchronic cross-section of the continuous development curve of his "poetics of quotation." The motivation behind these new translations, writes Zukofsky, is to "translate the "literal" meaning."[85] For Zukofsky, to translate the literal meaning means to transport the phonic effects of the original text into English.

In many ways, homophony in translation was not a new idea. It has long been an established axiom of literary translation practice that a "good" translation will both convey accurate meaning and at least some qualities of the literary and linguistic texture of the original, although what—in practical terms—this means varies widely from theory to theory and practice to practice. Many theories of translation rely on a conceptual distinction between form (the specific linguistic, spatial, and material qualities of the original) and content (the original's meaning or sense, abstracted from the particular language that articulates it). When transporting a textual object from one language to another, this distinction subordinates form to content as it prioritizes which qualities of the original to retain. In simplest terms, and for obvious reasons, most theories of translation hold the meaning of the original, rather than its sounds, to be the primary object of translation; and hold transporting the linguistic sound and shape of the original to be of secondary importance to accurately conveying its intellectual content.

Zukofsky applies the strategy of reversing this paradigm with wildly varying degrees of fidelity to the Latinate sound structure. Although some have described *Catullus* as a collection of

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[84] Although Zukofsky's completed his homophonic translation of Plautus' *Rudens* in 1967, he subordinates and incorporates this project into his magnum opus, "A," as its 21st book. Perhaps simply a question of presentation, but the *Rudens* translations in their published form function as a new text in Zukofsky's own work, and *not* as a translation.

[85] From the preface to *Catullus*. The Zukofskys explain their translation as an attempt to follow along with the phonetic patterns of Catullus's original speech while at the same time keeping pace with his meaning (*Prepositions* 225). Zukofsky, Louis. *Prepositions: the collected critical essays of Louis Zukofsky*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

"transliterations,"[86] the assiduous reader finds persistent thematic correspondences between original and translation, even in its most radical foreignness; as well as moments of haunting beauty:[87]

> her eyes flowered light lightens as
> all white parthenium—well it
> light to move, yellow poppy. (278)

A more accurate way to characterize Zukofsky's *Catullus* is as an inversion of the standard paradigm of translation.[88] The Catullus translations subordinate sense to sound in the transportation of a textual object from one language to another. Zukofsky's' translations hold their primary aim as conveying the formal, linguistic, and material qualities of the original into their source language, English; and hold the vigorously accurate conveyance of meaning and register to be secondary.

These various senses crystallize in the preface's stated desire to "translate the "literal" meaning." Zukofsky applies the maxim of "fidelity" with such straight-faced vigor, and such radical disregard for the inevitable reaction of the guardians of culture, that the translations appear as an ironic critique, satire, or *reductio ad absurdum* of the very maxims they radicalize. Without alteration and absolutely on their own terms, the translations take sense-oriented principles of fidelity to their maximal consequences, such that they appear as farce.[89]

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[86] They have been called far worse: "For most translators, the name Zukofsky represents a scandal. It is a name better left unspoken, and when it is spoken it inevitably signifies grotesque infidelity, gratuitous distortion, the deliberate abuse of a poem for the translator's own aesthetic satisfaction" (Mann).

[87] The Zukofskys' translations "move in and out of the Latin, now essaying a strong word, now falling back into more literal transfers to contain the revisionary energies within the general semantic frame of the Latin" (116). Hooley, Daniel M. "Tropes of Memory: Zukofsky's Catullus." *Sagetrieb: A Journal Devoted to Poets in the Pound-Williams Tradition* 5 (1986): 107-123.

[88] Ron Silliman, in his introduction to David Melnick's *A Pin's Fee*, glosses this inversion: "Zukofsky's Catullus, the mother of this genre of miming the sound of an alien text, aims at capturing also the basic spirit, if not always the figurative and narrative frames, of its source material. See his introduction to Melnick, David. *A Pin's Fee.* Logopoeia. Columbia University, Web. 12 Jan.2012.

[89] Further, the inversion of terms in the goal of "fidelity" (sound trumps sense) amounts to a critique of the philosophical and epistemological assumptions that support it. From Plato's subordination of the

A(n almost) random sampling—side-by-side with the original Latin, for phonic comparison, and a relatively literal trot—will illustrate the ways that the translations, in prioritizing material sound, both maintain and subvert the meaning of their source:

Will ay pulverize Africa, seed a rum sky, make count a hum, subdue cat numerous pries whose quivers star—nor more rare air—would mull the milliard loved away.	ille pulveris Africi siderumque micantium subducat numerum prius qui vestri numerare vult multa milia ludi.[90]	Let him the sands of Africa and the glittering stars first take account of whoever wants to count your many thousands of games (sex play)[91]

Occurring in a poem celebrating the wedding of a prominent Roman couple, this passage centers on the act of procreation, preceded by descriptions and celebrations of the public marriage ceremony, and followed by benedictions for the production of children and future heirs. [92] As such, in a poem about lineage and the procession from a "legitimate" predecessor to its heir, this stanza describes the creation of the link between one generation and the next. Thematically, the poem parallels the "legitimate" biological procreation of children in the sanctioned context of marriage; and the textual procreation proceeding in a "legitimate" lineage from canonical text to modernist children. In poetic terms, this stanza would compare to the moment of textual creation

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material world to an ideal and immaterial world of spiritual Forms; to Paul of Tarsus' "the spirit of the law rather than the letter"; through Descartes' immaterial *cogito* and Kant's inaccessible things-as-such that shape consciousness even as they remain opaque to it, the Western metaphysical tradition provides the foundations for a "metaphysics of translation." Although this genealogy is over-broad, it draws attention to the analogy between the philosophical tradition's tendency to subordinate matter to spirit and the metaphysics of translation in which the material aspects of language—its actual formal existence as sounds in time and space—are regarded as a merely arbitrary "body" which sense and meaning inhabit as spirit.

[90] Cornish, Francis Warre, ed. *Catullus, Tibullus, and Pervigilium Veneris*. Vol. 6. Harvard University Press, 1962.

[91] Column 1: the Zukofskys' homophonic version. Column 2: the Latin original. Column 3: a literal trot

[92] The specific poem is Catullus 61, ll. 206-210.

and the actual creative engagements with a prior text. It refers not to the source or the object, but rather the particular processes of mediating between them.

What in this stanza might at first appear to be nonsense, or partial sense interspersed with mismatched adjective-noun pairs ("rum sky") and onomatopoetic interjections ("ay"), resolves into something else entirely if read with a dictionary. "Ay," for example, is an archaic English adverb meaning "always," as well as an interjection implying regret. Beyond that, it is of course a typographical representation of the first person pronoun, "I." Retaining both meanings and returning to the Latinate implication of dust or sand (from *pulvis, pulveris*), we arrive at "Will I always reduce Africa [the geographical and cultural margins?] to dust?"[93] In this, the poem places the average English-speaking reader in the position of a second language learner. If she does not read with a dictionary, she remains excluded from the text, finding babble in the place of ambiguous but pregnant meaning. This makes of the translation's poetics a "hum"—a close-mouthed singing, a song obscured by the shuttering of transparent articulation. The translation "seeds"—as planting, impregnating, and burying—its veiled song in the "rum [bizarre or strange; possibly "foreign"] sky" of an alien text. "Subdue cat numerous pries," could refer to either Zukofsky's own poetics or Eliot's "cat numerous" poetics in veiled critique.[94] If a reference to Eliot's—and by extension, one powerful strain of modernism's—verse, Zukofsky characterizes

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[93] As an exercise, I produced a "translation" of Zukofsky's translation that mines the lexicon for archaic meanings and uncommon registers:

> Will ay always reduce Africa to dust?
> plant seed in a strange sky?
> make my mumble-song matter?
> cultivate the cat-numerous pryings whose
> tremblings are center-stage?—no more uncommon sky—and which would
> crumble the billions of beloved away?"

This reading of course articulates ambiguity in a way that excludes meanings and erases the very veiling and opacity that is central to the translation's poetics.

[94] The specific link to Eliot would of course be *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats.* Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *Old Possum's book of practical cats*. Mariner Books, 1968.

his peer's poetic engagements with canonical texts as pries / prying. Rather than "seed[ing]" the alterity of Latin and Greek material textuality in anticipation of poetic heirs, Eliot's modernist classicism forcefully pries open the foreignness of source texts in a way that destroys particularity ("no more rare air") and "mull[s] the milliard loved [a]way." In the Catullus translations, we find the modernist attention to the newness and presence of *speech* as a found thing and a point of access to literary immediacy turned on its head. Rather than a poetics that represents the mundane as newly recognized—an epiphany of the poetry of the everyday, or the beauty in the common found around us, or again as a poetic refashioning of the common in such a way that it is beautiful—we find a commitment to idiom that reveals the actual material conditions of our experience to be completely foreign.[95]

As above, the Catullus translations attempt to convey both meaning and sound, but have radically reversed the standard hierarchy, such that the material register of language subordinates its intellectual significance, producing bizarre circumlocutions. To describe the translations as "mere" homophony or transliteration de-emphasizes the complex ways in which meaning, even when subordinated to sound, remains in the English versions. Paradoxically, Zukofsky demolishes the facade of a singular English by deeply mining the historical resources of the language itself. That is, rather than injecting foreignness or opaque illegibility into the English language, as detractors have argued, the Catullus poems find difference buried in the seemingly

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[95] The conception of speech as a point of access to quotidian strangeness rather than immediacy is opposed, most obviously, to William Carlos Williams' attention to idiom, clarity, and speech. But likewise to Pound's conception of "the crust of dead English… in my own available vocabulary" as a primary obstacle to effective translation:

> What obfuscated me [in my attempted translation of Guido] was not the Italian but the crust of dead English, the sediment present in my own available vocabulary—which I, let us hope, got rid of a few years later… Neither can anyone learn English, one can only learn a series of Englishes. (85).

See Biguenet, John, and Rainer Schulte, eds. *Theories of translation: an anthology of essays from Dryden to Derrida*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

transparent, universalist present of American idiom. In Catullus, we find an English, not of the Great Books classroom or the Ellis Island ledgers, but a heterogeneous timescape of compacted layers, ranging from a highly Latinate, inkhorn English, into which words are imported en masse directly from Latin; to a savage Germanic English; to the English of the Renaissance dramatists; to an English of 20th century ethnic ghettoes, popular song, and snatches of found speech.[96]

The foreignizing processes of the translations, however, are neither stable nor static, but rather progressive at the level of arrangement and sequencing. The structure of *Catullus* is one of progressive foreignization, moving in its beginnings from a recognizably English vocabulary and sentence structure into an absolutely alien English. The translations as a collection move from the familiar Catullus of the earliest poems in its sequence, to the deepest sections of the poem, which dissolve English syntax into thematic correspondence, and contextually anchor pure sound in circumlocuitous bursts of image. This progressive foreignization is part of a strategy of interpellation that teaches the reader to read an alien English, and to see the radical foreignness at the heart of English itself. In this way, the translations introduce their reader to a familiar Catullus—the lyric Catullus of the transparent, transcultural lyric poet, pining for love—and progressively defamiliarize it. The total effect of this process incrementally teaches its readers to see the foreignness at the heart of English and the dissonance between the idea of Latin and its actual material presence.

For example, the initial and most well known poems in the sequencing of Catullus remain, despite some small peculiarities, the Catullus with which Zukofsky's contemporaries would have been familiar. Below is Zukofsky's translation of Catullus 5:

May we live, my Lesbia, love while we may,

[96] Venuti describes the Zukofskys' Catullus as drawing on "a dazzling range of Englishes, dialects and discourses that issued from the foreign roots of English . . . and from different moments in the history of English-language culture" (*Translator's Invisibility* 216-17).

> And as for the asseverating seniors
> Estimate them at one naught we won't assess.
> Suns will hurry to set and will rise—likely:
> But for us it all means when the bright light sets,
> Night is perpetual, and we are dormant.
> Dear, kiss me a thousand times, then a hundred,
> Then another thousand, another hundred
> And another thousand, another hundred,
> And when we've roused that multitude of thousands,
> Confounding their number we will know no sum
> Of them that a malicious eye may envy
> While it keeps counting the many times we've kissed.

The presence and practice of homophony in these early poems remains relatively limited. Homophony does not stretch across the line to encompass broader sonic patterns, but rather limits itself to the morpheme, preferring English correspondents that mimic the sound of the Latin source. That is, its particular lexical choices tend towards words that have made their way into English from Latin with relatively superficial changes in meaning. As in the example of "asseverating," the resulting word choices subtly disjoint the original's tone and register. The veer towards a stiltedly Latinate vocabulary tends to result in an English with a technical, specialized, or scientific register. Of course, this in itself is not entirely innovative with respect to Catullus, whose language often transcribes relatively specialized linguistic registers onto the "organic" interpersonal subject of amorous encounter. The language of sums and accounting, for example, regularly characterizes the Catullan register, even or especially in the context of the supposedly subjective and biographical relationship to Lesbia.[97] The translations seize on and foreground aspects of the source text (in this case, a specialized or disciplinary linguistic register) that, although present in the original, emphasize the difference between the text of Catullus and the idea of Catullus. Even at this early stage, then, and in this relatively subdued manner, the translations begin to emphasize elements of Catullan poetics that protrude from and

[97] The current poem serves as a relevant example.

distend their readers' expectations. At the same time, the poem juxtaposes this subtly different Catullus with lines that would pass unnoticed and unremarked in almost any standard translation. Lines 7-9 ("kiss me a thousand times, then a hundred") could substitute themselves for the same lines in almost any 20th century translation of Catullus.

In general, syntax in the earliest poems in the sequence interacts with its source in a way that largely maintains the original senses of subordination, order, temporality, and agency; although at times the translation subtly subordinates such meta-syntactical content to accommodate the material and formal sequence of Latin words. The translation tends to preserve the line boundaries of the original, making for a line-for-line correspondence of content. Particularly the early Lesbia poems—upon which the idea of Catullus as the iconic lyric poet depends—remain quite similar to contemporary translations. They do maintain a tendency towards a Latinate vocabulary that mimes the Latin source (asseverating, estimate, dormant) rather than preferring a more "natural" English correspondent.

The syntactical and lexical differences between an early poem in the sequence and an otherwise quite famous poem occurring midway—the 51st poem in the sequence—are striking:

> He'll hie[98] me, par *is* he? the God divide her,
> he'll hie, see fastest, superior deity,
> quiz—sitting adverse identity—mate, in-
> spect it and audit—
> you'll care ridden then, misery hold omens,
> air rip the senses from me; now you smile to
> me—Lesbia's aspect—no life to spare me
> [voice hoarse in a throat]
> linked tongue set torpid, tenuous support a-
> flame a day mown down, sound tone sopped up in its
> tinkling, in ears hearing, twin eyes tug under
> luminous—a night.[99]

[98] From OE higian "strive, hasten," originally "to be intent on."
[99] See Anne Carson's *If Not, Winter* for exemplary contemporary translations of Sappho. For comparison with Zukofsky's Catullus, I've included her translation of Sappho 31 below:

This poem itself is a translation of Sappho 31, a key site to explore and comment upon the nature of mediation, reception, and translation. Characteristic of the progressively anti-assimilatory poetics of Zukofsky's *Catullus*, the translation mines English archaisms (e.g. "hie"), idiomatic exclamations ("mate"), and a Latinate English that bypasses contemporary register to draw on the earliest instances of English meaning ("in- / spect it and audit"; "sitting adverse identity"). In this way, the translations progressively draw on the resources of English to create a language that is difficult for the reader to recognize or assimilate as English, resulting in an English that is completely foreign to itself.

Poem 51 bears considerable analytical significance, not only because its thematic similarity as a Lesbia poem with the earliest, more tightly laced translations throws the progression of Zukofsky's radical praxis into sharp relief; but also because the poem itself is something of a suturing point in the history of poetic translation, binding together a vast number

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He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty (63)

Carson, Anne. Trans. *If not, winter: fragments of Sappho*. Vintage, 2009.

of disparate historical threads.[100] At this advanced stage in the sequence, the translations' progressively radical rapprochements have encompassed each individual sound and syllable of the original. Although many distortions in vowel sound and length remain, the translation molds itself in precise ways to the phonemic dimensions of the Latin.[101] In refusing to abandon even minute variations in syllable, the translation produces a marked elongation of line length, often requiring two or three English equivalents to capture each aspect of a single Latin source-word. It is well worth the effort of reading this translation aloud to hear the expansion in English of each sound of the Latin original, and the halting articulations of each individual line. One could describe the poetics of this translation as "[voice hoarse in a throat]," not only because of the lurching qualities of the translations when read aloud, but because of the complication of "voice" with the visual representations of voice, signaled by brackets.[102] The translation stacks autonomous clumps of phrases side by side. The translation amputates these phrasal appendages from syntactical context, even while the groupings continue to play along its edges and tease the Latinate meaning in complex ways. They are dismembered bursts of image or thought that

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[100] As one of the most often translated poems in the history of western literature, Sappho 31 is deeply and repeatedly inscribed into the history of literature and thought. The Sapphic "original" meditates on and performs questions of erotics, embodiedness, hyper-sensory limit experiences, jealousy, desire, and the sublime.

[101] In his introduction to Zukofsky's *Selected Poems*, Charles Bernstein describes several general features of Zukofsky's poetics that apply to the Catullus translations, including "the intricate patterning of sound that everywhere pervades [Zukofsky's] work," "the microtonal shifting of vowels," and "the syntactic rotation of the same words shifting to different parts of speech." Bernstein, Charles. "Louis Zukotksy; An Introduction." (2006).

[102] Though it is the least of many ways in which I am indebted to Yopie Prins, to her I owe a sense of the historicity of voice:

> a figure of voice that we should not read too literally, as surely the Victorians did not. Technologically mediated voices have become so naturalized for us that we listen without the sense of estrangement that fascinated Victorian readers and writers, for whom literary and technological inventions of "voice" were a way to perform the dissociation and disembodiment of speech.

In Prins, Yopie. "Voice Inverse." *Victorian Poetry* 42.1 (2004): 43-59. See also *Victorian Sappho* for a nuanced reading of lyricizing complications of voice in Victorian translations of Sappho 31. Prins, Yopie. *Victorian Sappho*. Princeton University Press, 1999.

successfully translate the “literal” meaning while bouncing along the surface of image and affect conjured up by the Latin. Rather than a hierarchy of linear meaning, the semantic configuration of the translation produces an omnidirectional “force-field” of meaning that derives directly from the linguistic and formal thingliness of the original.

Both original and translation consist of two experientially distinct movements, stretching (quite roughly) from lines 1-4 (first movement) and lines 5-11 (second movement). In the first movement in both original and translation, the poem’s subjective center visually probes a troubling external spectacle: “he’ll hie, see fastest, superior deity, / quiz—sitting adverse identity—mate, in- / spect it and audit.” This first movement thematizes division and exclusion (“the God divide her”; “sitting adverse identity”), and narrates a struggle of wills between competing sites of agency. The emphasis here shifts in translation. Whereas both original and translation relate a more or less (or much less) coherent subject exerting observational agency over external spectacle, and spectacle in turn overpowering that agency, the original narrates a will overcome by jealousy and unfulfilled longing; in translation the will is overcome by the act of probing and questioning itself. The movements of “quiz[ing],” questioning, “in-spect[ing]” and “audit[ing]” lead to the following subjective and bodily dissolution: “you’ll care ridden then [after you] inspect it and audit.” Close attention to the detail of the spectacle reveals a gap between the external object of inspection (the “original”) and the actual substance to which it gains access, “Lesbia’s aspect.” The translation pierces the shroud of the idealized classical object to find, not Lesbia herself—but a phantasmagoric simulacrum: “now you smile to / me—Lesbia’s aspect—no life to spare me.”

Zukofsky’s translation does not, as the Catullan “original,” report the torturous mental disconnect between the desired object and the impossibility of obtaining it (“Whenever I see you,

Lesbia…"). Rather, the object of desire itself is disconnected from the "actual" beloved—it is Lesbia's aspect as phantasmagorical mental apparition that bursts into the line. Not only, as in the original, does division and disjointedness exist inside the viewer as subject of the poem, but it is also injected into the object of desire itself: "the God divide her," "sitting adverse identity." The translation performs the troubling status of "the original." As the "aspect" of Lesbia takes priority in creating desire, so too the act of translation takes priority in creating the "original" text as a desired but impossible object of longing. In this and other ways, the poetic texture of Zukofsky's translation performs the content of the original, even as it subordinates syntactical transparency to phonic and material fidelity.

In both Catullan (or Sapphic) original and experimental translation, the processes of the first movement unfurl into a shift in perspective or emphasis—from the external spectacle to the subjective center itself—and the proceeding dissolution of that center. In each, the second movement is both derivative (it stands in relation to the first movement as effect to cause), and viscerally embodied. The second movement is a powerful meditation on bittersweet erotics—an intense, if fraught, pleasure that derives precisely from its nearness to oblivion. The translation is quite ambiguous as to its affective response to the bodily dissolution of the second movement. As in the example of "air rip the senses from me," the descriptions of bodily dissolution function syntactically as either the disintegrating exclamations of a psyche under duress ("air is ripping the senses from me, and I don't like it at all!"), or as direct commands, maybe prayers: "Air, why don't you rip the senses from me right now? I'd really enjoy that." In the original, the dissolution proceeds as a separation of the senses from their objects, hearing from sound, eyes from vision, and so on. The translation, however, presents a paradoxical intensification of the sense, which is both its annihilation and its full activation: "sound tone sopped up in its / tinkling, in ears

hearing." The dissolution actually "sops up" or absorbs "sound tone… in ears hearing." The full process of the second movement results in a "luminous night"—a poetics of translation that is both a dissolution and disassemblage of the coherent idea of the Catullan corpus (its "aspect"); a procession into darkness; and a "luminous" intensification of the reader's aesthetic nearness to the thing itself, "sound tone sopped up in its / tinkling." It is in these moments of bodily dissolution that the poem's formal and linguistic "body" and its descriptive content most closely meet in Zukofsky's translation.

Rather than a resurrection, it might be best to compare the Zukofskian afterlife of Catullus to a form of undeath. To bring that "voice to life," as Scroggins describes Zukofsky's engagement with past texts, makes sense only if one maintains a highly qualified conception of "the voice."[103] If what, for example, Zukofsky's *Catullus* "resurrects" is a transtemporal voice (a voice which has "escape[d] the confines of a time and place"), it is not the voice as the deeply personal, unique expression of the lyrist Catullus, given over to its heights and depths of passion. The translations resurrect Catullus' "voice" quite literally: as vibrations of similar pitch and frequency, as the aped movements of the muscles and organs of the throat and mouth. Zukofsky's *Catullus* ironically comments on the ideology of a "living past," which here appears as a form of necromancy.

The universal element of the humanist "Great Books" tradition is not a grand philosophical ideal, but a precise pattern of vocal tics. Ultimately, Zukofsky finds in phonic quotation a more direct access to tradition. Rather than the Poundian reshaping of history by a single, solitary genius, Zukofsky's poetics "shape" the collage of voices and difference as the texture and material of history itself. These "literal" fragments compose Zukofsky's classicism.

[103] Scroggins, describing Zukofsky's poetics of translation: "To translate is similarly an acknowledgment of the other's voice, an attempt to "escape the confines of a time and place" and bring that voice to life for (or *through*) a contemporary reader" (*A Life* 379).

The classics are not texts universal in their moral or aesthetic accessibility. Far from it. The classics are glittering pearls of obdurate language that persist in their irreducible material singularity; resistant to translation or mediation; defiant of the assimilating universality of the center.

"Pulchertime" or "Poe tit": David Melnick's Poetics of Epic Farce

Zukofsky's oeuvre hovers in the liminal space between modernist and postmodernist classicism. From within a modernist framework of reception, he lays the groundwork for a postmodernist classicism.[104] We might better observe the contrast between the two by turning to a Language poet of the next generation, David Melnick. Melnick's *Men in Aïda* is a homophonic translation of the first book of Homer's *Iliad* that pays homage to Zukofsky while departing from and radicalizing his (already radical) methods. *Men in Aïda* injects illegibility into the idea(l) of Homer. The Homer of *Men in Aïda* is neither the white Homer nor the straight Homer created by the ideology of the center, but rather a minor Homer whose poetry springs from the bathhouse and thrives in the illegible recesses of language. In moving on to a poet two generations removed, the full range of Zukofsky's role as a hinge-point between modernist and later

[104] "For the modernist message to emerge," writes Ming-Qian Ma, "quotations have to forfeit their independence in use in order to facilitate a textual hierarchy." This results in a situation in which the montage of the modernist work dominates the quoted text and forcibly assimilates it to its own intrinsic order, in which "the inset is communicatively subordinated to the frame" (Sternberg 131). Ming-Qian Ma writes in great detail of the transition from modernist to postmodernist practices of citation—reading "Poem Beginning "The"" as a critical moment in the distinction between the "subordinative" practices of modernist citationality and more democratic practices of postmodern citationality. Ma, Ming-Qian. "A 'no-man's land!': Postmodern Citationality in Zukofsky's 'Poem Beginning 'The.'" *Upper Limit Music: The Writings of Louis Zukofsky. Ed. Mark Scroggins. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P* (1997): 129-153.

experimental movements becomes clear. Zukofsky remains an important figure for the New American poets of the 1950's and 60's, and equally so—yet in opposite ways—for the Language-centered writers of the 70's and 80's. As an avant-gardist literary movement, Language-centered writing emerges in the 1970's as a reaction against the more Romantically inflected, expressivist, confessional, and supernaturalist elements of the New American Poetry.[105] At the same time, Language writers revive the more radical impulses of modernism itself, casting back to the hyper-experimental poetics of Stein and Zukofsky.[106]

David Melnick's postmodernist classicism offers unique critical and interpretive possibilities. Examination of a Language poet such as Melnick, turning directly to the practice of homophony initiated by Zukofsky, encompasses the senses of lineage, contest, and breakage that dance around the legacy of Zukofsky and through the genealogies of New American and Language poetry. Melnick himself stands in an interesting genealogical relationship to modernist and New American classicism, having studied poetry and Greek under Robert Duncan, an iconic New American poet. Duncan himself was a student of H. D.'s, such that a direct familial line of classicism stretches from H.D.'s Sapphic engagements, through Duncan and on to Melnick. An important context informing any reading of Melnick's homophonic Homer is Robert Duncan's informal sessions of Homer translation and recitation, spanning years, in which Melnick was an active participant. With Duncan at the helm, a group of active poets translated and recited Homer's *Iliad* in its entirety. Melnick's homophonic Homer clearly springs from this experience.

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[105] Many critics consider Language poetry to be the last easily identifiable avant-gardist movement of the 20th century, with its central authors still alive, writing and teaching. Language poets and writers of the New American Poetry have hotly contested Zukofsky's legacy. The range of interests and orientations in various alliances formed in this contest speaks volumes to possibilities opened up by Zukofsky's experimentalism.

[106] Marjorie Perloff is the most prolific advocate for a reading of Language writing as a "neo-modernist" experimentalism. See Perloff, Majorie. *21st-century modernism: the "new" poetics*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.

Melnick's homophonic Homer results from a years-long engagement with Greek language and Homeric text. The fact is that the translation's presenting opacity or ignorance with regards to the Greek text in fact conceals a fascination with and knowledge of the classics unrivalled by any other Language Poet except perhaps Susan Howe;[107] and that the presenting non-sense and non-relation of its procedures conceals a nuanced and delicate skill that pointedly works against procedure and pattern. In other words, the translational procedures of *Men in Aïda* are far too random to be accidental; and its obfuscation of its source is far too complete to be random.

Whereas Zukofsky's poetics move in a roughly straight line, ever closer to a poetics of quotation and the mosaic assemblage of glittering, obdurate pearls of language, Melnick's poetics proceed rhizomically, stretching out in numerous simultaneous directions towards a plurivocal poetics of the absurd and illusory. These plurivocal "essais" are at times more tragic, bittersweet, and passionate than Zukofsky's verse; and yet embrace the flippant, sophomoric, and blithe. In Zukofsky's Catullus translations, linguistic materiality appears as a solution to "Askforaclassic, Inc.," and a means of bypassing its ideological shroud to arrive at a direct relation to the material text. For Melnick, the materialism of the text itself becomes a sleight of hand, offering only illusory access to the "real" substance of a classical origin. In Melnick's poetics, both the moral universality and aesthetic immortality of the classics *and* the obdurate material reality of the classics as textual objects appear as rhetorical effects of language.

Direct analysis of *Men in Aïda* and comparison with Zukofsky's translation practice establish its characteristic "anti-proceduralism." The full implications of the translation's "plurivocality," however, appear only in relation to the range of Melnick's classicism as it appears in earlier works. Therefore, I will spend some time with his first volume of poetry,

[107] Susan Howe's fascination, it could be argued, although it includes the Greek and Latin classics, tends more towards a multivalent historical sensibility that mines "the past" or history as such rather than the Greeks and Romans as an Ur-sites or origins.

Eclogs, as a vital context for understanding the full implications of *Men in Aïda*'s postmodernist classicism.

Men in Aïda is, first and foremost, an uproariously funny work. This is apparent from its first lines, and persists relentlessly throughout:

> Men in Aïda, they appeal, eh? A day, O Achilles!
> Allow men in, emery Achaians. All gay ethic, eh?
> Paul asked if tea mousse suck, as Aïda, pro, yaps in.
> Here on a Tuesday. 'Hello,' Rhea to cake Eunice in.
> 'Hojo' noisy tap as hideous debt to lay at a bully.
> Ex you, day. Tap wrote a 'D,' a stay. Tenor is Sunday.
> Atreides stain axe and Ron and ideas 'll kill you.
> The stars' foe at eon are radix unique make his thigh
> Leto's and Zeus's son. O garb a silly coal o' they is
> Noose on a nast rat-honor's sake, a can, a lick, on toe delay.
> A neck, a ton, crews in a time, & ceteretera.
> Atreides oh girl tit, oh aspen-y as Achaians.
> Loosen 'em us, tea, toga, trap her on tap (heresy a boy now).
> Stem Attic on anchors, in neck cable. Oh Apollo on us.
> Crews say oh Anna skip trochee, less set to pant as Achaians.
> A tray id, a them, a list, a duo, 'cause met to rely on.
> "A tray id I take. I alloy a uke, nay me day's Achaians.
> Human men theoi doyen Olympia dome attic on teas.
> Ech! Pursey Priam's pollen, eh? You'd eke a Dick his thigh.
> Pay Dad, am I loose! Ate a pill. Lent Ada a pen to deck
> his thigh
> As oh men idiots who unneck a bowl on Apollo on her."
> Nth alloy men panties up you fame as an Achaian.

> mēnin aeide thea Pēlēïadeō Achilēos
> oulomenēn, hē muri' Achaiois alge' ethēke,
> pollas d' iphthimous psuchas Aïdi proïapsen
> hērōōn, autous de helōria teuche kunessin
> oiōnoisi te pasi, Dios d' eteleieto boulē,
> ex hou dē ta prōta diastētēn erisante
> Atreïdēs te anax andrōn kai dios Achilleus.
> tis t' ar sphōe theōn eridi xuneēke machesthai;
> Lētous kai Dios huios: ho gar basilēï cholōtheis
> nouson ana straton ōrse kakēn, olekonto de laoi,
> houneka ton Chrusēn ētimasen arētēra
> Atreïdēs: ho gar ēlthe thoas epi nēas Achaiōn
> lusomenos te thugatra pherōn t' apereisi' apoina,

stemmat’ echōn en chersin hekēbolou Apollōnos
chruseōi ana skēptrōi, kai elisseto pantas Achaious,
Atreïda de malista duō, kosmētore laōn:
Atreïdai te kai alloi eüknēmides Achaioi,
humin men theoi doien Olumpia dōmat’ echontes
ekpersai Priamoio polin, eu d’ oikad’ hikesthai:
paida d’ emoi lusaite philēn, ta d’ apoina dechesthai,
hazomenoi Dios huion hekēbolon Apollōna.
enth’ alloi men pantes epeuphēmēsan Achaioi[108]

The third person omniscient narrator of epic poetry as a genre has here transformed into a chatty, lyric address, the “I” addressing the “you”: “…son Achilleus / and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians,” becomes, “A day, O Achilles! / Allow men in, emery Achaians. All gay ethic, eh?” Altogether, the effect is to juxtapose the high elevation of the epic voice with the catty, sophomoric humor of the cliquish address (a register not entirely dissimilar

[108] One of the more established translations (Lattimore) appears below:

Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus
and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians,
hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls
of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting
of dogs, of all birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished
since that time when first there stood in division of conflict
Atreus’ son the lord of men and brilliant Achilleus.

What god was it then set them together in bitter collision?
Zeus’ son and Leto’s, Apollo, who in anger at the kind drove
the foul pestilence along the host, and the people perished,
since Atreus’ son had dishonored Chryses, priest of Apollo,
when he came beside the fast ships of the Achaians to ransom
back his daughter, carrying gifts beyond count and holding
in his hands wound on a staff of gold the ribbons of Apollo
who strikes from afar, and supplicated all the Achaians,
but above all Atreus’ two sons, the marshals of the people:
“Sons of Atreus and you other strong-greaved Achaians,
to you may the gods grant who have their homes on Olympos
Priam’s city to be plundered and a fair homecoming thereafter,
but may you give me back my own daughter and take the ransom,
giving honor to Zeus’ son who strikes from afar, Apollo.”

Then all the rest of the Achaians cried out in favor…

Lattimore, Richmond. "trans. The Iliad of Homer." (1951).
Troughout, I have referred to the Greek edition of Murray, A. T., and William F. Wyatt. "Homer: Iliad I, Books 1-12." (1999).

to Catullus' antagonistic poems). The translation offers moments of hilarity ("Hose fat you commie nose toad") that recall Allen Ginsberg's sense of humor in poems like "America."

Linguistically, the translation is characterized by actual Greek transliterations: "hysteron" "theoi"; neologisms: "& ceteretera"; and surrealist juxtapositions of image which, rather than heightening a sense of profound but concealed meaning, dissolve the sense of meaning into sophomoric potty humor: "Poe tit" (8). The poem's "characters" represent a potpourri convention of disparate historical and mythical figures: "Poe" "Achilles" "Newton" "Phoibus Apollo" "Yoko" "Leto" "Creon" "Calchas" "Agamemnon" "Jesu" "Allah" "Pluto" "Kali" "Hume" (31); as well as personal lovers, friends, and acquaintances of the author: "Paul" "Eunice" "Rae" "Ron." In this last, we see one of the translation's most characteristic semantic gestures. The most consistent feature of the resulting work is the proper name. The proper name is the only element that protrudes, unchanged, in the unrecognizable landscape of Homer.[109] Lexically, the translation is wildly inventive. We find, in addition to lexical archaisms, onomatopoeia, and obvious neologisms, words that perhaps suggest the temporal depth or archaisms of Zukofskian homophony, yet resolve as pure invention, as for example "nast." The translation cycles between these various lexical strategies, one moment suggesting a pattern or strategy of neologism, in the next moment dissolving the expected neologism into transliteration or homophony, in places where either strategy would have made sense according to the internal rules of procedural selection that the translation has begun to suggest. In this, the translation refuses to leave language behind and follows the consequences of this commitment to their ludicrous and absurd end, no matter the cost.

[109] I owe a great many insights on the role of the proper name in Melnick as a site of linguistic "kissing" to Reynolds, Sean. "Hospitality of the Mouth and the Homophonic Kiss: David Melnick's Men in Aïda." *Postmodern Culture* 21.2 (2011).

The translation maintains such formal signals as indicators of speech (e.g., the Chryses speech in the Homeric original is set off in translation by quotation marks, although its substance is dramatically different from its source). Further, faint or blunted lexical implications often pass through from source to translation, as, for example, the sense of contention and conflict of "What god was it then set them together in bitter collision?" which in translation becomes, "The stars' foe at eon are radix unique make his thigh," retaining the blunted lexical implications of cosmic conflict. This multi-vocal pressure on the original, which presses it to the exact boundary of non-relation—the "refus[al] to move on from the "tangent point" at which the original and translation fuse" (16), as Reynolds describes it—in fact requires a great deal of skill.

Although it would be perverse to ascribe something as linear as narrative to *Men in Aïda*, the poem does interact in subtle ways with its source text's narrative. On the one hand, the translation works to undermine and explode its source-narrative—indeed, it works against the idea of narrative as such—arriving at an absurd non-relation to its source. On the other hand, the transformation of the Greek text into what Ron Silliman has described as a "ludic gay utopia" can (and has) been read as underscoring or throwing into relief concealed homoerotic elements in the original. It also "maps" the Homeric narrative onto a contemporary landscape. This is especially true in the first book, where the translation invests the divine plague sent by Apollo in the Homeric text with overtones of the AIDS epidemic. At the same time, none of the pathos one would expect of such a narrative exists in translation. In addition to the ghostly narrative of the bathhouse and the AIDS epidemic, repeated words and phrases do come to have affective and topical, if not narrative, significance. The repeated word "thigh," for example ("make his thigh"; "You'd eke a Dick his thigh"; "Lent Ada a pen to deck his thigh"; "Aïda is thigh the aerie a gay eagle a deck thigh a boy now"), suggests the birth of Dionysus from Zeus' thigh, adding the

allusive undercurrent of Dionysian abandon, orgiastic release, and of course the productive and creative forces possible within the context of homoerotic, male birthing.

The total effect of the translation's poetics works to always suggest and tease with the possibility of identifying its procedures, while never in fact allowing it. Unlike Zukofsky's *Catullus*, which invites the reader to track down its governing procedures, *Men in Aïda* presses procedure itself to the point of indiscernibility. The procedures governing homophony always suggest their own presence without allowing a clear articulation:

> Hey men, my prof Ron, a pacin' guy, cares in a rake's seine.
> Egg are oh yummy. Andrews call o' semen hose Meg a pant on.
> Argue on, critic. All high pay, then tie Achaioi. (10)

An address ("hey men") is followed by a descriptive statement, describing "my prof Ron," and segues into what fits naturally as a description of Ron in apposition: "a pacin' guy." The beginnings of a recognizable form and content of address and a recognizable syntactic structure begin to suggest themselves. After leading into a verb that fits naturally with the sense and syntax that it has begun to suggest, "cares," the poem leaps into non-relation with "in a rake's seine." This small example characterizes the translation's strategies of deliberately building the expectation of legibility, only to then defer and distend it. It does not invite interpretation so much as mock interpretation: "Argue on, critic." It teases with partial sense structures, ultimately moving to the complete non-sequitur: "Eggs are oh yummy," and finally dissolving even syntactic form: "o' semen hose Meg a pant on." This process is not, as in Zukofsky's *Catullus*, progressive at the level of sequence or arrangement, but rather occurs constantly at the microscopic level of line. The effect is to suggest the purely formal rules and procedures of translation. It does not isolate, but rather suggests or promises the possibility of isolation (of procedures from resulting product; of form from content; of sound from sense, etc.) while ever

deferring its presence.[110] It is not that the translation has no governing procedures, but rather that it is actively "anti-procedural."

In terms of linguistic philosophy, homoerotic desire in the translation becomes a figure for linguistic solipsism, for poetic composition as erotic linguistic desire reflected back unto its own substance, language oriented—not towards an "other" or a point opening up unto a reality outside of itself—but sated, desiring and finding its own body.

In many ways, the success of Melnick's neo-Zukofskian translations of Homer has concealed the poetic virtuosity of his earliest work.

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[110] The anti-proceduralism of *Men in Aida* mirrors in important ways the poetics of Melnick's non-sense volume, *PCOET:*


1.

thoeisu

thoiea

akcorn woi cirtus locqvump

icgja

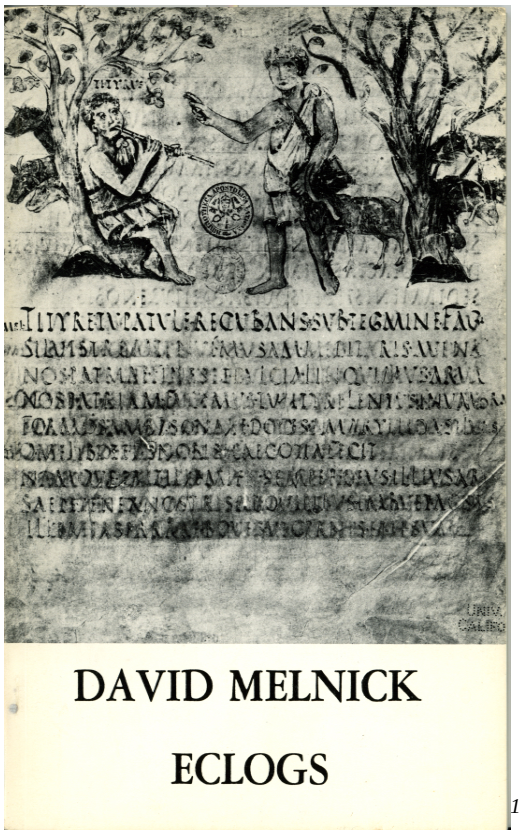
cvmwoflux

epaosieus1

~~cirtus locquvmp~~

a nex macheisoa

The nonsense words that make up the entire volume have a decidedly Greek flavor. The appeal to the goddess or Muse, for example—"thoeisu," "thoiea"—frames the volume's first poem. *PCOET*'s "deferral within suggestion" of semantic sense is polyglot—its action applies to a wide variety of languages and linguistic registers, including French, Latin, Greek, and English. *PCOET* reduces to pure form not only the creation of semantic and formal meaning by means of near-words, poetic shape, line-breaks, and the inscription of editorial care and process ("~~citrus locquvmp~~"), but also reduces to pure form the modernist strategy of poly-lingual allusion. *PCOET* throws into relief the mechanical procedures behind the creation of semantic meaning; lyricism; allusiveness and the consolidation of textual prestige. Both *PCOET* and *Men in Aïda* represent a major departure from the affect-laden, poetic elevation of *Eclogs*. Melnick, David. *Pcoet*. GAWK, 1975.



[111]

Figure 1.1 Front Cover of David Melnick's *Eclogs*

Eclogs (Figure 1.1) is a forlorn allusive minefield that blends myriad classical topoi, motifs, and genres with a contemporary urban landscape. In this, the poem's initial ethos tends to be decidedly late modernist in its investment in historical fragment, in its longing for historical plenitude, and in its mournful fixation on classical and Biblical intertexts. At the same time, the poem performs a cascading series of different temporalities and orientations towards history and the historical text. "These 10 poems," writes Melnick, "are one poem w/ 10 times or tenses & are so numbered" (2). Each section of the poem seeks to embody a different temporal approach to the past. Its goal is a typically modernist encounter with a "living past," as site of linguistic, textual, and aesthetic plenitude. I name these cascading approaches "temporal essais" to capture the sense of incomplete probing and seeking that attends each individual section. As each

[111] Melnick, David. *Eclogs*. Ithaca House, 1972.

temporality is “tried on” and just as quickly discarded, it gradually becomes clear that the work of the poem is not so much a sincere attempt to resurrect the past and constitute a site of classical plenitude, but is rather a repeated performance of the *failure* of various temporal and textual modes to constitute that plenitude. It is in this repeated performance of failure that the poem ultimately comments on and mournfully critiques various modernist and ancient classicisms, finding in them a false projection of a reality beyond the material surface of language.

The equivalence of “times or tenses” spans the poem. In *Eclogs,* language produces various temporalities as extensions of its material tense—history as “aspects of the perfect.” On the one hand, this closes the distance between remote historical periods by exploring their remoteness as an accessible and present function of language. On the other, it creates a chasm between the present and the past that is unbridgeable in an absolute sense. Poetics and thought may trace the surface of the past as created by and revealed in language, but may never reach beyond language to approach the text itself, or the past itself, or the classical itself. In this secondary role, Melnick’s postmodernist classicism dispenses entirely with linguistic idealism—there is only language, and nothing else. It is precisely this reduction of temporal and classical *effects* to mere functions of language that introduces wild oscillation in register and approach to classical poetics. The absurdist non-relation of *Men in Aïda* is simply the Janus-face of the linguistic mournfulness and ambiguity of *Eclogs*. Although one takes its condition as an occasion for mournful impossibility, and the other as an occasion for absurdist play, both take the context of material language as an all-in-all.

Like its temporal framework, the poem’s characteristic linguistic texture breaks apart singular semantic and syntactic connections, both stretching outwards in multiple simultaneous semantic directions, and deferring the possibility of “touching” or coupling with a single

meaning. The poem's linguistic breakage opens up many possible linguistic networks, multiplying connectivity. Language opens out in all directions towards multivalent meaning, but refuses to commune with a "single" connection, as for example in the following lines:

> The lake-
> shore out
> -landish tone w/ hi
>
> malayan rubber beat
> twin wood & bricks along the broad, high, way is
> the
> must errifically narrow in, know scopes & radii
> in
> shore
> up
> to well commanded yew / cage
> -ing fire
> T

The "shore" implies a sea-border, or perhaps a verbal construction with "out"—to "shore out." "Out" stands alone, and is willfully disjointed from its following part, "landish," which calls out to complete "out" as "outlandish," but cannot overcome the breakage of line and dash that separates them. This produces a willfully liminal construction that hovers at the "shore[s]" between "out," "landish," "outlandish tone," "landish tone," "shore outlandish tone," "shore out landish," and so on. The same is true for the following morphemic and syntactic breakage at "hi / malayan rubber," suggesting as it does the multiple possibilities of "tone hi," "tone hi malayan," "tone him," "tone Himalayan," and so on. This characteristic linguistic strategy stretches sense in multiple simultaneous directions, without quite "touching" a singular point of semantic stability. *Eclogs* performs a marriage of linguistic and temporal connectivity. There is no dualism here, but rather the poem's simultaneous linguistic stretching in multiple directions without quite touching semantic stability is the self-same movement of its temporal stretching and incompleteness.

One of the primary ways in which the poem conceives its engagements with time and history is as an encounter with a particular body of classical literature. The cascading temporal "essais" of the poem's ten sections do not proceed randomly, but rather enact a series of temporal and historical narratives. The essais narrate, briefly but poignantly, a poetic history of classical literature—performing and abandoning the temporalities of Platonic philosophy, Homeric aesthetics, and lyric embodiedness; as well as a contemporary literary history, performing and abandoning the temporalities of modernism, Zukofskian materiality, and the New American Poetry, ultimately fracturing and spilling beyond these various temporal frameworks to arrive at the postmodernist temporality that grounds *Men in Aïda.*

Rough but accurate distinctions cut the poem into three movements, each of which narrates a transition from one classical temporality to another. Sections 1-3 begin with Platonist dualism and narrate the transition to Homeric aesthetics. Sections 4-6 begin with Homeric aesthetics ("shield of Achilles") and narrate the transition to the ephemeral temporality of lyric desire, drawing on Sappho as the primary point of reference. Finally, sections 7-9 narrate the ultimate failure of these classical temporalities, and we watch the poem gradually empty of its classical allusiveness and arrive at a fractured urban present. The tenth and final section reflects on the cascading temporalities of its sections as a whole, and arrives at an absurdist relation to the past, laying the groundwork for *Men in Aïda*. The following pages touch on the characteristics of the poem's various temporalities in terms of a brief performance of classical literary history, fleshing out especially the lyric temporality of its latter sections as a point of contact with lyric as it appears in Zukofsky's and (in Chapter Two) Ginsberg's Catullus. I argue that *Eclogs* paves the way for *Men in Aïda,* and that we best understand *Men in Aïda'*s linguistic absurdism in terms of this broader arc of Melnick's creative output.

Eclogs begins with the temporality of Platonic dualism, with language striving to break from "the sea" as "death," and inhabit a timeless, immaterial realm of "the cease & flow of time" and a body "made of light." The Platonic cessation of time stretches towards an ideal realm of "green facts made / in light of / filling earth w/ / bliss & terror" (2), in which the corporeal and incorporeal exist on distinct planes: "the body of light? Detach- / ment of shoulders, eyes from / . all matter ." (3). This questing and questioning of temporal stillness, the "cease & flow of" time and "time / to disappear into the real" (2) is at the same time interwoven with a corporeal dérive, in which the landscape of the present flows calmly by: "the bus in / design repeats… / rails the elevated / train seeks forwardness." Although desire longs for the "smooth-shaven Pan . a shoulder ablaze . a young tree / denied," its object is not an earthly body but rather a heavenly body "made of light." In keeping with its Platonist stance, the first section turns away from the aesthetic as a false lure: "if you can / remember, do not / remember (color / of Wagner, of Tennyson" (2).

From idealist on high the poem moves through a Homeric constitution of aesthetic plenitude, in sections 3-5. The fixed reality of language as aesthetic plenitude, however, "function[s] as an image : distant, controlled." From this failed, mimetic temporality, the poem progressively orients itself towards the physical body, embedded in time, as an object of intense desire and "reality." Sections 4-9 explore the temporality and aesthetics of ancient lyric poetry—and ultimately, its failure—primarily through the figure of Sappho as "Muse . 10th." Having found the "body of light" and the timeless realm of linguistic idealism lacking, and the "shield of Achilles" a "world of glass / though singing," the poem goes on to explore the body and its ephemerality: "a world of bones / of the skull of / visible area of 'the heart' // "to get inside yr flesh / bones & blood, the bend of it." (5). The desired other, here, is of course also

representative of a desired classical past. To get inside the bones & blood of the distant text could perhaps let the poem touch the past. In this section, time and ephemerality themselves are sanctifying forces: “death is a soaring thing” (14).

The past tense occurs for the first time in section 6. This signal of historical awareness simultaneously plunges the poem into the physical reality of the body. From the frozen, aesthetic realm of “shield of Achilles,” *Eclogs* transitions to the lyric temporality of Sappho as “Muse . 10th”:

> one, a red flower
> w/ the voice of a woman sang
>
> the creature at hand, not
>
> delight, its sword, split
>
> the word, sp.I
> split.s
> the face to a grimness (th’race), a
> smile. (16)

Lyric temporality is “*Pulchertime,”* the temporality of physical loveliness in all its ephemerality. In “pulchertime,” language more nearly approaches contact with the world beyond itself—whether historical or communal—than the “green facts” of the eternal or the “crystal, regular shapes” of fixed aesthetic immortality. Lyric temporality, however, is a self-consuming gesture. In approaching “the creature at hand,” lyric temporality fully signals the mediating nature of language—its role as border/barrier—and disrupts this border, “delight its sword, split[ting] / the word, sp.I / split.s.” Yet even in the moment of breaching linguistic surface, language can approach this fleeting loveliness only as a thing already lost, already past: “*Tell me no more / that folly’s bitter / tell not me*” (18). It acknowledges and savors the bittersweet thorns of the temporary. In *Eclogs*, the past tense becomes the final marker of linguistic stretching, a

movement that can only signal a realm that it cannot enter. The past tense of lyric temporality creates plenitude beyond language—the plenitude of history, or embodiedness, or the classical—by registering it as lost. Plenitude is then the "negative rose" of language, which in its fullest blossoming signals what it is not. The most embodied and realized manifestation of language is as an archive of its impossibilities.

Lyric temporality recedes as ultimately unsuccessful in section 7: "angel, farewell / I'll despair awhile." The body as a site of plenitude is now splintered: "a kind of glass Hawaii," and a "stone / you / frail / sometimes forget / your carved burden" (17). Throughout the poem, the arbitrary meeting of past and present ("Fresno; exist?"), as in *Men in Aïda,* is best exemplified by the proper name: "(greater) illusion of David." "David" both hearkens to the psalmic David ("I have fought to overcome the wicked") and "David" as Melnick himself. Language arbitrarily touches the past at the point of the proper name: David / David. Through the figure of the name, *Eclogs* super-imposes two distinct realities, thereby revealing their incommensurability as an occasion for absence, loss, and mourning. Even in approaching similitude—the moment when language caresses some real, material feature of the past in name—this super-imposition reveals dissimilarity and emptiness. The figure of the name (David / David) is both a relation and a non-relation, a non-identity within identity.

The poem's final temporality is similar to the lyric time of section 6, although it now registers lyric plenitude as one more effect of linguistic surface:

commands onto the shore, glass-
and jewel-
boned, tie
ropes of the sea
singed with sight of Moab's cliffs

Troy walls, Attica, the prison's keep-
er, all intent on entering
cage / or / company?

Silver doubt (the) falls between
a creature,
the sleekest heifer in the herd, the
dance & crop of sexuality
where
time is a worsening, recapitulate
give a will to life past

"Lost, I am lost: my fates have doom'd my death.
"The more I strive, I love; the more I love,
"The lesse I hope; I see my ruine certaine.

this sewer world

the veil
the
reality
under whose name
let us gather.

female & male / weed & flower / corn & stalk

where the seeker is who left us in this valley, the pale
Center of Kept Rebels, the
park-

The surface of language in the present has stretched to touch the past as “Moab’s cliffs” or “Troy walls, Attica.” It has stretched to “touch” and “give a will to” a glittering textual tradition that promises rest, protection, plenitude (“Troy walls”); and the convention of past and present in the figure of the proper name: Attica (part of ancient Greece) / Attica (state prison and site of

politically charged riots). The nature of this point of contact between past and present is ambiguous: the arbitrary convention it produces in the proper name may be either "cage / or / company?" The poem remains uncertain as to whether its engagement with a past textual tradition is a cage—a closed surface along the contours of which language traces but only finds itself—or company: the actual touching / caressing of a point opening up onto the outside. The contact between past and present opens out onto quotation and literally "gives a will to life past" in reproducing the material texture of the past text in its own language. Nevertheless, even in this moment of touching, that which promised "company" can only inscribe its own woundedness and insufficiency onto the present text: "Lost, I am lost." The text is lost. In the very moment of touching—quotation, the moment of the kiss, the moment when the "mouth" of the present text embraces the mouth of the past text—the past is lost. The very act of touching / quoting erases the text. And this registration of the past text as lost—which only becomes visible in quotation—spills into the present text. The quotations never close, ultimately dissolving the boundary between past and present text. Language offers equal access, but it is access to a "sewer world" or "veil."

Ultimately, the work of the collection is a performance of impossibility. From its beginning, this conclusion is foregone: "David / David." Language stretches to embrace a classical past, but can touch it only at the point of the proper name, a relation both intimate and arbitrary.[112] *Eclogs* traces along the illusory, material surface of language, which is both its

[112] Although Melnick's poetic fixation on the proper name would appear to coincide directly with Derrida's thoughts on the role of the proper name in translation, (See Derrida, Jacques. "Des tours de Babel." *Difference in translation* 165 (1985)), it must be remembered that, as radical as the theoretical contours of Derrida's thought appear, they are ultimately an analysis and description of deeply modernist practices of translation. That is, what Derrida has in mind, when writing on the proper name and translation, is a praxis that far more closely resembles Benjamin's translations of Baudelaire than Zukofsky's *Catullus* or Melnick's homophonic Homer. In fulfilling in praxis what Derrida describes in

fullness and its paucity. Although foregone, the tragic performance is nonetheless allowed to have its full circuit. Futility inscribes itself on each essai; and yet, each attempt affirms its own peculiar sphere of futile time; an almost existentialist perseverance in the face of meaninglessness. In light of this early volume, the linguistic abandon and open farce of *Men in Aïda* resolves as simply one more orientation towards and performance of classical materiality—a final essai. This time there is no sense of loss or mourning, but rather a Dionysian celebration of linguistic surface and semblance and a reveling in the empty fullness of the proper name. *Men in Aïda* is the Janus-face of a work like *Eclogs*. The mournfulness of mere "veil[s]"—surfaces without depth, whether aesthetic, idealist, or embodied—stands opposed to the ludic joyfulness of the same, its flippancy and capacity for play.

From the scatological Eros poems of Catullus to the high-epic grandeur of Homer, the texture of the allusive framework has changed. Yet Zukofsky moves from the polished, scant beauty and humor of Catullan verse into stranger and stranger realms of productive alterity; Melnick moves from high epic pathos through mourning in *Eclogs*; and in *Men in Aïda* passes beyond oblivion with joy.

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theory, Melnick extends the physical presence of language into territory that before was only touched by abstract thought.

Chapter 2:

Residual Mainstream Margins: New American Classicisms

> The Academic Study of Western Classics has… been sabotaged by sexual psychopaths… Why have the Loeb library texts been translated so as to leave out the balls? Have they not? I seem to remember for instance certain Catullus poems & lines were simply excluded for reasons of gentility.
>
> Allen Ginsberg, "The Classics and the Man of Letters"[113]

Chapter Two engages the poetics of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Spicer, key figures in the New American Poetry and its attendant imbrications with the American counter-culture at mid-century.[114] Although comprising a relatively heterogeneous collection of styles and distinct poetic movements, the writers of the New American Poetry shared several persistent tendencies: a heightened sense of community, organized around opposition to the perceived cultural hegemony—a counter-hegemony; emphasis on spontaneity as a means of composition; exodus from the affective cerebralism of the modernists; prioritization of sincerity and expression as the

[113] Auden, WH, et al. "An "Arion" Questionnaire: the Classics and the Man of Letters." *Arion* (1964): 6-100.

[114] The title of the New American Poetry comes from an influential anthology that represents a loose consortium of a number of avant-garde movements active particularly in the first decades after the Second World War, including the Black Mountain School, the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beat Generation, and others. See Allen, Donald, ed. *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. New York: Grove Press, 1960 for the definitive anthology of poetry. The same editor has also collected statements of poetics under the title of *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1973.

domain of poetry (a tendency, despite their vehement dislike of "academic" verse, shared with prevailing mainstream or confessional modes); and the return of the supernatural as a persistent tropic presence in verse. From Zukofsky's perspicacious critique of "Great Books classicism," in 1923, to the development of the New American Poetry and the Free Speech Movement in the 50's and 60's, things did not fare well for classicism. In "The Classics and the Man of Letters," a questionnaire published in *Arion* in 1964, Allen Ginsberg articulates a series of criticisms that express openly what Zukofsky's verse expressed only obliquely. He paints the classics as a co-opted expression of the cultural center and an (occasionally not so) covert reification of "the universal, humanist subject" as peculiarly straight, white, and male, and repeatedly calls for the diffusion of the cultural authority afforded to Greek and Latin. "Whose Classics?" writes Ginsberg, "Three-fourths of the world's ancient literature is left out. Where's *Mahabharata*? The *Ocean of Story*? The *Puranas*? ...The man of letters is also generally a finky old bore" (54).[115] For Ginsberg, the historically situated, highly particular, and internally diverse body of Greek and Roman letters has come to function as a narrowly western medium of ethnic and cultural mores. He is happy to point out the artifice involved in the institutional mediations of "the Classics" in order to maintain "a monopoly on Latin-Greek": "Why have the Loeb library texts been translated so as to leave out the balls? Have they not? I seem to remember for instance certain Catullus poems & lines were simply excluded for reasons of gentility" (56). He refers to the Loeb edition's refusal to translate Catullus' promise to "face-fuck and sodomize" his poetic enemies. For Ginsberg, the omission is telling, and he latches onto it as the most visible face of classicism's role in regulating identity. Classicism's censorship of a queer and overtly sexualized

[115] For Ginsberg, special elevation of Greek and Latin classics above various world literatures amounts to epistemological racism. Although the classics as texts themselves are useful, their presence at the head of an allusive pantheon is not: "The elements," writes Ginsberg, "of reference have… multiplied" (55)

past normalizes its material, such that it excludes "censored" social realities.[116] Thus, he offers the censored past as a figure for the excluded present.

Due in part to his success in creating a viable public identity as homosexual ("America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel") and self-described "Buddhist-Jew," and giving a communicable voice to censored identities, Allen Ginsberg came to represent one of the most visible and well-known faces of the counter-culture. His cultural renown and presence in the popular imagination reflect his poetics, which fashion the self as public, intelligible, sincere, and transparent. From *Howl*'s obscenity trials, to Ginsberg's public appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee, staged exorcisms of the Pentagon, or any number of poetic representations ("who let themselves be fucked in the ass"; "Catullus sucked cock in the country"),[117] Ginsberg's poetics "naturalized" the cultural center's disavowed, censored margins—its queer or oriental or bohemian others—and fed them back into the system as public spectacle. He extended—and was a vital force in shaping—the New American Poetry and its public reception.

Jack Spicer's life and poetics stood in stark contrast to Ginsberg. Spicer was a key player in the San Francisco poetry scene well before the reading at Six Gallery—founded by Spicer himself—that launched Ginsberg and "Howl" to public recognition and readership. As Ginsberg's fame and success grew, Spicer languished in an anonymity that was both structural and self-imposed.[118] For years, he refused to publish his work, as an expression of derision

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[116] By censored I mean that the Loeb edition, produced by faculty at Harvard since the 1830's, literally excised all references to 'fucking' in every classical text until the 1940 edition. Then they started publishing full texts, but only in Latin until 1960.

[117] Unless otherwise noted, I have referred to Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected poems, 1947-1997*. HarperCollins, 2006 for all quotations of Ginsberg's verse.

[118] When he did publish, he deliberately limited circulation: "the poet's [Spicer's] reputation was confined to San Francisco and Berkeley. This obscruity was mostly Spicer's doing. He printed his books in tiny editions and did not allow them to be sold outside San Francisco—often giving them away free at readings" (125). In Gioia, Dana. *Disappearing ink: Poetry at the end of print culture*. Graywolf Press, 2004.

towards the poetics of self-promotion and celebrity.[119] Throughout his career and until his death from alcoholism in 1965,[120] Spicer's poetics functioned as a progressively more pointed critique of Ginsberg and the poetics of personhood, public image, and spectacle, a response that plays out both through poems and biographical encounters:

> Following Ginsberg's Berkeley reading in June 1959, a huge party was thrown… Spicer was in attendance, and Russell's diary describes Ginsberg bowing down before the seated Jack. (Stan remembered it as a playful simulation of a blowjob, which may have further alienated the awkward, repressed Spicer…Ginsberg recalled, "I intuited in Spicer a jingly-jangly fear, under all the defense, a fierce *Manjusri*, almost a demon, guarding him from the world, and I offered my mouth to him. I saw in his eyes the desire, the recoil, the fear, and he bolted. Plus I was drunk. Some party." (Ellingham 276-77)[121]

This snippet speaks volumes to the nature of Spicer's criticisms of Ginsberg's commodification and publication of censored identities. The "playful simulation of a blowjob," as a bow, signals the homosocial economy of homage and influence that ties Ginsberg to the San Francisco Renaissance, and the transformation of homosexual desire into a reified public identity.[122] The text shows Ginsberg responding to Spicer as a censored subject ("a jingly-jangly fear, under all the defense"), and attempting to "initiate" him into the public economy of spectacle. The initiation takes the form of a sexual challenge that queers public identity, but relies on

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[119] Spicer's disdain for the culture of celebrity springs from an alternative configuration of poetic authority, influence, and hierarchy, rather than its absence. For a more detailed discussion, see Epstein, Andrew. *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2006.

[120] Gizzi recounts the factual narrative and its symbolic mythos: "1965: Late July, Spicer is found comatose in the elevator of his building, taken to San Francisco General Hospital and treated for liver failure. Dies on August 17. "My vocabulary did this to me," he tells [fellow poet] Blaser at his deathbed. "Your love will let you go on." Buried anonymously in San Francisco." Gizzi, Peter, and Kevin Killian. "Introduction. My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer." (2008).

[121] Ellingham, Lewis, and Kevin Killian. *Poet be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*. Wesleyan, 1998.

[122] Davidson argues for the importance of homosocial communities in the New American Poetry, and its relationship to their aesthetics: "Does poetics have gender, and, if so, how do homosocial relationships participate in constructing both terms?" (29). His insights have informed understanding of the passage above: "In certain communities—literary circles or artistic movements, for instance—obligatory heterosexuality is reinforced even when those communities contain a large number of homosexual males." See Davidson, Michael. *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

homosocial authority—the exchange of mutual regard among men—and heterocentric machismo. The spectacle of Ginsberg's queerness guarantees its entrance into the social matrix—precisely because of its heterosexuality as an assertion of male dominance through sexual aggression. The hybrid identity that results is quixotically queer-straight, effeminate-masculine, progressive-regressive. The whole episode underscores the nuanced combination of revision and recidivism that Spicer criticized in Ginsberg's poetics of public identity.

Allen Ginsberg and Jack Spicer are familial contradictions, set at odds despite or because of their resemblances. The same tension characterizes the poets' various classical poetics. Ginsberg and Spicer shared an ambivalent position vis-à-vis classicism, both as a means of reception and as a series of received texts. Each poet was keenly aware of the gap between "the Classics themselves" and "the basic literary stupidity of institutional (academic) Classicism in XXth Century" (56). Ginsberg, for his part, evinced distaste for "institutional… Classicism" and its transformations of Greco-Roman texts into reflections of the cultural center. He also adopted many of its strategies, acknowledging classicism's peculiar lessons in the mechanisms of identity construction, the codification of cultural hegemonies, and the production of social intelligibility. He borrowed in ways that are sometimes immediately apparent. In the same document, Ginsberg brazenly employs the strategies he criticizes, translating the classics into his own milieu by valorizing "the spirit" of Greek and Latin literature rather than its form, its universality rather than its particularity ("Anacreon at a crucial point turned me on to HUMANITY" (54)), and so on. Although "Pindar's variable stanzas… encourage freedom," the idea of imitating set, classical "prosody" inspires derision: "Ugh!" Ginsberg quips, "That would be a monkey-like stupidity" (55).

More often, however, Ginsberg's classical debt is visible only in hindsight and with the intervening accrual of scholarship. This is true for the influence of Oswald Spengler's orientalist conceptions of core and fringe cultures on Ginsberg's apocalyptic poetics, and for the equally powerful influence of Romantic constructions of prelapsarian eastern cultures and eastern religions on Ginsberg's "Eastern turn," at least in its germinal stages.[123] Likewise, the degree to which these discursive histories branch out from 19th century philological models of ancient Greek and Roman culture sheds light on Ginsberg's egalitarian allusions. One of Ginsberg's primary strategies is to expand the aura of cultural authority accorded to the Greek and Latin classics to alternative world literatures.[124] In mimicry of the Western Academy in its formative stages, when constituting various Buddhist, Hindu, Greek, or Sanskrit pasts as stable objects of knowledge, an ancient "classical" Greek and Latin past invisibly supplements Ginsberg's multicultural present.[125]

What is true of Ginsberg is equally true of Spicer, who became entranced with the formal processes of classicism as a producer of intelligible texts and a guarantor of valid identities.

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[123] John Lardas's book, *The Bop Apocalypse*, details the strong early influence on Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs of Oswald Spengler's apocalyptic orientalism in *The Decline of the West*. See Lardas, John. *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*. University of Illinois Press, 2000. For an alternate account that reads the influence of Buddhism on Ginsberg's poetics, see Trigilio, Tony. *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics*. SIU Press, 2007.

[124] In a seemingly incidental remark in her 2001 article, "German Orientalism," intellectual historian Suzanne Marchand writes, "orientalist philology [of 19th century Germany]… provided the foundation for the deep critique of "Eurocentrism" handed down to the anti-colonial and counter-cultural youth movements of the 1960s" (466). By linking orientalism to the critique of Eurocentrism, she makes room for a non-standard conception of orientalism, generally conceived as a reflection of Eurocentric power relations. She then points toward the strong presence of such an orientalism in mid-twentieth century American culture, in "the anti-colonial and counter-cultural youth movements of the 1960s," and suggests an uncanny historical community of this 20th century American orientalism and 19th century German scholarship. Marchand, Suzanne. "German Orientalism and the Decline of the West."*Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (2001): 465-473.

[125] Masuzawa offers a detailed intellectual history of the discourse of "world religions," and a compelling case for its foundations in western models of classical and Biblical philology. See Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions: or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Nevertheless, the similarities conceal a deep tension, even enmity in purpose and function. Unlike the culturally egalitarian Ginsberg, Spicer appears to adopt the intertextual economy of classicism wholesale, situating Greek and Latin at the head of an allusive pantheon. His poems consistently draw on a "Western" allusive framework—the convergence of classical, Biblical, and Anglo-Saxon in a single, unbroken line—as a given context and presence. Spicer reacted against public manifestations of the New American Poetry, such as the Beat Generation or the Free Speech Movement with which it became so entwined. He affected an "American" and masculine ethos, writing poems about baseball, the bar, drinking, and boxing, and often downplayed the overt representation of his homosexuality. Whereas Ginsberg loudly publicized his homosexuality and accrued lovers like interest, Spicer was often shy, and remained celibate for long periods of time, at times adopting an almost Calvinist sense of damnation with regards his own sexual identity.

Spicer consistently laced his verse—and life—with the deepest irony, and his "embrace" of the reactionary position is part and parcel of a critique that is as scathing towards his own stance as that of his rivals, and his poetics often achieve an exquisite tension in which multiple, often contradictory strata of meaning coexist. Though the figure of Spicer as doomed Orpheus is compelling in many ways, and his biography in many ways tragic, I argue that it is also an active function of his poetics. In "Orpheus in Hell," an early example of Spicer's career-spanning use of the Orpheus myth, linguistic performativity, critiques of representation, and classical reception unite in the trope of misnaming:

> When he first brought his music into hell
> He was absurdly confident. Even over the noise of the
> shapeless fires
> And the jukebox groaning of the damned
> Some of them would hear him. In the upper world
> He had forced the stones to listen.

It wasn't quite the same. And the people he remembered
Weren't quite the same either. He began looking at faces
Wondering if all of hell were without music.
He tried an old song but pain
Was screaming on the jukebox and the bright fire
Was pelting away the faces and he heard a voice saying,
"Orpheus!"
He was at the entrance again
And a little three-headed dog was barking at him.
Later he would remember all those dead voices
And call them Eurydice.[126]

"Hell" is, among other things, a running allegory for the "descent" into the "original" text or tradition, and thematizes the double binds involved in making an ancient text "intelligible" to the present. The poem thematizes the epistemic faux pas involved in making an ancient text "intelligible" to the present and repeatedly transforms the substance of the past as skewed representation, the "little three-headed dog" to "Cerberus." For Spicer, so invested in understanding and critiquing the subtle processes of classicism, entering into classical intertextuality is always an act of misnaming—representing the cacophony of marginal or excluded realities as "Eurydice." Unlike Ginsberg, Spicer fully implicates his own verse in the processes of misnaming, and encounters the "swerve" of representation even or especially when drawing on classicism as a means of social and poetic critique. The poem obsesses over its own implication in skewing the classical past by figuring Spicer *as* the doomed Orpheus, both signaling and reproducing this disjoint between representation ("call them Eurydice") and its reality ("all those dead voices"). Misnaming is the byproduct of the attempt to make the distortions of representation visible, the textual residue that remains after its own failure. In the attempt to represent the double binds of representation, Spicer's poetics consciously offer themselves as an image of damnation, inscribing the violence of their failure on the textual body

[126] For all references and quotations of Spicer's verse, I have referred to Spicer, Jack, Peter Gizzi, and Kevin Killian. *my vocabulary did this to me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

of his poems. The poet can only represent Eurydice by constantly performing this spectacle: Orpheus constantly returns to hell, forgetting each time that the image of Eurydice is merely something that conceals the jukebox screaming of reality. Spicer's poetics repeatedly perform "misnaming" by opposing their representational content—sentiments, positions, stances, objects—to their "negative representations"—the ways in which they configure themselves as "not-this," Eurydice as "not-Eurydice." "Eurydice" in the poem is a "name," as reifying misidentification, and simultaneously the "linguistic gesturality" that signals its own "pronominal stutter" *as* name: "Eurydice" is the name of misnaming.[127]

Rather than examining a particular poem, this chapter traverses the full, diachronic arc of Jack Spicer and Allen Ginsberg's poetics. In section one, I focus on 1) Ginsberg's early Catullus translations and the ways in which "the classical" functions as a guarantor of valid social identities; 2) his complex formal usurpation of classicism's "philology of identity" and the formal procedures of his marginal classicism; and 3) extending this reading into his later career, singling out the characteristic "ambient allusiveness" of the classics in his verse and the eventual and progressive transposition of "classical authority" to the idea of the Orient. Perhaps Ginsberg's primary insight is into the portability of classicism's power to invent social centers and govern public identities. The modernist project showed the New Americans the plasticity of

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[127] My take on Spicer's critique of representation has benefitted greatly from D. Katz' article, "Jack Spicer's After Lorca":

> Spicer's vision of a 'silent poem', first of all, breaks entirely with the logocentric ideality of the poem, based in the temporality of speech. Spicer here imagines a writing which would retain its full iconic properties, and resist resolution into the status of simple *representation* of the aural temporality of the expressive poetic 'voice'. However, this poetics is in no way 'objective', as its very centre consists precisely of a silent speech *act*—the deictic 'pointing' towards the real which is disclosed. Subjective positioning remains the organizing principle of the poem. The result is a poetry which is almost a phenomenological reduction of the speech act into pure linguistic gesturality, a ceaseless pronominal stutter, sheer deixis, affirming nothing but the possibility of its own spacing. (90)

Katz, Daniel. "Jack Spicer's After Lorca: translation as decomposition." *Textual Practice* 18.1 (2004): 83-103.

classical texts; it is only a short step from there to the total divorce of classicism's cultural and hegemonic authority from a static series of classical texts. Therefore, in examining Ginsberg's classical engagements, I attempt to demonstrate the processes whereby Ginsberg detaches classicism from Greek and Latin material texts, and transpose its authority onto alternative texts and social identities.

Whereas Ginsberg's verse attempts to usurp and *perfect* classicism's invisible procedures, Spicer's verse becomes ever more entangled in turning classicism against itself. In section two, I focus on 1) Spicer's self-cancelling "critical performance" of classicism's procedures of identity construction and community formation, and 2) his progressively articulate critique of Ginsberg's usurpation of those processes, and its attendant poetics of personhood and reified public image. For Spicer, critiques of classicism such as Ginsberg and Zukofsky's underestimate the extent of its power. The scope of classicism's misprision stretches far beyond particular texts. Indeed, Spicer takes something like "classicism" as hard-wired into the nuts and bolts of linguistic expression. If classicism is a problem, re-imaging Catullus or the classical past as queer, Jewish, or female at the level of representation cannot address it. Spicer's poetics figure their critique as foregone, yet offer themselves as a "residue" of critical agency.[128] His poetics gesture toward a social or historical reality outside of classicism's reified images, but run up against the paradox of communicating the pre-linguistic ground of language. He offers one of the most potent critiques of "classicism," while at the same time enacting one of the most sustained

[128] Maria Damon, in *The Dark Ends of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry*, rightly describes the "sacrificial" nature of Spicer's poetics in more biographical terms: "The double bind of Spicer's poetics is that in the name of love, they doom him to death—in his case not simply the ego death of Zen and Eastern philosophies, but, for one so self-consciously and problematically heir to Western thought, the death of the entire organism" (176). Damon, Maria. *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

engagements with both the idea of the classical and particular Greek and Latin texts.[129] Spicer's simultaneous critique and performance of classicism resonates with one of the recurring themes of this dissertation. These two—seemingly opposed—positions are often complementary, and often the most piercing critiques of "classicism" emerge from the most intimate encounters with its texts.

The Invention of "HUMANITY": Allen Ginsberg's Mainstream Margins

> …the sense of old reality of Catullus, dead so long but his worries are still sad and true, and [I] can hear his voice in poems.[130]

Perhaps because of his vocal critique of classicism, elevation of the Oriental classics above those of Greece and Rome, and the progressive absence of Greek and Latin language and literature in his published verse, none has yet examined the role of classicism and classical reception as an urgent context for Ginsberg's poetics. There are many reasons to do so now, not least of which is the role of Greek and Latin at critical turning points in his career. "Malest Cornifici tuo Catullo," a short engagement with the Roman poet Catullus and his Latin, is well known as a transitional work, composed over several months in the period leading up to the composition of "Howl." During the same period, Ginsberg was poised on the brink of total capitulation to a radically different way of life. In the midst of physical illness, he contemplated

[129] Spicer and Zukofsky, though they never met, are united in their positions as marginal members of marginal movements. That is, both Zukofsky and Spicer serve the thankless role of gadflies and voices of conscience to the critical positions of the very movements, social milieu, and poetic coteries that give rise to their own poetic practice. In Spicer, I find the resources for something like a deeply and thoughtfully articulated poetic critique of the New American Poetry that *precedes* the new American poetry.
[130] Qtd. in Schumacher, Michael. *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992, p. 327.

ending his burgeoning relationship with Peter Orlovsky and "becoming heterosexual." He considered exchanging poetry for the study of "Greek or prosody" at Berkeley, a very real possibility if not for Kerouac's stern response ("It's a Buddhist, AN EASTERN FUTURE ahead," "[Greek poetry] is child's play").[131] In this period of crisis prior to the composition of "Howl," his characteristic style hung in the balance, as well as the career that would carry him to public notoriety and a fraught but determined commitment to life as a public homosexual and advocate for the cultural margins. At the same juncture, he fiddled endlessly with "Malest," "work[ing] and rework[ing] the poem, checking its metric scheme against the Latin and the English translation of the Catullus poem."[132]Correspondence contemporary with the composition of "Malest" reveals a Ginsberg that sharply contrasts with the boisterous anti-academicism of the more familiar cultural icon:

> You would like Catullus. I read a collection of translations edited by an Aiken, and am reading him in Latin now with aid of a pony… I am doing some real study on metrics… Trouble is a real study involves knowledge of music, Provencal, Greek, etc. It all relates directly to history or basic theory of metrical practice and notation. I don't know how far I can go with the crude education I have… There is a difference between the kind of fine classical education you can get in private school and the vague generalities of public high schools. Write sometime. I'll let you know when anything happens. Love, Allen. (Morgan 113)[133]

Ginsberg saw his work with Catullus as an attempt to remedy his "crude education," and attain the cultural capital ("knowledge of… Greek," "history of basic theory of metrical practice") that a "fine classical education" would have granted him. If we take this sentiment as an interpretive framework for "Malest," we see that he located the regulation of literacy (complex manipulation

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[131] Kerouac, Jack, and Allen Ginsberg. *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters*. Penguin Books, 2010.

[132] "Malest Cornifici" took up what would appear to be an inordinate amount of Ginsberg's time and energy. In his notebook, he worked and reworked the poem, checking its metric scheme against the Latin and then the English translation of the Catullus poem. It was important to Ginsberg that the adaptation be precise to the final beat. Furthermore, it was critical that it be written in modern, hipster idiom…" (Schumacher 192).

[133] Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*. Da Capo Press, 2008.

of poetic form, literary-historical knowledge) in the institution; and at least in part identified with the Great Books ideal "of fine classical education." In this time of personal crisis, Ginsberg turned to the Latin text, and devoted painstaking attention to its linguistic, philological minutiae. Ginsberg became a philologist by proxy.[134]

The exact nature of Malest's relationship to its source text resists easy categorization. In the same *Arion* questionnaire in which he attacks academic classicism, he describes his practice in "Malest" as "paraphrase." There could be no term *less* suited to Ginsberg's philological practice vis-à-vis the Catullan text than "paraphrase," or its implication of rough, sloppy approximation. The poem skips over paraphrase as "different words approximate sense," practicing extremes that fall on either side. The poem moves between extremes of relation and non-relation that at no moment inhabit the "middle way" of paraphrase, but rather jarringly alternate between direct linguistic and semantic modeling and complete linguistic and thematic departure. There is no gradation between these disparate modes, and the abrupt jumps highlights the staggered, discontinuous transmissions of the Catullan source. These disjoints are visible only at the level of comparison with the Latin, because the resulting poetic surface of Ginsberg's poem is seamless. The English poem qua English poem reveals none of the suturing points where it leaps from direct modeling to pure invention. The idea of paraphrase conceals extremes of stylistic mimesis, invention, and linguistic rigor combined with complete transformation of affect, register, and cultural context, and in many ways speaks to the genius of Ginsberg's self-effacing philology.

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[134] Years later in the *Arion* questionnaire, Ginsberg goes great lengths to dismiss this very faculty of classicism and its objects: "The spirit of Anacreon, sure. But greek prosody? Ugh!" He goes so far as to argue that study of philology should not be taught to undergraduates studying the classics, and that even in graduate school philology qua philology should be emphasized only if the student demonstrates a remarkable aptitude. At each point, Ginsberg is at pains to pin classicism's foibles on its investment it's the linguistic minutiae of its objects.

I would like to situate Ginsberg's later poetics in terms of "Malest," and argue that they find their seeds in this sustained philological encounter with the Latin of Catullus. "Malest Cornifici" is a concrete instance of Ginsberg's broader mediations between novelty and tradition, critique and context, margins and center. Thinking through these negotiations in terms of "Malest" reframes them as discrete philological practices, compelling us to reconsider the hyper-contemporaneity of Ginsberg's poetics, the "organic" anti-formalism of his verse, and the historical displacement of "the new" in terms of a very specific type of textual practice. The work of Ginsberg's "Malest" is the production of a formal surface and a cultural present whose "transparency" and directness to its original is indistinguishable from invention, whether that relationship is in fact direct and "transparent" or absolutely indirect and opaque. Its success is in the "extraction" of the formal means of creating transparency and directness of relation from any actual directness of relation. In this sense, we have Ginsberg the radical formalist, whose poetics produce a classical present, no matter their degree of separation from their model of a classical past. The formal mechanisms that translate the classical erase their own presence as artificial, creating the semblance of an organic and unmediated accessibility of the past in the Beat poetics of Ginsberg's milieu. The "sincerity," "universality," and "organicism" of the resulting poetic identity is seamless, perfectly executed. The poem represents a treasure trove of material for contextualizing his immanent breakthrough to a poetics of naturalized public identity.

The choice of source text is by no means arbitrary, and together with "Malest" forms a kind of thematic chiasmus. As is Ginsberg's "Malest," Catullus 38 is a homosocial address between men bound together by their status as agents of desire:

> 1) malest cornifici, tuo cattulo
> malest, me hercule, et labriose,
> et magis magis in dies et horas
> quem tu, quod minimum facillimumque est

qua solatus es allocutione?
irascor tibi, sic meos amores?
paulum quid lubet allocutionis
maestius lacrimis Simonideis[135]

2) I'm happy, Kerouac, your madman Allen's
finally made it: discovered a new young cat,
and my imagination of an eternal boy
walks on the streets of San Francisco,
handsome, and meets me in cafeterias
and loves me. Ah don't think I'm sickening.
You're angry at me. For all of my lovers?
It's hard to eat shit, without having visions;
when they have eyes for me it's like Heaven.

The overall theme of Ginsberg's poem reverses the original's affective register (Malest's "I'm not doing well" becomes Ginsberg's "I'm happy"), while keeping to its general subject matter and tone (homosocial address). The original Catullus 38, which is the object of Ginsberg's adaptation, comments on the sincere transmission of emotions as an interpersonal medium. The poem's subject ("your Catullus") teasingly addresses his male friend, Cornificius, chastising him for his lack of sympathy. The original dances around the subject of sincerity. On the one hand, the poem's speaker both gives and demands sincerity. The sincerity and depth of Catullus' "distress" is the substance of the space of address, along with his displeasure at the lack of reciprocal sincerity from Cornificius. On the other hand, the speaker's self-conscious histrionics signal the performative and manufactured nature of his distress—its insincerity—and likewise chides the addressee for refusing to manufacture a false emotion "pathetic as the tears of

[135] For your Catullus, Cornificius,
it's bad; it's bad, by Hercules, and trying,
and daily and hourly gets much worse and worse.
Yes—least and most easily done—with what
consolation have you comforted him?
I'm in a rage with you—so much for my love?
A little sympathy, please, however small,
and sadder than the tears of Simonides. (60)
Trans. Lambert, John. *The Poems of Catullus.* Scripsi 2007.

Simonides." The poem, then, is about the fabrication of sincerity as a necessary condition for egalitarian community and interrelation.

The poem's transformations and appropriations of its Latin source are both deliberate and heterogeneous, and address each of the poem's nested layers of significance—from meter, to phoneme, morpheme, syntax, and line—with discrete procedures. Though rules govern these procedures, their formalism is such that they systematically disrupt uniformity. Metrically, "Malest" is a study in the systematic disfiguration of its source. The poem disrupts metrical equivalence with its source meter's hendecasyllabic (x – – x x – x – x – –), but also within its own individual elements. Catullus' unvaried meter gives way to a dizzying sequence of metrical variations, and the uniform parameters of meter meet their inverse image in the measured, precise, and uniform *disparity* of each of Malest's parts (I = Invention, A = Adaptation):

1 A: I'm happy, Kerouac, your madman Allen's 11 (x – / x – / x –) (x – / x – x)
2 I: finally made it: discovered a new young cat, 12 (– x x / – x) (x – / x x – /x –)
3 A: and my imagination of an eternal boy 13 (– x x / – x – x) (– x x – / x –)
4 I: walks on the streets of San Francisco, 9(– x / x – / x – / x – x)
5 A: handsome, and meets me in cafeterias 11(– x / x – / x x – / x – / x –)
6 I: and loves me. Ah don't think I'm sickening. 10 (x – –) (– x / – x / – x x)
7 A: You're angry at me. For all of my lovers? 11 (x – / x x –), (x – / x x – x)
8 I: It's hard to eat shit, without having visions; 11 (x – / x x –) (x – / x x – x)
9 I when they have eyes for me it's like Heaven. 10 (x – / x – / x –) (x – / – x)

Outside of the deliberate mimicry in the call and response of lines seven and eight, no two of "Malest's" lines scan alike, and no line in the poem scans as a hendecasyllabic. Even within Ginsberg's line, no two sides of a caesura mirror each other. "Malest" runs through a deft succession of metrical permutations—often from foot to foot—without repeating itself. Whereas Ginsberg's poem progressively extracts its source from the particular linguistic forms it inhabits, the original progressively animates those forms. The original Catullus 38 begins with the bare, mechanical reality of its meter, foregrounding the normally invisible artifice of metrical

constraints. The first lines begin as performances of their own reduction to "mere" symptoms of meter: "It's bad. It's really bad. It's really really bad." They are zombie-like, lifeless, unvaried, and mechanical in their lack of metrical variation and constricted range of expression. The movement away from unvaried repetition is, at first, a mere twitch. Lines 1-3 are predetermined, passive, and subjected to their form, then evolve into repetitions with a ghost of variation, finally injecting expressiveness in line three. The poem tells the formal narrative of the human struggling to break free from its set, predetermined constraints, or of the poet to invest the dull and dead materials of the predetermined form with life. Taken together, the narratives told by the progression of the two poems' metrical structures forms a chiastic inversion.

In Ginsberg's paratext, complex strategies of inversion, reflection, and invention continue at the level of line. The poem alternates between two distinct modes of transformations: inversion and invention. The invented lines stand in arbitrary relation to the semantic and linguistic matter of the original, while the inversions attend carefully to the sound of the original language and its syntactic relations while inverting aspects of its register. The first line of Ginsberg's "Malest" models the linguistic features of the original quite faithfully. The line's syntax and subject, apart from the affective reversal of "I'm happy," directly mirror Catullus. Ginsberg retains the affection of the poem's speaker diminutively referring to himself in the third person, adding "madman" as a descriptor, "your madman Allen." The addition of madman, despite some expansion of length, only embellishes the sonic similarities of "your madman Allen" to "tuo Catullo" in terms of vowel distribution. Add this to the way that "Kerouac" evokes sonic similarities to "Cornificius," and the first line arrives at a marriage of sonic and thematic fidelity. Lines three and seven likewise perform an inversion of affect, while modeling themselves directly on the concrete linguistic features of the original. "Imagination" sonically

mimes “magis magis,” and “an eternal boy” mimes the general syllabic distribution and sonic values of “in dies et horas.” The relationship of semantic content to its original is slightly more complex than the simple reversal of line one, but nonetheless transforms the sense of quickening time of “in dies et horas” into the timeless “eternal” of the poem’s idealized boy. What in the original line is an abysmal nadir of emotional state has come full circle as giddy wish fulfillment in “Malest.” Line seven, like the others, mimics the syntax and sound of the original while effecting an affective reversal. Catullus’ “I’m angry at you” becomes Ginsberg’s pleading, “You’re angry at me,” *and sic meos amores* (“treat my love so?”) becomes “For all of my lovers.”

Of eight Catullan lines and nine of Ginsberg’s, only three unequivocally model themselves after Catullus’ sound or content. The other five lines of Ginsberg’s poem have only the most tenuous connection to the Catullus. The connections extend little beyond the obvious framework of homosocial friendship and empathy given or received. Take, for example, the final lines of each poem. Only the most brazen interpretive doublethink can establish either sonic or thematic modeling. The “tenuous” lines exhibit features that are uncharacteristic of Ginsberg’s poetics: a careful sense of enjambment, the subtle but persistent connective tissue between lines, a precision of address, and the polished, subtle, but cutting, barbs and appeals of Catullan wit. The poem’s language is minimally generative, rather than the maximal and verbose generativity which becomes Ginsberg’s modus operandi. The poem maintains the stylistic indicators of Catullan speech,[136] even in syntactic and semantic non-relation: carefully placed terms of endearment (“your madman Allen”), polished inclusion of the vulgar (“it’s hard to eat shit”), representations of verbal interjection (“ah”), embeddedness in geographical place (“streets of San

[136] One cannot escape the idea of voice in Ginsberg. I do not adopt the term uncritically, but rather as a description of the formal devices that create a textual semblance of voice in Ginsberg’s verse.

Francisco"), variations in statement length, the quick oscillation between report and address, the use of idiomatic phrases ("young cat"), and so on. The poem skillfully maintains the formal registers of Catullan voice. Where we might perhaps describe Ginsberg's poetics as paraphrase (the three closely modeled lines), they invert semantic content but preserve linguistic form. Where "Malest" departs from the linguistic form of the original, it does so in a way that blasts through the gravity well of "approximate sense" and stands as pure invention.

The poem ends on a note of, if not insincere, at least facile attraction. The "eternal boy" is idealized and unreal, and it is precisely the unreal "visions" that undercut and softly blunt the edges of the poem's self-satisfied preening. Nevertheless, the poem cannot resist the illusory flirtations that are "like heaven": "when they have eyes for me it's like Heaven." Finally, the gaze flips around: Even as Ginsberg's poem translates its unreal classical fantasy into the stream of time and makes it real, the positions of source and target reverse. Now Ginsberg is the object of the gaze of the classical "eternal boy." Just as Ginsberg takes the Catullan text and translates it from the unreal, remote, and ancient past into the here and now, so too the "classical" Catullus that Ginsberg has recreated in the present translates Ginsberg himself into the past. "Malest" makes the classical real, which in turn makes "Malest" classical.

After going through these individual textual practices in perhaps painful detail, it is possible to step back and contemplate the science fiction insanity that is the translation machine of "Malest." For each of the source text's multiple, nested planes of significance—from meter through phoneme, morpheme, syntax, line, and theme— "Malest" maintains multiple, nested procedures of appropriation. Horizontally, within the same plane of significance—say meter, for example—"Malest" maintains at least two staggered, discontinuous modes of appropriation. Vertically, each plane duplicates some aspect of the planes above or below it—so for example,

the alteration from invention to inversion at the level of line resonates with the shifting permutations from metrical foot to metrical foot, or the substitution of polar values at the level of morpheme—happy to sad—*while always* preventing seamless continuity of procedure. Moreover, it does this in such a way that the resulting poetic surface bears none of the marks of the artifice involved in its creation.

The poem's cycling between direct relation and modeling—something quite close to translation—and indirect, transparent-seeming fabrication, self-consciously acknowledges an investment in the illusory "visions" and formal structures that, though artificial productions of reception, nevertheless create the seamless surface of voice, personhood, sincerity, and masculinity. It is specifically the invisibility of the classicism's creation of sincerity, transparency, and normative identity onto which this piece latches. The primary formal goal of its engagement with the Catullan text is to reproduce the invisibility of the interface between text and ideology. It successfully reproduces classicism's ability to normalize or naturalize an otherwise foreign past. What I find remarkable about the resulting poetic surface is not so much the degree to which the ancient text is "updated," or the formal transformations whereby "Malest" appropriates the ancient text to make it its own—offering us now a queer Catullus, now a bohemian Catullus, now a hipster Catullus—but rather the complex ease with which the bohemian appears as classical. A contemporary landscape stands side-by-side with the ancient original in such a way that their disparity is indiscernible.

In "Malest," Ginsberg opposes an overtly queer Catullus to the sanitized Catullus of the Loeb edition. At the same time, the queer classical text emerges as a direct inversion of the hegemonic image. Whereas hegemonic classicism selects and represents only those aspects of a classical past that bolster the heterocentric present, Ginsberg flips it around, and represents only

the homoerotic Catullus. Even as the poem recovers a formerly censored aspect of the classical past, it holds it up as a guarantor of the censored present. Similarly, "Malest" creates the past in the image of the present by updating its idiom to fit the particular social milieu it is meant to support (hipster, Beat, bohemian, and so on), and writing out the original text's meditation on poetic artifice and the construction of public emotion. Ginsberg's poem in no way "foreignizes" its queer content by means of the Catullan original. Rather than confronting the "straight" Catullus of hegemonic classicism with an image of difference and opacity, Ginsberg constructs a contemporaneity that is interchangeable with the classical past by naturalizing his queer Catullus. These are the formal processes whereby the classics are detached from the classical—the invention of "HUMANITY" and "the real human balls" from the "Ugh!" of "Anacreon's prosody." The subtle formal processes whereby Ginsberg's "philology of the margins" displaces the classical from the classic complicate our understanding of the unedited, sincere, or spontaneous in Ginsberg's poetics. If "Malest" is an early instance of the poetics of sincerity, transparent public image, and the unedited organicism of the self, then it calls for a substantial revision of our understanding of these terms in Ginsberg's poetics. They are "organic" in the way that organic food is so: we arrive at "natural" food not as recidivism to a primitive agricultural economy, but as the crowning achievement and fullest culmination of high industrial food technology.[137]

Ginsberg's "Malest" personifies his usurpation of classicism's identity-regulating mediations. Ginsberg crafted a Beat classicism on the basis of discrete strategies of reception and mediation—in "Malest," those textual strategies are inversion, usurpation, and exclusion vis-à-vis the poem's source text. The poem takes the groundlessness of the Latin text as an image of

[137] Davidson and others have noted the canny poise involved in the creation of Ginsberg's public image: "The change of Allen Ginsberg, market researcher, to Allen Ginsberg, poet, may not have been such a transition after all" (*Guys Like Us* 32).

the present as a given, yet seeks to reproduce and alter classicism's naturalization to reflect a marginalized queer identity.[138] With "Malest," Ginsberg discovered the ability of poetic form to naturalize alterity in the period directly preceding the development of his characteristic poetics in "Howl." Ginsberg learned not only from the text of Catullus, but also from the embedded series of institutional and ideological frameworks that mediated his access to Catullus and produced the immediacy of a living, directly accessible past.

Detailed analysis of "Malest" offers purchase for new perspectives on the broader arc of his poetics: Far more than in exploring the "organic" ancientness or mythical status of various traditions, Ginsberg invests in "borrowing" that status to create a self-mythologizing present: "Old life and new side by side, will Catholic Church find Christ on Jupiter Mohammed rave in Uranus will Buddha be acceptable on the stolid planets or will we find Zoroastrian temples flowering on Neptune" (171). It is difficult to overstate the omnipresence of "naturalizing" strategies of reception as they gain complexity throughout Ginsberg's career. His verse consistently positions itself in relation to various frameworks of reference and reception, which by turns encompass historical and geographical fact, architectural landmarks, nationalist mythologies, religious textual and liturgical traditions, constellations of poets and poetic movements, and bodies of literature, organizing their inclusions in categories such as "American," "Oriental," "Biblical, and "Greco-Roman." The remediation of these intertextual fields is constant, and operates at multiple levels, of which two of the most recognizable are 1) sustained *refiguration* and 2) *ambient allusiveness*. 1) "Refiguration" refers broadly to the sustained engagement and *use* of an intertextual figure or trope, more robust than a brief allusion,

[138] Davidson, Michael. "From Margin to Mainstream: Postwar Poetry and the Politics of Containment." *American Literary History*. (1997): "Far from rejecting the cultural mainstream, the Beats embraced many of its more oppositional features." (268) "The Beats, to continue my first example, neither "sold out" to the mainstream nor rejected it; rather, they worked strategically *within* it to develop an immanent critique." (269)

lengthier than a line or two, and having a substantive function in the source, e. g. "Howl's sustained use of Christological figures ("the eli eli lamma lamma sabachthani saxophone cry," "with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years").[139] I coin the term 2) *ambient allusiveness,* on the other hand, to refer to Ginsberg's idiosyncratic use of side-by-side allusions to eclectic intertextual fields. These lists function as egalitarian spaces in which disparate traditions share equal status, and serve to generate allusive background noise rather than poetic or narrative fulcra, e.g. "The Big Beat" contains a recurring address or summoning of eclectic deities ("Kalki! Apocalypse Christ! Maitreya! grim / Chronos… / and Ganymede" (357). This background noise tends to frame and lend atmosphere to otherwise highly contemporary engagements with current poetics and politics. In many ways, Ginsberg never rejected "Malest"'s poetics of naturalizing translation that so resembles the "Askforaclassic Inc." of Erskine's Great Books classicism.[140]

At the same time that this perspective contributes to our understanding of Ginsberg's poetics, it poses new questions and throws into relief several anomalies, including: 1) the progressive absence of Greek and Latin intertexts in his verse, and 2) the sharp contrast of the apparent affirmation of "a fine classical education" with his subsequent and pronounced anti-institutionalism and anti-classicism. Firstly, the role of classical reception in "Malest" underscores a new intertextual peculiarity: Remarkably, "Howl" represented Ginsberg's last

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[139] See Hardwick's *Reception Studies* for a critical vocabulary of reception studies including "refiguration" and many other terms. "Ambient allusion" is my own innovation.

[140] "His favorite freshman course was a great-books seminar taught by renowned critic/essayist Lionel Trilling. Another Columbia professor, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Van Doren, was also very instrumental in interesting Allen in writing poetry, though both Trilling and Van Doren, Ginsberg later lamented, were far more concerned with teaching the classical Victorian forms of poetry than in studying more modern forms practiced by such poets as Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, or William Carlos Williams" (Morgan 24).

sustained engagement with Greco-Roman classicism until late in his poetic career.[141] After "Howl," Ginsberg distanced his poetics from Greek and Roman texts as sites of poetic or linguistic authority, instead resituating its intertextual geography by prioritizing first a Biblical, then an Oriental, past, embracing Kerouac's "EASTERN FUTURE."[142] For a period of over a decade, Greek and Latin texts appeared *only* as members of egalitarian lists or as ambient allusions in Ginsberg's verse, and even then in small numbers, or as figures for hegemony itself: "Minerva, sexless cold & chill, ascending goddess of money… executive dyke, Minerva, goddess of Madison Avenue…" (194).[143] 1962's "Stotras to Kali Destroyer of Illusions" serves as a brief but representative illustration of this elision of Greek and Latin. Although the poem contains well over fifty proper name or direct allusions, including intertextual fields as various as American architecture, international politics, Medieval mysticism, "Bible," and Hinduism, only two of these ("Spouse of Europa"; "Maya") point to Greek or Latin sources (298-300). The contrast of this elision with the persistence of Biblical and Oriental refiguration underscores the peculiarity of Ginsberg's "classical silence." On the one hand, this excision was part of an articulated strategy to "Let Occidental and Washington be transformed into a higher place, the plaza of eternity" (163). On the other hand, Ginsberg's specific criticisms of classicism cannot fully account for the excision of Greek and Latin texts. The disciplinary histories of Biblical,

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[141] A substantive refiguration rather than inclusion in a list of ambient allusions.

[142] "Greek" does not appear in *The Collected Poems* between pp. 187-800; "Greece" appears once on p. 347 as a place name; "classic" does not appear from pp. 136-802; "classical" from pp. 94-879 (except once on 500 as "classical music").

[143] One could possibly consider "A Supermarket in California"'s brief (two line) but thematically central use of Charon and Lethe as a refiguration—but the poem is roughly contemporary with "Malest" anyways; or one could look at the broadest levels of genre and claim *Elegies for Neal Cassady* as a refiguration of classical elegy—but to my mind this is far too broad and indirect. The claim, too, limits itself to verse published in the collected poetry, and stops short of unpublished and archival materials—although I am unaware of any specific exceptions in them. By any account, we have a period of well over a decade following the composition of "Malest," spanning the height of his success as a poet and public figure, in which Greek and Latin intertexts take a backseat.

Oriental, and classical studies diverge at a relatively late point in history, and thus their codifications as coherent objects of academic knowledge share striking similarities. Nonetheless, Ginsberg took as perhaps the most stable intertextual feature of his work the refiguration of the tropes, topoi, motif, and figures of "Bible" (e.g., "Tho I am not there for this Prophecy… Take this, this Psalm… This is the end, the redemption from Wilderness," in "Kaddish" 220) and "Orient" ("As the old sages of Asia, or the white bears of Persia / scribbled on the margins of their scrolls / in delicate ink / remembering with tears the ancient clockbells of their cities" 253). His verse hungrily assimilates a Biblical and Oriental past, while limiting the classical past to a nominal or token presence.[144]

Secondly, examining Ginsberg's later career from the perspective of "Malest"'s naturalizing classicism complicates the familiar narrative of "Howl's as an anti-institutional manifesto of counter-cultural transgression, as well as the timeline and motivations for his ultimate divorce from the ideology of "a fine classical education." The resonances of "Howl's formal strategies with those of "Malest"—in addition to Ginsberg's accounts and rebuttals of its critical reception—suggest that it was not until *after* the dismal institutional reception of "Howl" that he fully rejected 1) classicism *qua* Greek and Latin, and 2) the figures of "institution" and "academic classicism" as privileged sites of cultural authority. "Howl" functions more as an extension and development of Malest's classical "HUMANITY" than its revision or recusal. Like "Malest," "Howl" grounds itself in the "history or basic theory of metrical practice" and the literary historical archive governed by "a fine classical education," classical (Plotinus), Biblical (eli eli lamma lamma), and modern (Cézanne, Whitman, etc.). Further, the terms of Ginsberg's

[144] In general, a far more coherent and detailed account of the interrelationships between Biblical, oriental, and classical philology in their formative periods is an absolute necessity to the coherence of classical reception studies; both an institutional and discursive genealogy of the same and of persisting formations of "the Biblical," "Oriental," and "classical" as literary topoi and sites of reception.

defense of "Howl," the indignant incredulity with which he met its critical reception, and the strategic responses he subsequently developed, all suggest that he had intended "Howl" as a *practice* of "tradition" rather than its negation. He characterized it thus his letters: "I ALSO believe it's the main "tradition," not that there is any tradition except what we make ourselves" (Morgan 203).[145] In the same letter, his disdain encompasses the *mis*identification of "Howl" with "negative values" and "the whole sociological-tone-revolut whatever bullshit that everyone comes on with" ("the vulgarity… so called friendly from the same intellectual types… [of their] halfwit interpretations of "negative values" of Howl" 212); and his incredulity springs from the wholesale misrecognition of the artifice, complexity, and literary-historical merits of its formalism:

> I get sick and tired I read 50 reviews of Howl and not one of them written by anyone with enough technical interests to notice the fucking obvious construction of the poem, all the details besides (to say nothing of the various esoteric classical allusions built in like references to Cézanne's theory of composition etc. etc.) (205)

With "Howl," Ginsberg had expected "the guardians of culture" to see their own reflections, or the poem's skilled manipulation of cultural capital, or at least some recognition of the formal achievement involved in recreating "tradition." "Howl" was meant to write itself into the Great Books tradition of universal "HUMANITY"—the "main tradition" and the institutional frameworks that he had formerly believed to be privileged entrances to classicism or canonicity.

Ginsberg's progressive disidentification with an academic classicism grounded in Greek and Latin resulted, I would argue, not from a rejection of that "tradition" or its attendant classicism, but from a progressive sense of the disjoint between "academic institution" and the cultural literacy required to regulate and reproduce canonicity: "basically no one has insight into poetry techniques except people who are exercising them" (203). The transition from "a fine

[145] In correspondence with John Hollander.

classical education" to "the whole horror of Columbia" (204) hinged around "the horrible irony of all these jerks who can't read trying to lecture me (us) on FORM" (205). For Ginsberg, the academic and high cultural reception of "Howl" compelled the realization that "the institution" and its representatives were relatively minor players in the regulation of cultural capital: "Just a bunch of dilettantes. And THEY have the nerve to set themselves up as guardians of culture?!?" (204). Ginsberg's version of "Askforaclassic" succeeded almost too well: The "horde of half educated deathly academicians" had mistaken Ginsberg's organic poetic surface as self-evident, missing or refusing to acknowledge the technical virtuosity involved in its production and its resonance with the procedures by which the very texts they claimed to represent had become the transparent semblance of affirmative "tradition." The turning point in Ginsberg's final (at least for the ensuing years) disidentification was his realization that "the guardians of culture" had inherited a system of cultural production that exceeded them, and the operation of which they no longer understood. To borrow a phrase from "Wichita Vortex Sutra," Ginsberg now saw "the guardians of culture" as "bad magicians" who no longer spoke the arcane tongue from which they drew their power: "Not one yet, not ONE in all the colleges, magazines, book pages has said anything real, has got the point, either of spirit or prosody… NOT ONE" (213).

Ultimately, Ginsberg was a pragmatist of the first order, and it was this growing sense of the disjoint between "academic institution" and the cultural literacy required to regulate and reproduce "a contemporaneity for every period" that motivated his eventual, clairvoyant ultimatum: "UNLESS THERE IS MORE COOPERATION FROM THE SUPPOSEDLY RESPONSIBLE PARTIES IN UNIVERSITIES AND MAGAZINES," Ginsberg writes, "THEY CAN TAKE THEIR FUCKING LITERARY TRADITION AND SHOVE IT UP THEIR ASS—

I don't need them and they don't need me" (206). Charles Altieri and others have characterized Ginsberg's multivalent occupation of the "mainstream margins" in terms of the nation:

> There is no doubt that Ginsberg feels wounded by the very nation that he wants to celebrate. But that is the aspect of contingency that he has to reconcile with the possibility of acknowledging the forces that have formed him. In fact, his sense of betrayal proves inseparable from ideals cultivated by that very nation… (44)[146]

While this analysis no doubt applies to questions of national identity, the present analytical context suggests a more direct application to questions of "institution." "The "nation that he want[ed] to celebrate" becomes the "tradition" into which he sought entrance; and whereas his technical virtuosity allowed him to skillfully manipulate its formal networks of communication ("I don't need them [the universities and magazines] and they don't need me")[147] he reserved his

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[146] Altieri, Charles. "Spectacular Antispectacle: Ecstasy and Nationality in Whitman and His Heirs." *American Literary History* (1999): 34-62.

[147] As a compelling example of the many ways Ginsberg develops a "social formalism," and its similarities with the "naturalizing classicism" of "Malest," witness Ginsberg's testimony before the Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, investigating use of LSD:

> Dressed in a suit and tie, and speaking in a low, respectful tone, he [Ginsberg] began his address by admitting that he was uneasy… that the members might have prejudged him by his public "bearded image": "I am a little frightened to present myself—the fear of your rejection of me, the fear of not being tranquil enough to reassure you that we can talk together, make sense, and perhaps even like each other—enough to want not to offend, or speak in a way which is abrupt or hard to understand... We can't treat each other only as objects, categories of citizens, role players, big names, small names, objects of research or legislation… (Schumacher 471-72)

Here is a moment when Ginsberg addresses *reception as a social question*, and a masterful negotiation of his public presentation and the tissue-fine convergence of discursive strategies and the legitimation of juridical authority. This direct encounter, his request to be allowed entrance into the field of juridical discourse, grounds itself in a nuanced social formalism. On the one hand, his appeal subtly criticizes the economy of public image, the unreality of its abstracted representations, and the ways in which it grounds juridical authority. At the same time, Ginsberg's strategies of *"social formalism"* offer the irreducible particularity of himself as "HUMANITY": resistant to the transformation of subjects into reified "objects," abstract "categories of citizens," "big names, small names," or "objects of… legislation." Ginsberg requests entrance to the highly charged and segmented public space as a human being, immediate and irreducible in his particularity.

Unlike "the guardians of culture" at an earlier point, the senators are not at all dismissive of Ginsberg's influence. Javits presents himself as fully aware of the threat posed by Ginsberg's formal mastery of the procedures that govern "legitimation," and makes explicit efforts to counter it:

> Q. Do you consider yourself qualified to give a medical opinion [concerning the use of LSD] which will determine the fate of my 16 ½-year-old-son?
> A. No….

"sense of betrayal" by "the forces that had formed him" for "the horror of Columbia": "THEY CAN TAKE THEIR FUCKING LITERARY TRADITION AND SHOVE IT UP THEIR ASS."

I would argue that Ginsberg's "classical silence" and disdain for academic classicism and its "tradition" had little to do with disavowing its textual capital or formal strategies. On the one hand, reading the elision only as a strategic move threatens to devolve into a flattening (and cold) critical judgment, dismissive of his ethical and multicultural commitments in a way that resonates ominously with his early institutional censure. On the other, my suggestion reflects the arc of Ginsberg's poetics themselves as they mature into self-reflexive critique and struggle with the contradictions involved in his classical usurpation: the symbiosis of critical innovation and the tradition from which it seeks to break; the "gap" between representation and its purported objects—public identity, sexuality, personhood, and so on; and the paradoxes of critical recidivism. That is to say that, although I argue that Ginsberg's poetics take as their starting point the pre-existing valves that mediate identitarian validity, they evolve. Ginsberg's basic critique of classicism is not that its strategies of identity reification and the creation of "images" of public identity are fundamentally insidious, but rather that they do not sufficiently nuance. The goal is ultimately a linguistic image and a linguistically reified identity that is coterminous with the pre-

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> Q. Of course you are not, and that is the important point that must be made to those who will listen to you.

Javits is speaking, not to Ginsberg, but to the matrix of public discourse. The Senator exercises a strategy that strikingly resembles Ginsberg's own: He draws attention to the troublesome gap between Ginsberg's formal legitimacy—the combination of organic sincerity and a "HUMANITY" irreducible to legitimized or delegitimized "objects of legislation" (recognized subject categories such as scientist or doctor or expert or authority) with the artful manipulation of the discursive codes that guarantee those very same those categories (empirical data, the language of controlled research, the objective facticity of piles of papers, reference to articles, charts, and statistics). The Senator underscores the *formalism* and discursive artifice of Ginsberg's expertise, empiricism, objectivity, authority, intelligibility etc: "Look! Though he sounds exactly like those that have been sanctioned as representatives of these various spheres of knowledge, and though he has exactly the same rhetorical arsenal and formal skill sets that they themselves exercise—he has not been sanctioned by the approved order." In effect, the senator is simultaneousy drawing attention to the gap between the universality of discourses of reason, objectivity, empiricism, and reliance on fact and data and their actual existence as subordinated to, situated within, and dependent upon highly contextual and contingent "legislative categories."

public, private internal identity. The turn away from "Western" classics represents an evolving self-critique of his own classicism that begins at the level of represented content (resituating the intertextual stage of his naturalized, humanist, or American revisions onto ever more "foreign" or "unclassical" traditions) and finally turns against itself as a critique of representation as such.[148]

These tensions crystallize in the *Indian Journals*, which stand at the apogee reflexive critique.[149] In the earlier period of "Malest" and "Howl," Ginsberg's poetics articulate his "philological self-erasure." The osmosis of past to present, present to past, archaic to modern, center to margins, east to west, foreign to native, and so on, is the basis of his "linguistic supernaturalism" and creation of poetic immediacy, personhood, and presence. In India, Ginsberg encounters the material site of his "classical" projections. The *IJ* mark a crisis in which Ginsberg confronts the "gap" between the "archaic time," liberated identities, and linguistic

[148] The shift in imaginary geography of Ginsberg's later work, especially the *Indian Journals*, in which the "outside" comes to be more and more exclusively located in the East, as well as the progressive Easternization of Ginsberg's post-*IJ* poetics, represents an intensification of a textual and affective logic already implicit in "Howl," and deeply implicit in the Romantic and Transcendentalist tradition on which it draws so heavily. This mapping of a vertical geography of the metaphysical onto a horizontal geography, not to mention in combination with the degree to which, especially in his earlier poetry, Ginsberg takes on the role of the prophet (witness the repeated exclamation of "Moloch!" in "Howl" section 2, which transforms the poet into a Jeremiah, the poem into a Jeremiad, and America into a wayward Israel), might serve as concrete platforms from which to investigate Ginsberg's "neoromanticism". Ian Balfour, for example, has argued for the importance of the figure of the prophet in the crafting a Romantic subjectivity and poetics in *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy.* See Balfour, Ian. *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*. Stanford University Press, 2002.

[149] Two notable exceptions have recently paid a great deal of attention to the material in the *Journals*: Amy Hungerford's "Postmodern Supernaturalism: Ginsberg and the search for a Supernatural Language" (Hungerford, Amy. "Postmodern Supernaturalism: Ginsberg and the Search for a Supernatural Language." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18.2 (2005): 269-298) and Barrett Watten's "The Turn to Language in the 1960s" (Watten, Barrett. "The Turn to Language and the 1960s." *Critical Inquiry* 29.1 (2002): 139-183). This paper owes a great deal to Watten's formulation of the role of the East in the formation of an "outside" and his analysis of the *Journals.* Watten's article, however, focuses on a political reading of the outside and focuses more narrowly on the *Journals* themselves, rather than their relation to the longer arc of Ginsberg's work; and on the relationship of Ginsberg's post-India poetics to the emergence of Language poetry in the late 60's and 70's. To Hungerford's article I owe many insights into Ginsberg's conception of a "supernatural" poetry of transformative power, although unlike Hungerford I emphasize the continuity of this emergence with logics already set in motion in Ginsberg's earlier poetry.

presence of his "Oriental classicism," and the material reality of India as a measured present. To Ginsberg's credit, he does not shrink from the encounter, but follows its implications to their limits. The *Indian Journals* encounter the opacity of classicism's object, in India, and bring the question of language as an obdurate medium—resistant to stable reifications of identity—to the forefront in Ginsberg's work. After "Wichita Vortex Sutra," the western classics return as a presence in his work. This return defers pride of place, but restores classical texts to viability and treats them as full interlocutors in a number of prominent poems, from "Ecologues," to "Plutonian Odes" and "τεθνάκην δ' ολίγω 'πιδεύης φαίνομ' αλαία." Ginsberg's poetics evolve towards a self-aware critique or performance of their participation in practices of representation and image-creation. In this, Spicer's sustained critique is all the more poignant because of the similarities in poetic and social context that he and Ginsberg share.

"Malest" frames the development of Ginsberg's poetics in terms of the highly particular mediation of a classical text, and brings into a synchronic lens a host of urgent issues, from censorship's influence on the content of Ginsberg's verse, to the formal similarities between the cultural center and Ginsberg's "margins"[150]—and to what degree his poetics represent those margins by analogy with the center—issues of homosocial community and the economy of prestige, and the formalist "self-erasure" of his soon-to-be characteristic poetics of sincerity, authenticity, organicism, and "personhood." Reception studies allow us to articulate an early example of Ginsberg's poetics of public identity and "hegemonic marginalism" as grounded in

[150] Perelman makes a number of provocative and compelling points vis-à-vis comparison of Ginsberg and Zukofsky's relationship to Jewishness: "Another way of coming at Jewishness in innovative writing, what I'll call homeopathic Jewishness, will restore the commonsense fact that Ginsberg is a Jew, though in a non- commonsense way… Crudely, the homeopathic model says that the more diluted the Jewishness the more Jewish the writer… Back to "Ginsberg is more Jewish than Zukofsky." Really, isn't it simpler to reframe their difference- amid- genealogical- similarity as a difference in historical generation, both poetic and chronological? Zukofsky grew up speaking Yiddish; two decades later, Ginsberg grew up speaking English" (54-56). See Perelman, Bob. "Zukofsky at 100." *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*(2009): 40.

highly specific modes of textual mediation. It contributes to and often revises our understanding of each of these issues, and situates the histories of classicism and western philology as potential contexts for Ginsberg's orientalism.

"A title not chosen for dancing": Jack Spicer's Residual Margins

> Somebody tells me that these people are human. That's silly. They are not human they are homosexual. Jews are not human either, nor Negroes, nor cripples. No one is human that doesn't feel human. None of us here feel human.
>
> Jack Spicer[151]

Ginsberg and Spicer's poetics stand as "limit cases" of classical reception in the New American Poetry, complementary contradictions. Whereas Ginsberg's poetics operate in the cultural mainstream that exists outside the framework of institutional legitimacy, disidentifies with the canonical "surface" of its intertextual content, and usurps its creation of "tradition," Spicer's poetics operate on the cultural margin that exists *within* the framework of institutional legitimacy, *identifies* with the canonical "surface" of its intertextual content, and does so in order to *disrupt* its creation of "tradition." As in his late and complex volume of poetry, *Language*, Spicer's apparent complicity with classicism's homogenous images of tradition and identity is often simultaneous with an anguished critique. Although the cultural and textual "sources" for *Language*'s investigation of origins cycles between Mesopotamian, Greek, and Old English, and oscillates wildly between Biblical and classical, its poetic surface is remarkably homogenous. No matter how heterogeneous or marginal the volume's intertextual traditions—whether Trojan or medieval, straight or queer--they all arrive in Greek:

[151] Spicer 2008, p. 11.

> Troy was a baby when Greek sentence structure emerged. This
> was the real Trojan Horse.
> The order changes. The Trojans
> Having no idea of true or false syntax and having no recorded
> language
> Never knew what hit them.

The task the poem sets itself—representation of a past outside of the reified classical images of that past—can take place only by means of the very reifying forms it seeks to overcome ("Greek sentence structure"). The "classical" object of the poem is a past outside of and pre-dating "recorded language." As opposed to the "materialist classicism" of a poet such as Zukofsky, Spicer takes the materiality of "recorded language" itself as a figure for the obfuscating erasure of classicism, and finds an insoluble crux in the fact that what has been erased ("Troy" as a figure for a past outside the ideological archives of classicism) can only be gestured to in the erasing medium ("Troy" as the highly mediated ideological creation of "Greek syntax").

Whereas Ginsberg sharply distinguishes the various disparate traditions that classicism assimilates, Spicer mimics classicism's erasure of difference and cultural specificity and the tradition's retroactive assimilation of these disparate literatures as its univocal "origins." "The only poem," Spicer wrote in a letter to the editor of *Open* Space, the magazine in which much of *Language* appeared,

> that interested me in the whole July issue (including my own) was the rhymed poem called "Underwier" about half-way through the issue. … I wonder if the accusation against Open Space is not that it is too homosexual but that it is too homogeneous. Like cartons of milk.[152]

He pointedly includes his own verse in this description. Despite Spicer's own cultural marginality, and the energetic critique embodied in his poetics, the poems in *Language* appear "not… [as] too homosexual but… [as] too homogeneous," still "cartons of milk." For Spicer, the

[152] Qtd. in Ellingham, Lewis, and Kevin Killian. *Poet be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*. Wesleyan, 1998.

cultural syntax has most fully territorialized its margins ("Troy"), even or precisely in their non-equivalence with its homogeneity. In a characteristic move, *Language* performs the homogeneity and sameness of difference in order to make its force visible. Perhaps counter-intuitively, his poetics embrace the insincerity and unreality of classicism's creations, not in a desire to reproduce them, but in a self-cancelling demonstration of its mechanisms. Because the appeal to an "outside" of illusory texts is the central move in the ideology of classicism, one can only approach an actual "outside" of the classical through the (false) medium of "classicism." It is precisely in this performance of classicism's artifice that Spicer finds purchase to offer legitimate critique, however faint that voice might be. Spicer's poetics progressively come to identify with a "residual marginality," the marginality of the margins that sometimes draw him into strange alliance with the center.

My reading of Spicer focuses on *Language.* Although the performance of "misnaming" is a constant in Spicer's work, its field of action shifts from narrative or content-oriented misnaming, in his early career as in "Orpheus in Hell," to formal and linguistically based misnaming, as in his mature work. *Language* is a high-water mark in this progression, and displays Spicer's stylistic achievements at their heights. It is also his most applied investigation of ideas of tradition and the hoard of literary origin. The early poems anchor the critique of representation in concrete questions of identity formation, ethnicity, and sexuality in ways that illuminate the scope and range of his late critical poetics.[153] *Language* reveals that Spicer's

[153] The linguistic substance of a poem, and of classicism as an intertextual matrix, consists in a persistent rupture between its referential content and its formal substance. In Spicer's poetics and poetic theory, representational content is *always* a red herring that cuts against the grain of its formal and performative substance:

> [I want] the moon in my poems to be a real moon, one which could suddenly be covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with the poem – a moon utterly independent of images
> the lemon [mentioned in a poem would be] a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste—a real lemon like a newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper… How easy it is in erotic musings

earlier engagements with "tradition" have evolved into a more comprehensive encounter with radical historicity. Comparing *Language's* formal strategies and textual receptions with his roughly contemporary and now famous Vancouver lectures revises and expands the critical vocabulary for understanding Spicer's aesthetics. By reading the lectures from the perspective of classical reception, and grounding its complex articulations of poetic practice and aesthetic negativity in discrete examples of reception in *Language,* I offer an interpretation of Spicer's poetic theory and practice as an incisive critical model of reception, critique, and poetic negativity; and demonstrate that this model grounds the emergence of aesthetic negativity in the reception and "disfiguration" of canonical forms.

I organize a reading of the volume as a whole around an untitled poem (henceforth referred to as "faded-blond"), both for its particular resonances with Ginsberg's "Malest" and because the specificity of its intertext allows a more precise analysis of its textual strategies. Though different in style and sensibility, comparison of the poems throws into sharp relief similarities in method and tendency that mark the New American Poetry as a discrete movement, and the disparity and particularism that periodizing literary history must occasionally flatten. The poem is a nearly perfect counterpoint to Ginsberg's "Malest." Both Spicer's and Ginsberg's

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> or in the truer imagination of a dream to invent a beautiful boy. How difficult to take a boy in a blue bathing suit… and to make him visible in a poem… not as an image… but as something alive—caught forever in the structure of words. Live moons, live lemons, live boys in bathing suits. The poem is a collage of the real.

In each instance, Spicer divides the poetic composition into two strata: its material and performative composition—what it *is* and what it *does:* "a real moon," "a lemon the reader could cut," "a real newspaper" versus its representational content as the pictures it shows us, what it *looks like*: "[a moon] covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with a cloud," "newspaper in a collage," "lemon rinds": Although the theoretical distinction itself is traditional, it is important to underscore that in each individual instance, the poem's actualization—its "becoming-lemon"—is marked by a sharp divergence in the poetic strata of composition and representation. To create a newspaper, the poem cannot create a picture of a newspaper, but must use newspaper scraps to collage a representation of something else; the poem's "real moon" comes into being, not in a representation of the moon, but through the clouds that cover it. The poem's "representational surface" is necessarily at odds with its formal substance: "It is a strategy where we miss what we hit."

poems are adaptations of traditional—classical or Biblical—forms, and identify with the formal and affective structures of those forms as sites of resistance to what they conceive as the otherwise stodgy and oppressive culture of mid-century America. Both, taking the modernists as a cue, see in the very forms on which the prevailing cultural hegemony rests the resources to suggest alternatives to the hegemony. For both, the textual reality of classical formal and aesthetic devices, as well as the classically inflected tropes of lyric voice, personhood, and pathos, is expansive. Both poems usurp the present by returning to and modifying an origin whose authority surpasses that of the present. Both present themselves as restoring a visceral openness to the classical. Each signals this restoration with obscenity—"How / motherfucker can I sing a sad song"; "It's hard to eat shit"—as a de-censoring move against high cultural appropriations. Foregrounding censored linguistic registers, obscenity, the classical itself as an object of resistance, and identifying with the classical past as a site of visceral expression and unedited sincerity all mark characteristic tendencies of the New American Poetry's classicism.

Nevertheless, the similarities conceal a deep tension, even enmity in purpose and function, and suggest ways in which Spicer's critique of Ginsberg responds to, resonates with, depends upon, expands, negates, and completes his aesthetic innovations via immanent critique. Whereas Ginsberg's poem usurps classicism's "authenticity-machines," Spicer's "faded-blond" performs its own domination by those machines:

> The faded-blond out beauty
> Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I forget you
> Zion.
> There we wept
> He gave me a turn. Re-
> Membering his body. By the waters of Babylon
> In a small boat the prince of all the was to come
> Floating peacefully. Us exiles dancing on the banks of their
> fucking river.
> They asked us to sing a sad song How

Motherfucker can I sing a sad song
When I remember Zion? Alone
Like the stone they say Osiris was when he came up dancing.
How can I sing my Lord's song in a strange land

Spicer's most overt source text, Psalm 137, is like the source of Ginsberg's "Malest" a meditation on the nature of sincerity and the social production of intersubjectivity.[154] The original psalm's narrator presents himself as a marginalized member of the socius—in Babylonian exile—who is being asked by his Babylonian captors to perform. He complains, "I'm sad but you want me to perform a poetics of joy" [paraphrase]. The impossibility of the narrative demand, internal to the poem, to sing joyful songs sincerely, in fact produces the "sincere" outpouring of the "hidden" emotion of sadness ('How can we sing the songs of the Lord / while in a foreign land?"). The psalm generates sincerity from the tension between dual levels of semantic production. The level of hegemonic social representation, regulated and

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[154] For comparison, I include the NIV translation of Psalm 137 below:

1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
2 There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
3 for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?
5 If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.
7 Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did
on the day Jerusalem fell.
"Tear it down," they cried,
"tear it down to its foundations!"
8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.
9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.

enforced by the Babylonian captors, appears in the original as the "surface" in which an enforced poetics demands a shallow image of "happiness," which in turn creates the "submerged" level of sincere sadness.

Formally, Spicer adapts the original's hierarchies of social representation in a nuanced extension and exploration of his own critique of representative language, identity, and classicism. Spicer's poem adopts the two levels of poetic and formal melancholy, and the level of social representation—but social representation paradoxically demands the reproduction and representation of the "sincere" space of excluded lyric outpouring. That is, the level that is in Spicer's poem the public or "sounded" level of semantic production demands a representation of affect, by means of poetic artifice, that corresponds to the level of semantic production that is within Spicer's poem banished and invisible. The violent power of Spicer's poem demands that its subject "translate" its affect into a portable "image" of the same that can circulate publicly, which is exactly what the poem does. What in the psalm is the overt stratum of social representation (Babylonians regulating and constraining the narrator's social representations of himself and his people) has in Spicer's poem flipped around and become the submerged level, consumed / overwritten by sadness. The poem signals the formal artifice of its "sincerity" even as it helplessly continues to produce it.[155] Remarkably, the poem's muted expression of its false sincerity and historical determination is the only element that in some way escapes its pre-determined forms. In its most sincere attempts to perform the artifice and insincerity of its

[155] Snediker aptly captures this subtlety—and the interpretive missteps it sometimes invites—apropos of Spicer's "sincere insincerity":

> …notwithstanding its surfacing throughout Spicer criticism, suffers in its transparency so often being taken for granted. More simply, Spicer's accounts of his own poetics too often are understood as nonproblematically sincere, even as Spicer's poetry admonishes us against so straightforward a sincerity… Spicer's anger—as both abstraction and particularity—is directed at form, at voice, at the hypothesis of content. This is to say that Spicer's anger keenly surfaces in the raveled snags of form, voice, content.

Snediker, M. D. "Prodigal Son (Midway along the Pathway)." *Criticism* 51.3 (2009): 489-504.

expressive content—the ways in which its content is a mere function of classicism's formal devices—Spicer's poem can do no more than helplessly reproduce them. Spicer's poem signals its own helplessness and loss of agency in the face of the near-total linguistic and formal power of classicism. Classicism's homogenizing power is, for Spicer, far more than *content*: it is a function of the very structures of language, as it presently exists.

The formal and receptive strategies of "faded-blond" offer concrete examples of Spicer's aesthetics as they encounter and negotiate traditional texts and forms. Reading Spicer's lectures on poetics in the context of these discreet strategies underscores the centrality of reception for Spicer's poetics. Taking his cue from Yeats, Spicer articulates poetry as "dictation from the Outside."[156] The poet receives "transmissions" from sources variously described as "Martians," "ghosts," "spooks," and so on.[157] In dictation, the "transmissions" which are the poet's objects exist as uncoded communication, whose nature is alien to the actual language of poet or poem. Language is the "cleft palate" that distorts the alien transmissions, or the inanimate substrate of "building blocks": "some nice furniture to work with, but no more than furniture, as history is." Behind this mystical language, Spicer articulates a nuanced theory of cultural construction and poetic negativity:

> Now, if you have a cleft palate and are trying to speak with the tongues of men and angels, you're going to still speak through a cleft palate…
>
> It's impossible for the source of energy to come to you in Martian or North Korean or Tamil or any language you don't know. It's impossible for the source of energy to use images you don't have, or at least don't have something of. It's as if a Martian comes into a room with children's block with A, B, C, D, E which are in English and he tries to convey a message. This is the way the source of energy goes. But the blocks, on the other hand, are always resisting it…

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[156] A champion for Spicer both during and after his life, Robin Blaser's "The Practice of the Outside" is the most well known articulation of Spicer's poetics. See Blaser, Robin. "The Practice of Outside." *J. Spicer, The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (1975).

[157] Spicer repeatedly insists on the hypothetical and theoretical value of the "dictation," paradigm, as opposed to its value as an actual description of a physical or metaphysical reality.

> But at the same time, you are stuck with language, and you are stuck with words, and you are stuck with the things that you know. It's a very nice thing, and a very difficult thing. The more you know, the more languages you know, the more building blocks the Martians have to play with. It's harder, too, because an uneducated person often can write a better poem than an educated person, simply because there are only so many building blocks… And sometimes for great poetry, an infinitely small vocabulary is what you want…
>
> But the more building blocks, the more you have to arrange your building blocks and say to the Martian, "Oh no, Mr. Martian, it doesn't go this way. That spelling p-r-y-d-x-l doesn't make any sense in English at all. We'll change it around." And then you make an anagram of it, and you spell what the Martian was trying to say. The more building blocks you have, the more temptation. The more you know, in a university sense, the more temptation there is to say, oh yes—yes, yes, yes—I remember this has to do with the Trojan War, or this has to do with this, this has to do with that, and so forth.
>
> But on the other hand… given the cooperation between the host poet and the visitor—the thing from Outside—the more things you have in the room the better if you can handle them in such a way that you don't impose your will on what is coming through…And it seems to me that, essentially, you arrange. When you get a beautiful thing which uses the words and the shadows of the words—the fact that "silly" once meant "blessed" instead of "silly" as it now does, something like that—you ought to be very distrustful, although at the same time the thing which invades you from the Outside can use it.[158]

Scholars have rarely explored the implications of Spicer's theory of language in terms of reception.[159] His conception of language as "building blocks" or "furniture" extends well beyond the domain of linguistics to include classical intertextuality or the idea of the Western tradition: "The more building blocks you have, the more temptation. The more you know, in a university sense, the more temptation there is to say, oh yes—yes, yes yes—I remember this has to do with the Trojan War, or this has to do with this, this has to do with that, and so forth." The lectures expand on the disparity of inert medium and alien message to account for intertextuality ("this has to do with the Trojan War") and the institutionally mediated cache of "western" intertexts

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[158] All quotations of Spicer's lecture are drawn from Spicer, Jack. *The house that Jack built: the collected lectures of Jack Spicer*. Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

[159] There is a great deal of work that aptly explores Spicer's earlier conception of translation as "correspondence" (circa *After Lorca*) that approaches its nuanced subtleties of "tradition." Approaching the lectures from this perspective grounds these earlier articulations in terms of textual negotiations of cultural capital and historically discrete codes of literacy. See, among others, Chamberlain, Lori. "Ghostwriting the Text: Translation and the Poetics of Jack Spicer." *Contemporary literature* 26.4 (1985): 426-442.

("The more you know, in a university sense").[160] Language is a collected thing: a museum display or an object of economic pursuit and hunger. Acquiring it primarily takes the form of education: through reading and instruction, the accreting store of "building blocks" as lexical and historical range. The poet's medium as language encompasses allegorical dimensions, including: synchronic breadth ("five languages") and diachronic depth ("words and their shadows"; "the fact that "silly" once meant "blessed" instead of "silly" as it now does"); the forms that govern usage, intelligibility, and grammaticality ("spelling p-r-y-d-x-l doesn't make any sense in English at all"); textual linkages and resonances ("I remember this has to do with the Trojan War"; something like what Dufallo would call "staging… receptivity to the classical past"[161] ("The more you know, in a university sense"); "language, words, the things you know"; "the images… you have." In his late lectures and poems, "language" persistently points towards the historical contingency and density of the total cultural system.

According to Spicer's usage, the concept of language resonates more with the senses of "horizon of expectations" than with language per its common usage. Language represents the radical historicity of the horizon of expectations and the double binds of literacy: "The more building blocks you have, the more temptation. The more you know, in a university sense, the more temptation there is to say, oh yes—yes, yes, yes—I remember this has to do with the Trojan War" (9). This system is normative, exerting magnetism towards a normative

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[160] Interesting to note that Spicer cites his counter-example as Duncan, in a comparison of Duncan and Pound's intertextual practices:

> Duncan's at least includes Pound's way of getting to this thing, where Pound simply uses history in the ultimate sense. Not history the way it was in that discussion we've heard, but history in the sense of everything connecting to everything else. When Duncan talks about words, he does it the same way: that you follow back the word and so forth. That you can follow back a word to its source. You can't unfortunately. But even assuming you could, you'd get something which was, well, some nice furniture to work with , but no more than furniture, as history is…. the second book of the thing [fake novel Rimbaud]… is essentially about history. (27)

[161] Dufallo, Basil. "Reception and Receptivity in Catullus 64." *Cultural Critique* 74.1 (2010): 98-113.

arrangement or series of arrangements, and its magnetism grows in proportion to the quantity of elements. Language as "building blocks" is a "temptation" and barrier to poetic practice: "the blocks are always resisting it." The greater the poet's grounding in the contemporary horizon of expectations and its codes of literacy, the greater his propensity towards *re*affirming it will be. The idea that these matrices can be simply side-stepped is a delusion: "you are stuck with language, you are stuck with words, and you are stuck with the things that you know"; "It's impossible for the source of energy to use images [and languages, and knowledge] you don't have" (9) There is no way outside of the horizon of expectations, and no way outside the complex networks fused under the heading of "tradition" or "canon." Spicer situates poetic practice in the context of the historical density of language, in this broader sense.

On the other hand, although this kind of cultural capital is not equivalent with aesthetic negativity, it can *amplify* aesthetic negativity: The normative resistance of language is essential to the strength or "usability" of poetic practice: "the more you know, the more languages you know, the more building blocks the Martians have to play with," and "the more things you have in the room the better if you can handle them." The product or goal of Spicer's aesthetics is a distortion in the building blocks, and the trope of Martian dictation, spooks, ghosts, etc., becomes a way to think about the problem of aesthetic negativity in the context of the dense historicity of the present. How can a poem alter the affirmative nature of the present, or introduce something new into it, when the only basis for a poem is the materials that constitute the horizon's affirmative substance, its texts, literacies, institutional frameworks, and so on? There is no other ground for what is *outside* the horizon of expectation except the horizon of expectation itself.

Situating Spicer's lectures in terms of "faded-blond" offers a specific, formal example of what this kind of self-reflexive poetic negation might look like. One of the most remarkable

formal accomplishments of the poem is the degree to which it closely imitates the formal and affective qualities of its model text, psalm 137, despite the thematic and affective disjoints and contradictions with its source.[162] Spicer's poem, like "Malest," alternates between direct adaptations or quotations of its model text, and lines whose content is foreign to the traditional form, but which in affect maintain the tone of the original. The register and syntactic context of phrase groups and partial groups shift with lightning fast imperceptibility, such that one could almost "read over" the profound disjoint without apprehending it, experiencing it only as a lagged crick in the system. A brief outline of each line's relationship to the original, whether complete invention, direct adaptation, or some combination of the two, reveals the following oscillations between invention and adaptation:

(Invention = I; Adaptation = A)
I
A
A
I
I A
I
I A
A
I A
A
I
A

More than half of the poem's linguistic "body" has no place at all in the formal context of psalm 137 or the history of its reception. The out-of-context, "invented" statements and linguistic registers are naturalized and "tamed" by the formal poetic and allusive matrix of the psalm. In terms of agency, whereas Ginsberg's "Malest" dominates the past by erasing its own non-

[162] Kossak describes the afterlife of "the original lyric form" in Spicer's verse as a "constant re-deferral [that] always promises the continuance of the original lyric form while also always frustrating that expectation" (23). Kossak, Benjamin. *Jack Spicer and the Phenomenology of Meaning*. Diss. Oberlin College, 2009.

relation to it, invisibly usurping its will and desires while maintaining the formal surface of the original, Spicer's poem, on the contrary, performs the dominance of "expression" by the impersonal poetic architecture of traditional form. The poem performs the inability of its "expressive disjoints" (the material that so willfully disjoints itself from the source text) to fundamentally alter the overall affective and tonal effects of the source form. The classical form ultimately dominates and assimilates those disjoints.[163] We might read "Re- / Membering" ("Re- / Membering his body. By the waters of Babylon") as a figure for the poetics of reception in Spicer's lectures and in the poem itself. A "Re- / Membering" is a dismemberment that is a putting back together. The difference between a classical "remembering" and Spicer's residue of classical "Re- / Membering" is in the ways the latter self-reflexive signals the determinative nature of the archive and the impossibility of denying it. This is at the same time a critique of the representation and reception of an ancient past, in the form of the text's own reception of an ancient text.[164] The poem's mute / voiceless / invisible registration of the artificiality of its sincerity and reception is the only element of the poem that one might call unique, that in some way escapes the double binds of its representation. The classical—its image, its hegemonic forms, and its drive for an "authentic" classical past underneath or behind the images—is a crucial trope in which the distance between degrees of illusion might collapse. It is not simply

[163] Snediker, M. D. "Prodigal Son (Midway along the Pathway)." *Criticism* 51.3 (2009): 489-504: "Spicer's anger—as both abstraction and particularity—is directed at form, at voice, at the hypothesis of content. This is to say that Spicer's anger keenly surfaces in the raveled snags of form, voice, content.
[164] Nichols similarly describes the self-reflexive dimension of "the cultural archive" in Spicer: "the poet's voice is continually crowded by the dead voices that haunt the language and hang out in the cultural archive… Spicer's poetry [is] disclosive of what is absent in language as well as… the Spicer poem is a reflexive gesture that points to itself pointing." Nichols, Miriam. *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside*. University Alabama Press, 2011.148

the reversal that reveals the alien kernel at the heart of the present as such, but the residual, briefest glimpse of the founding nature of that very displacement.[165]

For Spicer, to gesture towards the difference between "classicism" and the texts that are its objects, is perhaps the most characteristic ploy of "classicism" itself. This insight appears as an ironic—but unavoidable—poetics of self-critique; an awareness of the illusions of classicism, and of the tragic impossibility of escaping those illusions: The last poem that Spicer composed before his anonymous death in a poverty ward, positions itself as a reactionary critique of Ginsberg and the cultural movements for which he had become a figurehead: "A necessity which is not love but is a name / King of the May. A title not chosen for dancing":

> At least we both know how shitty the world is. You [Ginsberg] wearing a
> beard as a mask to disguise it. I wearing my tired smile. I
> don't see how you do it. One hundred thousand university
> students marching with you. Toward
> A necessity which is not love but is a name.
> King of the May. A title not chosen for dancing. The police
> Civil but obstinate. If they'd attacked
> The kind of love (not sex but love), you gave the one hundred
> thousand students I'd have been very glad. And loved the
> policemen. Why
> Fight the combine of your heart and my heart or anybody's
> heart. People are starving. (Jack Spicer's final poem)

This, Spicer's final word in an ongoing debate, addresses Ginsberg directly and attacks the poetics of public image.[166] Spicer, like Ginsberg, sees classicism as reifying public identity by creating images of "American," "heterosexual," and "universal." Unlike the early Ginsberg,

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[165] At the same time, Spicer's poem undercuts its formal idealization of the love object (and the ideality of its residual critique) by simultaneously presenting itself as a vulgar recounting of particular sex acts: "he gave me a turn. Re- / Membering his body." The pun creates a correspondence between the formal indicators of a lyric gesture of longing for the idealized lover, and at the same time the crassly material "Membering his body." Neither register cancels out the other, but rather suspend the contradiction in taut correspondence.

[166] Fredman describes Spicer's poetics as "a wholly impersonal visionary art, which contrasts strongly with the emotionally vulnerable art of Ginsberg" (99). Fredman, Stephen. *Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art*. Stanford University Press, 2010.

Spicer takes the processes of identitarian reification themselves as the object of his critique, rather than their identitarian content. Although Ginsberg's poetics create intelligible public identities, they do so by co-opting the processes of classicism and hegemony. Ginsberg creates reified images of Buddhist, queer, or bohemian. By presenting these images as the "authentic" substance of classicism, he reproduces the reification and division that demanded a center and a margin in the first place. His poetics signal the artifice involved in creating "outsider" communities according to the logic of the cultural center, and present strategies of identity reification and commodification as resituating the center to make a hegemony of the margins ("You [Ginsberg] wearing a beard / as a mask to disguise it").[167] For Spicer, this position is as disingenuous and dangerous as the alternative, precisely because it "mask[s]" participation in the processes it critiques. "If they'd attacked / The kind of love (not sex but love), you gave the one hundred / thousand students I'd have been very glad. And loved the / policemen" ("Why / Fight to combine of your heart and my heart or anybody's / heart"). Spicer's poetics progressively come to offer themselves as an image of damnation and a self-negating performance of the very qualities they hope to critique. This tense suspension of and inclusion in various strata of subjective logics is the finest conceptual edge, in Spicer's work. It is also his most characteristic turn of thought.

By examining not only the ways in which a critical poetics arises in opposition to, but also how it borrows from and shares similarities with "hegemonic classicism," Chapter Two participates in a growing body of scholarship that deepens our understanding of the New

[167] Vanderborg describes Spicer's divisive social inclusions and exclusions as a means of criticizing the same: "Spicer's divided books of poetry and paratexts reaffirm his need to articulate provisional borders between insiders and outsiders… *kreis* member and orphic speaker for a wider canon… that he can transgress in order to expose the limitations of either side's communal histories" (61). Vanderborg, Susan. *Paratextual Communities: American Avant-Garde Poetry Since 1950*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2001.

American Poetry by juxtaposing its impulse towards critique with its "reproduce[tion of] the very social forms [it] criticize[s]" (Mortenson).[168] This critical development has ranged widely, recontextualizing the Beat Generation's discourse of "spontaneity and temporality in terms of particular historical and cultural mediations" (Mortenson); the San Francisco Renaissance's "new, [homosexual] male subject" in terms of "a group ethos of male solidarity and sodality that often betrayed homophobic qualities" (Davidson 30); and the Black Mountain School's "production of new art forms and practice," in terms of "largely male forums… [and] the structure of homosocial relations, genitalized or not" (29). The marriage of classical reception and avant-garde studies allows us to resituate abstract negotiations of gender, sexuality, temporality, public identity, and intelligibility in terms of discrete textual mediations. Further, it contextualizes the dialectic of cultural critique and innovation in terms of the dance between a pre-existing historical, cultural, and literary context and the horizon that strains towards "the new." Chapter Two arrives at a uniquely detailed snapshot of the mechanisms of cultural development and identity construction as they operate at a particular literary and historical moment and of the role that poetics and the mediation of key texts has played in broader processes of historical change.

[168] "The Beats arrive in each new present with a burden of history (both individual and social) that complicates the ways in which they attempt to utilize the present" (Mortenson 1) – classical reception grounds this complex interplay of temporal mediation and the weight of the past in a particular and concrete series of specific textual mediations. "In challenging the conformist paradigms of the time, the Beats often reproduced many of the social assumptions at work in the very culture they critiqued." (2) "an account of Beat practices that reveal how gender and race affect Beat politics of the moment" (2) Mortenson, Erik Ronald. *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2010.

Chapter 3:

C=L=A=S=S=I=C=I=S=M=S and Beyond

> Art works are not just monuments of the past but investments in the present, investments we squander with our penurious insistence on taking such works as cultural capital rather than as capital expenditure. For the most part, our programs of Great Books amount to little more than lip service to an idea of Culture that is encapsulated into tokens and affixed to curricular charm bracelets to be taken out at parties for display—but never employed in the workings of our present culture.
>
> Charles Bernstein, "A Blow is like an Instrument"[169]

Chapter Three continues to explore the evolution of avant-garde reception, turning to the poetics of perhaps the most well known Language writers,[170] Charles Bernstein and Susan

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[169] Bernstein, Charles. "A Blow Is like an Instrument." *Daedalus* 126.4 (1997): 177-200.

[170] There is some controversy around the critical standard for referring to the movement: "It has been variously labeled 'Language poetry', 'Language writing' 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing' (after the magazine that ran from 1978 to 1981) and 'Language-centered writing'" (Arnold, David. *Poetry and language writing: objective and surreal*. Vol. 2. Liverpool University Press, 2007). Several anthologies collect various representations of the movement's characteristic texts and writers, of which I have most drawn on Silliman, Ronald, ed. *In the American Tree: Language, Realism, Poetry*. National Poetry Foundation, 2002. See also Messerli, Douglas. *From the other side of the century: a new American poetry, 1960-1990*. Vol. 1. Sun & Moon Pr, 1994 (There is also an earlier anthology by the same editor: Messerli, Douglas, ed. *" Language" poetries: an anthology*. New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1987), and Beach, Christopher. *Artifice & indeterminacy: an anthology of new poetics*. University Alabama Press, 1998. Of equal if not greater importance as key resources in the availability of Language and other experimental poetics are web archives at the Electronic Poetry Center (*Electronic Poetry Center*. Ed. Charles Bernstein, Lori Emerson, Kenneth Goldsmith, Jack Krick, Donato Mancini, and Steve McLaughlin. 2012. Poetics Program/Dept. of Media Study, SUNY Buffalo. 1 June. 20012 <http:// http://epc.buffalo.edu/>) and PennSound (*PennSound.* Ed. Charles Bernstein, Al Filreis, and Michael S. Hennessey. 2012. Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing, University of Pennsylvania. 11 Dec. 2012 <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>)—in which the establishment and success of each Bernstein himself has been instrumental—which offer a wealth of textual, audio, video, and visual materials. Also

Howe. Language writing developed in the wake of the New American Poetry, both carrying on and criticizing its legacies.[171] Shaped by the Free Speech Movement and the Vietnam War era, Language writing tended—even more so than the New Americans—towards the overt politicization of poetics. In defiance of the workshop poem's neat symmetries ("The eye is not split open in such a work"),[172] Language writing took the New American emphasis on process and sprawling poetic form to new heights. At the same time, the movement broke sharply with the New American "sanctification of the natural" and reliance on the tropes of expression and sincerity, instead emphasizing the constructedness and artifice of form. As Bernstein writes, "there is no natural mode." [173] Long after Louis Zukofsky's vivisection of Askforaclassic Inc., the artifice of a universal American classical tradition continued to work its way through American poetics, often with crucial effect.[174] Ideas of tradition and canon had grown even more

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of interest is the digital facsimile archive of early, small-press editions of a number of language-oriented experimental writing collected at *ECLIPSE* (*ECLIPSE*. Ed. Craig Dworkin and Danny Snelson. 2013. Department of English, University of Utah. 27 May 2013 <http://eclipsearchive.org>.

[171] Though this is a broadly accepted position, there are many characterizations of the particular terms of relationship and breakage from the New American Poetry:

> Silliman considers Language poetry to be a continuation (albeit incorporating a critique) of the earlier movements. Watten has emphasized the discontinuity between the New American poets, whose writing, he argues, privileged self-expression, and the Language poets, who see the poem as a construction in and of language itself. In contrast, Bernstein has emphasized the expressive possibilities of working with constructed, and even found, language.

See Wallace, Mark. "Definitions in Process, Definitions as Process / Uneasy Collaborations: Language and the Postlanguage Poetries." Flashpoint Magazine. 15 June 2005 <http://www.flashpointmag.com/postlang.htm>. Kaplan offers a narrative of the germinal context of Language writing in Harris, Kaplan Page. "New Narrative and the Making of Language Poetry." *American Literature* 81.4 (2009): 805-832.

[172] Bernstein, Charles. "Stray Straws and Straw Men." *Andrews and Bernstein* 39 (1987): 45. The volume this essay appears in is an important collection of theoretical essays and poetics by Language writers, drawn from the eponymous journal. See Andrews, Bruce, and Charles Bernstein, eds. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*: *Poetics of the New*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

[173] Bernstein, "Stray Straws."

[174] Timothy Woods paints an interesting picture of Zukofsky's influence on Language writing in Woods, Timothy. *The Poetics of the Limit*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. However, I do not intend to suggest the influence of Zukofsky as an iron-clad genealogy. Similar influences are often traced to Stein, Spicer, and others, as in *Paratextual Communities:*

> The dialogue between the poet and a ghostly predecessor in Jack Spicer's translations and homages continues in the writing of a second generation of post-World War II avant-gardists in

starkly polarized than was true just a poetic generation prior. “Ideas are dead,” writes Charles Bernstein in “A Blow is Like an Instrument,” “except when in use. And for use you don’t need a preset list of ideas or Great Works. Almost any will do if enactment, not prescription, is the aim.” Likewise, Susan Howe is critical about the gender politics of a classical canon that draws on great works from the past to preset or “prescribe” the ideas, institutions, and works of the present. “I am suspicious,” she writes, “of the idea of a canon in the first place because to enter this canon a violation has usually been done to your work… If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself.”[175] Vis-à-vis Ginsberg, we have moved from “the objects of reference have multiplied” to “there *are* no objects of reference”: “There are no core subjects, no core texts in the humanities” (“A Blow”).

The growing awareness of the historical contingency of the classical was simultaneously the challenge of its density, the ways in which “traditional European poetic genres and forms tend to naively reflect western values… poetry as conditioned by the ideological limitations and power of the written word in western culture” (Wallace 2005). This critique of a shared classical tradition is a critical moment, a tipping point that is also reflected in various kinds of language-centered writing from the 70’s and 80’s. Within the shared cultural context of the “canon wars,” Bernstein and Howe outline two distinct vectors of poetic response to the basic question: Does the “classical” refer to something real, but inaccessible (like Kantian things in themselves), or to a solipsistic delusion? Does the classical name something that is real? Howe’s mode responds

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> the palimpsest form. The postmodern palimpsest is a visual collage in which excerpts of a paratextual source are juxtaposed on the same page space with the poet’s responses to that source. (62)

See Vanderborg, Susan. *Paratextual Communities: American Avant-Garde Poetry Since 1950*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2001. And Marjorie Perloff was among the first to articulate the extended philosophical influence of Wittgenstein on early Language writing, in Perloff, Marjorie. *Wittgenstein's ladder: Poetic language and the strangeness of the ordinary*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.

[175] Howe, Susan. "Talisman Interview, with Edward Foster." *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (1993): 155-181.

with a belated "yes," while Bernstein responds "absolutely not!" In keeping with the Kantian metaphor, I call these related but divergent responses to a shared relation to the historical archive "A Critique of Pure Skepticism" and "A Critique of Pure Citation," respectively: Susan Howe's Benjamin to Charles Bernstein's Adorno.[176] This context forms the comparative stage for exploring Bernstein's poetics of citation and Howe's poetics of "luminous fragments" as alternate vectors of postmodernist reception.

Howe's work is haunted by the ghosts of the past, concerned with material history and the literal material context in which we encounter it: the archive, the stacks, the forgotten memento, the handwritten scrawl:

> If I were to read aloud a passage from a poem of your choice, to an audience of judges in sympathy with surrounding library nature, and they were to experience its lexical inscape as an offshoot of Anglo-American modernism in typographical format, it might be possible to release our great great grandparents, beginning at the greatest distance from a common mouth, eternally belated, some coming home through dark ages, others nearer to early modern, multitudes of them meeting first to constitute certain main branches of etymologies, so all along there are new sources, some running directly contrary to others, and yet all meet at last, clothed in robes of glory, offering maps of languages, some with shining tones.
>
> *from seaweed said nor repossess rest*
> *scape esaid*
>
> True wildness is like true gold; it will bear the trial of Dewey Decimal. (*Souls of the Labadie Tract*, 18-19)

The passage above figures the experience of wandering through the library stacks at Yale in terms of Howe's deep investment in the historical past and her idiosyncratic poetics. For Howe, the present of taxonomical modernity ("the trial of Dewey Decimal"), the face of which is the library, becomes synonymous with an experience of separation and alienation from the past. Modernity names the accrued separation from the historical past, both in terms of the archive as a haunted site and the archive as the site of a historical trauma. The library is an indeterminate

[176] The titles pun on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgment*.

geography, whose terrain shifts imperceptibly from ordered, mapped, and known "lexical inscape[s]," and "maps of languages," to the terra incognita of "true wildness" and "library nature."[177] At the same time, the library is paradoxically both the inscription of a fall from the past into the taxonomical codes of the decimal system—the ineradicable *mark* or *sign* of alienation from the historical other ("the trial of Dewey Decimal")—and the geography of its possible resurrection ("it might be possible to release our great great grandparents"). It is the site where one becomes most crucially aware of one's homelessness and exile from history, and the only place in which a reunion might take place ("and yet all meet at last, clothed in robes of glory"). Howe's poetics linger in the space of the fragment: ruined papyrus shards—copied and recopied before being found in the desert; tattered signposts that might point the way to a once complete original.

In the chapter's first section, I pay special attention to Howe's *Pythagorean Silence*—an early, but beautifully complex, work.[178] Doing so allows me to place Howe's poetry and its historical engagements in a dialogue and counter-dialogue with modernist practices of intertextuality and citation, as well as underscoring the role of "the classical" in creating a poetics of fragmentary plenitude. Citations, shards, fragments—in Howe's *Pythagorean Silence,* these textual elements become the material basis for a magic spell: The classicist summons up the demon of plenitude that then possesses the tattered margins, the blank spaces and fissures left behind by history. For Howe, the material archive of history does not create the illusion of an ideal but remote whole—the material fragment does not function as a cipher through which we

[177] Schultz, in *The Poetics of Impasse*, describes Howe's poetics vis-à-vis "tradition" and its use of archival materials in comparison with Bernstein's poetic "mis-seaming" (see my analysis of "Dysraphism," below": "[Howe] revises tradition through her self-proclaimed role as editor/interpreter of a series of prior texts… Howe begins from a place of mis-seaming and reconstructs (or sews together) traditional texts" (142). See Schultz, Susan M. *A poetics of impasse in modern and contemporary American poetry*. University Alabama Press, 2005.
[178] Howe, Susan. *Pythagorean silence*. Montemora Foundation, 1982.

glimpse the ideality of a lost past. *Pythagorean Silence* enacts an "immanent idealism" of the fragment or shard itself. Like Zukofsky, Howe's investment in a classical past and in the historical other more generally centers on the obdurate shards of history that resist assimilation. Howe is an archivist of the invisible multiplicity of historical voices that speak / sing / cry from the shattered spaces of history. It is in these shattered spaces that the work of historical assimilation—the assimilation of the infinite difference of historical actuality into a coherent and singular narrative of a culture's history—is incomplete. The idea of "the classical" could only exist as a *via negativa* in the *missing* words of history.

Bernstein, on the other hand—more than any other poet in this dissertation, and perhaps of his generation—becomes a delicate yet savage practitioner of ironic critique.[179] Take, for example, Bernstein's use of the footnote in the poem, "Dysraphism":

> Did a wind come just as you got up or were
> you protecting me from it? I felt the abridgement
> of imperatives, the wave of detours, the sabre-
> rattling of inversion. *All lit up and no*
> *place to go*. Blinded by avenue and filled with
> adjacency. Arch or arched at…
> No where to go but pianissimo…
>
> _____
>
> "Dysraphism" is a word used by specialists in congenital disease to mean a dysfunctional fusion of embryonic parts—a birth defect…. *Raph* literally means "seam", so dysraphism is mis-seaming—a prosodic device! But it has the punch of being the same root as rhapsody (*rhaph*)—or in Skeat's—"one who strings (lit. stitches) songs together. a reciter of poetry… (37)[180]

Perhaps the most well known poem from Bernstein's most well known volume, *The Sophist*, "Dysraphism" relies on disjunctive leaps of syntax, simultaneously jarring and banal

[179] I am often recalled to Kierkegaard's definition of Socratic irony as "infinite absolute negativity" when I read Bernstein. See "The Irony of Socrates," in Kierkegaard, Søren. *The concept of irony: with constant reference to Socrates*. Collins, 1966.
[180] Bernstein, Charles. *The sophist*. Sun & Moon Press, 1987.

juxtapositions of disparate parts of speech, and resistance to narrative. The "museumification" of the footnote immediately contextualizes the figure of the radical poet (whose position is defined in relation to the "outside") in a position of critical authority on the institutional "inside" that it purportedly disavows. Bernstein's footnote is a parody of the high modernist allusiveness—the allusiveness that requires Eliot to include footnotes to the *Wasteland*. Bernstein's use of allusion is consistently parodic. Allusions in Bernstein's poems are "wave[s] of detours"—even as the line performatively alludes to Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" ("the sabre- / rattling of inversion. *All lit up and no* / *place to go*") communicated by the pun on the light in "Light Brigade" in "*All lit up*." The avenues of allusion fill the poem with intoxicating "adjacencies" while paradoxically precluding movement.

The mis-seaming of the poem's construction has no power to stem the flow of cultural capital, and can only diffuse or redirect its force: "Or is a pretend wish / that hits the springs to sing with sanguine / bulk." The "or" that would lead outside the system—the avenue that fills with adjacency—is "a pretend wish." This same "or" of the avant-garde position that would tear down the museum walls and unravel lyric voice can only "hit the springs to sing with sanguine / bulk." Even in its movement of mis-seaming, the poem reproduces voice as song, and the "dysraphist" as "one who strings… songs together," albeit songs "with sanguine / bulk." The "or" of the avant-garde remains "a pretend wish": to banish the self, to parody the highbrow allusiveness of modernism into nonexistence, to democratize language and meaning making. The poet is nonetheless ensconced in the institutional walls of intertextuality and learning. This is a poetic voice that, even as it celebrates the movement towards ruin and extinction that mis-seaming and hyper-parodic allusiveness might allow, finds it can only diffuse itself to a minimal degree of presence. The lyric voice has "no where to go but pianissimo." Bernstein's signature is

the sound that participates in its production as voice, but that through self-parody proceeds to pianissimo.[181] A voice in pianissimo is a voice that hears—if ever so faintly—its own self-production as "expression," that cannot banish this production but can only ironically mark it. This is not, however, a nostalgic poem about the failure of finding an outside to the system. The parodic registration of this self-production is the very force turns the volume down, so that, in a self-cancelling gesture, voice is simultaneously marked and reduced to a whisper. Ultimately, Bernstein is an eminently playful, mischievous poet, aware of his own ineradicable self-presence, taking pleasure in its awareness of its own self-production. If one's avenues filled with adjacencies lead only to "proclivities for puffed- / up benchmarks," and one's gesture towards the outside leads only to tenure at the University of Pennsylvania, and one's understanding of cultural capital as a sickness cannot cure it, one can at least enjoy one's symptoms.[182]

Institutional classicism appears, in Bernstein's work, as a host of magical obfuscations that secure their position as guarantors of coherent objects of knowledge by creating those objects *ex nihilo*. Bernstein's poetics both reproduce and empty out the movement of the classical, arriving at a classicism in pianissimo. Taking the figure of poetic sophistry as a touchstone, I range over a chronology of moments in Bernstein's oeuvre, from 1987's *The Sophist* to the 1996 electronic text, "Littoral," and 2006's *Girly Man*, exploring the extension of "poetic surfacing" into various aspects of the classical.[183] *The Sophist* itself is laced with an impressive range of classical allusions and citations—particularly to more and less obscure classical philosophers (Anaximander, Plato, a host of Neo-Platonists, Aristotle, and so on). By

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[181] The term is Marjorie Perloff's, developed in Perloff, Marjorie. "Language poetry and the lyric subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo." *Critical Inquiry* 25.3 (1999): 405-434.
[182] The great hope of Lacanian psychoanalysis. See Žižek, Slavoj. *Enjoy your symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*. Routledge, 2012.
[183] Bernstein, Charles. "Littoral." *Electronic Poetry Center*. Ed. Jack Krick. 2012. 28 Oct. 2012. <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/visual/littoralht.html>; and *Girly man*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.

demonstrating how *The Sophist* refigures linguistic reference and plenitude as questions of citation, ever revising and short-circuiting the figure of Platonic thought, I argue that Bernstein transforms the plenitude of an ideal classical past from an alienated object of historical longing into a function of pure allusiveness. As the museum walls create the sanctity of the work of art, so too, for Bernstein, does the citation create the ideality of the classical.[184] Whereas Zukofsky engages with the idea of the classical as a site of cultural, identitarian, and subjective ideals—the universal human subject—Bernstein engages with the classical as a site of linguistic plenitude and its loss or dissolution into pure semblance. In this schema, poetry is mere wordplay: a self-enclosed system that forever bounces along the boundaries of "the real." For Bernstein, this is not a melancholy occasion of loss, but rather opens up a celebratory space of linguistic play.

A Critique of Pure Skepticism: Susan Howe's Luminous Shards

> I think that when you write a poem you use sounds and words outside time. You use timeless articulations. I mean the ineluctable mystery of language is something… it's just… it's like earth from the astronauts' view—that little blue film, a line floating around space sheltering all of us.
>
> Susan Howe, "Talisman Interview"

Compared with other poets in this dissertation, Howe's poetic ethos is most similar to the mournful linguistic fragments and disjoints of history in Melnick's *Eclogs,* and resonates with its valence of postmodernist plurivocality. Yet I will argue that, in strange ways and despite incredible differences in poetic approach, Howe shares more similarities in terms of the possibilities and potentials of the work of poetry with Ginsberg. If the undeath of tradition is a

[184] See Hein, Hilde. "Institutional blessing: the museum as canon-maker." *Artifacts, Representations and Social Practice*. Springer Netherlands, 1994. 1-19.

literary historical pivot point, tipping over into the plurivocal response of the postmodernist avant-garde, then Ginsberg and Howe descend along similar trajectories. Their poetics characterize a not inconsequential "voice" of postmodernist reception, a linguistic supernaturalism that remains deeply aware of the difficulties proposed by language, history, and modernity. Whereas for other Language poets, such as Charles Bernstein, postmodernist plurivocality takes the form of many, autonomous language games or spheres of discourse cycling incommensurably side by side, in some way never having been fully distinguished in the first place—existing only as various iterations in the material texture of language rather than as real modifications in its basic structures and procedures—Ginsberg and Howe each turn to forms of linguistic "materialist supernaturalism" in response to the historical density of tradition, and maintain a richly affective poetics that resonates more with the mournful shards of Melnick's *Eclogs* than the ironic comedy of *Men in Aïda*.[185]

The title of Howe's *Pythagorean Silence* immediately situates its reader in the context of a classical past (or present). The pre-Socratic philosopher Pythagoras of Samos thrived in the late 6th century BC, credited as the first Greek to call himself "philosopher."[186] A Pythagorean silence, then, is in one sense the silence of historical origins, in this instance the origins of philosophical thought in the west: the silence that muffles access to a time before the beginning of recorded history. A Pythagorean silence, too, is a silence in this second sense, that we know little with confidence about his life or teachings because none of his written works remains. Much of the little that we do know comes to us vicariously through its reception in the Platonist

[185] My sense of Howe's materialist supernaturalism has been influenced both by Hungerford's formulation of Ginsberg's "postmodern supernaturalism," (Hungerford 2005) and M. H. Abrams' development of Romanticism's "natural supernaturalism" in the classic of literary criticism by the same name. See Abrams, Meyer Howard. *Natural supernaturalism: Tradition and revolution in romantic literature*. Vol. 609. WW Norton & Company, 1973.

[186] For a fuller account, see Philip, James A. *Pythagoras and early Pythagoreanism*. Vol. 7. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966.

and Neo-Platonist traditions on which his thought came to be so highly influential. A Pythagorean silence is the silence of texts submitted to the devouring force of a history that leaves only fragments, anecdotes, and fables: traces without presence.[187] Both of these dimensions—the silence of origins, and the archive of silence that trails in the wake of history—come to play in *Pythagorean Silence*. We might supplement this reading with Howe's statements from an interview appended to *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*:

> It seems to me that as writers they were trying to understand the writers or people…. not to explain the work, not to translate it, but to meet the work with writing—you know, to meet in time, not just from place to place but from writer to writer, mind to mind, friend to friend, from words to words. That's what I wanted to do in *My Emily Dickinson*. I wanted to do that. Not just to write a tribute but to meet her in the tribute. And that's a kind of fusion…
> EF: So these moments of fusion are historical. But does history ever exist outside some intellectual fusion or agreement?
> SH: I think so… If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself.
> EF: Then you do feel history is an actuality?
> SH: Yes.
> EF: Against which the writer is working?
> SH: In and against… (158-59)
> EF: So the things we know aren't simply things we made up.
> SH: Well, whatever they are, they're a kind of order. They're a kind of beauty, they're blue, they're light. Words are candles lighting the dark. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God." I think that there has to be *some* order if only order in disorder. And words and sounds are… they reach up out there. A little flicker in silence… a signal.

[187] Susan Howe herself describes her conception of poetry in terms of what can only be called number mysticism:

> I wouldn't say so. I would say space-time. It's (time) the thing that isn't chaos… Algebraic formulas are also articulations of sound forms in time. Thom says mathematics is a universal language; numbers have sounds; So there are these forms in space and time and in apparent chaos—formulas, patterns… In algebra a singularity is the point where plus becomes minus… The singularity… is the point where there is a sudden change to something completely else. It's a chaotic point. It's the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else. Predation and capture are terms he uses constantly. I thought this was both a metaphor for Europeans arriving on this continent, where a catastrophic change then had to happen—a new sense of things on the part of the original inhabitants and the emigrants, and to the land as well. And it seemed to be a way of describing these poems of mine. They are singular works on pages, and grouped together, they fracture language; they are charged. "Singularity" was a word dear to the Puritans for other reasons. ("Taliman Interview," 173)

So that would be what for Spicer… but what do I know? What do any of us know? (163)

Language, in its state as fragmentary—a stutter that hiccups in the place of poetry—is the historical shard that, apart from its referential value, its *mimetic* faculties, reaches up and outwards towards a past from which it was broken off. In more descriptive terms, words are luminous shards: Broken off from unity with a historical past, they exist as fragments in the flux of time. Necessarily marked by their fall, they nonetheless bear the shape and image of the unity from which they spring, and like "a little flicker in silence… a signal" touch the outer boundary that is home.

A historical poet, Howe's poems "include history"[188] both in the sense that they draw extensively on archival materials, and in the sense that they often narrate discrete textual histories, recording movements in the historical stages of stylistic and poetic development. Thus, *Pythagorean Silence*'s first section is the first movement in a historical narrative of the volume's history—what it went through, how it arrived at where it ends. Therefore, we might first approach the volume through an orientation to its general structure and the movement of its development as a whole, before moving onto detailed readings of its individual sections. Far more so than the distinct poetics of each of the poem's three sections, the volume's prefatory poem stretches across this fuller movement, foreshadowing the eventual arc of the volume's poetic history:

> we that were wood
> when that a wide wood was
>
> In a physical Universe playing with

[188] The ideal of a "poem including history" is Pound's. Though the above formulation references the idea only incidentally, it has a powerful afterlife and influence on later generations of poets, and at least to some degree Pound's figure of a "poem including history" comes to play as an explicit interlocutor for each of the poets in the dissertation. See Pound, Ezra, and Michael Dirda. *ABC of Reading*. Vol. 1186. New Directions, 2010.

words

Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf

Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver

The poem equates the poet with an *enfant matérialiste*: “In a physical Universe playing with / words.” The material word is the poet’s plaything. A studied ambiguity makes it possible to read the sentence as either a correction of the nostalgia of the first two lines “we that were wood / when that a wide wood was,” or an apposite descriptor: the longing for a pre-fallen, pre-traumatic state of the first two lines encounters the trauma of the second two, where the words written on the text of history (“we that were woods”) no longer signal the speech of trees, but an expression of modern print technologies (“in a physical universe”). This first movement signals both a progression in a historical sequence (once, we were unashamed, organic; now we are mere material) and a retrospective description of the naivety of the first two lines (we thought we were wood, now we realize we are only “in a physical Universe playing with / words”). In any event, the now of the final two lines, having begun in the wood, and having passed through the traumatic wilderness of materialism, stakes the poem on the possibility of a transformation: “Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf / Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver.” The “be” of these lines might be a statement of fact: once we were a wood, now we are in a physical universe; in the midst of that physical universe I am mere inert material—bark, leaf, limbs, hair. But the “be” of the final two lines might also be a prayer. They recall a classical invocation of the Muses, a marshalling of poetic energies for the purpose of a super-human (humanly impossible on the basis of a “physical universe” in which the poet is in the position of “playing with / words”) metamorphosis.

In the midst of this physical universe, in which the conditions of idealism and of the poem as such are impossible, the invocation ("my bow my lyre my quiver") may be the site of a transformation, in which the impossibility of the historical past becomes an embodied reality in the material present. The work of this volume of poetry is in finding the balance of tension in this place of studied ambiguity. In the midst of poetic materialism—mere "playing with / words"—the poem will effect a transformation that, because of the very real force of history, cannot be a return. Within the midst of the trauma and horror of the impossibility which a "physical Universe" makes of the wood: "Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver." The invocation asks that the act of poetic production be a bride, in which the impossibility of an idealist past and the reality of a material present are joined. The shape of this conjoinment, however, will not emerge until the poem's final section, in which the poem grapples formally with atomistic fragmentariness. The poem as such does not have the power to exist amidst historical atomism ("in a physical Universe playing with / words") until its final section.

The poetic development of the prefatory poem serves as a rough map for the development of the volume's individual sections. As in the prefatory poem, the volume's first movement is an encounter with the traumatic contingency of the classical. The poem's first section, "Pearl Harbor," takes place in the aftermath of a traumatic encounter with time and history. In this first movement, the temporality of modernity appears as fractured and fallen from a classical past and unity with a historical other. The second section, eponymously titled "Pythagorean Silence," stands in dialectical and antithetical opposition to the first. The first section is the history of the second, which performs one possible mode of poetic response to the trauma of section one's historical displacement. Despite the intense confrontation with history, time, and matter, it is not until the passage through the second section's textual idealism that the poem is able to

"embrac[e] something / some history of Materialism" and arrive at the third section's archival poetics of fragment. "Pearl Harbor," the volume's first section, lingers in the space of historical contingency, developing its contours and poetic texture. The section performs an encounter with the historical contingency of modernity, figured in part as the traumatic non-equivalence of the ideas and texts of canon, classical, and tradition with historical reality. The reader of Howe's poem finds himself in the aftermath of a trauma. The poetic language of the text springs from the attempt to work through this trauma of unclear dimensions. On the one hand, it is the trauma of a locatable historical event. The first section, titled, "Pearl Harbor," has a specific date—12.7.41—and location—Buffalo, the poet's lifelong home. A nameless "HE" and "SHE" meet in late afternoon, in the snow.[189] The trauma is the trauma of nuclear terror that follows on the wake of the Pearl Harbor bombings—a specifically modern trauma which is the Janus-face of Enlightenment narratives of progress. Human reason blossoms as a monstrous bloom, an atom bloom.[190]

Immediately, however, the poem fractures the referents of this precise location in history, much as trauma fractures the poem's reality, and we move from the trauma of a locatable time and place to one of mythical proportions. She whispers, "Herod had all the little children murdered!" The trauma is also that of the Word becoming flesh, of the Idea encountering its own radical insufficiency in matter: the child of promise, the coming Messiah snuffed out by the contingencies of history, whose name is Herod; spirit encounters matter and the token of the event is murdered children. In the scenario of "Pearl Harbor," however, the "almost" of the Biblical narrative becomes an actuality. The promise of textual embodiment does not come to

[189] The reader must forgive the absence of page numbers in my citations of Pythagorean Silence—they do not exist in the original.

[190] My thoughts here (and Howe's, I imagine) are in conversation with Lyotard's articulation of postmodernism as characterized by the collapse of Enlightenment narratives of progress. See Lyotard, Jean Francois. *The post-modern condition: A report on knowledge*. Vol. 10. U of Minnesota Press, 1984

fruition; spirit stays locked in a false beyond; Herod murders not only the children, but also *the* child. The trope of the Logos is, too, a figure for the retroactive historical necessity of classicism's tradition. The assimilative drive of canon transforms contingent histories, events, ideas, and texts into the "presence" of its hermeneutical density, "the little children" as the contingent historical event that grounds the Biblical narrative into the retroactive destiny of the Logos (its density/destiny) or a handful of ancient Semitic texts into the legacy of "Latin Christendom." In this scenario, the poem cannot "call presence": "Leaning in enclitic ne / I cannot / call presence and in its / absence / fold in one hand / *what* / a few / fragments / holds us to / *what.*" All that materializes of the tradition's promise of hermeneutical plenitude are "a few / fragments" that tie the confusion of the fingers to two interrogative pronouns whose referents remain undefined. The murder of the embodied Idea leaves fragments that tie the bare confusion of the hand to the fragility of words, "what" to "what." The poem likewise generalizes this trauma of mythical proportions to include another Biblical intertext: "In Rama / Rachel weeping for her children // refuses / to be comforted / because they *are* not."

In the trauma's aftermath, various modes of speech and writing emerge as direct results of catastrophe and the attempt to make sense of it, all of which comment upon the poem's own mode of production: The refiguration of the Biblical Rachel enacts one characteristic mode of speech that springs from the trauma of history: whispered speech, the speech of mourning and fear. In this context, the whisper is the speech of a voice whose own vocalization cracks with the weight of unbearable words. But the whisper of the subject of trauma is at the same time song ("they stand on the edge of a hole singing") and an insistent act of mourning ("In Rama / Rachel weeping for her children // refuses / to be comforted"). Specifically, the poem that emerges at the site of trauma and in the first section is non-mimetic and non-referential:

R

(her cry

silences

whole

vocabularies

of *names*

for

things

(and TALKATIVE
says we are all in Hell.)

Once again, the underworld ("we are all in Hell") becomes a trope for the double binds of classicism, the inability to name history's "little three-headed dogs" without recourse to the language of "Cerberus." The poem's whisper emerges at the moment when song becomes impossible; said whisper of impossible song is precisely the song ("they stand on the edge of a hole singing") of mourning that emerges at the site of historical trauma. The final lines of the first section ask, "Body and Soul / will we ever leave childhood together," recalling Kant's narrative of the modern social order as a progressive maturation of the human race and the incremental spread of reason in "What is Enlightenment."[191] This narrative can ground neither poetics nor the humanistic tradition in the context of the nuclear horror that is the Janus face of modernity in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. Section one finds that it cannot "write poetry after

[191] I am thinking in particular of "Answering the Question, What is Enlightenment?" the title of which Lyotard's "Answering the Question, What is Postmodernism?" is a pun. See Lyotard, Jean-François, and A. Demand. "1. Answering the Question, What Is Postmodernism?." *Postmodernism: A reader* (1993): 38; and Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?." *from Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology. Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford*(1996): 51-57.

Auschwitz."[192]

A brief look at the antitheses of the first and second section's temporalities and geographies will help delineate each section's place in the larger functioning of the poem as a whole. Whereas the first section is the ineluctable forward movement of time, the second section is a desperate retreat from time. The second section retreats from the contingency of tradition into the timeless zone of Pythagorean stillness, a figure for both the idealism of the philosophical tradition and the ideality of a "timeless" classical inheritance. Although this section has removed itself from the trauma of history, and in some sense confronted the historical density of modernity, its "silence" will ultimately be insufficient to meet the demands of the opening invocation and prayer. In place of the persistent whisper of mourning that is the figure of poetic speech in the first section, the figure of poetic speech in the second is a merely representational power whose force is no greater than the shadowy force of time or matter in that framework. Within this timeless, poetic idealism, poetics finds itself strangely impotent, locked within the contemporary horizon of expectation, able only to mime and recycle what that horizon already affirms. The complete retreat from matter into the Ideal hamstrings the poem and renders it impotent. The section's version of classical ideality is, in the end, a "shadow emperor."

This section contains specific references to the ideas and doctrines of Plato's *Laws, Republic, Phaedrus, Phaedo,* and *Symposium;* Parmenides' doctrine of the One; Pythagoras; the pre-Socratic Thales; Aristotle's *De Anima;* the *Odyssey*; Sappho, and so on. This is just a cursory list, but it is enough to satisfy that Howe's engagement with the classical tradition and with ancient philosophy is hardly shallow. It is also—not accidentally—the only numbered section in the poem. Since the book itself is without page numbers, the regularly ordered, numbered

[192] The much quoted and misquoted phrase is Adorno's. See Adorno, Theodor. "After Auschwitz." *Negative dialectics* (1973): 361-65.

sequence of the section two is all the more significant. It is also, in terms of lineation and visual layout of poems on the page, the least interesting section of the poem. The lines tend to be left aligned, with few or no unexpected ruptures of lineation or jarring gaps as the eye traces along the text:

> He plodded away through drifts of i
> ce
> away into inapprehensible Peace
> A portable altar strapped on his back
> pure and severe
> A portable altar strapped on his back
> pure and severe
> In the forests of Germany he will feed
> on aromatic grass and browse in leaves

The temporality and geography of section two stand in direct opposition to the temporality and geography of section one. Here, time now "Marches // and maneuvers / Incessantly advancing towards the aim of // standing still." The geography is no longer a terra incognita, but a place in which "all the shores marked // Outside the window fictions are / crumbling." The muffling snow of section one, the force of which was an anesthetic for the wound of history, no longer offers the hope of numbness, but its actuality: "Snow at night and still snowing / not a house stirring // Save for air nothing there." Not only do time and motion grind to a halt, but "Sound dies away // caught up in clouds to meet air / A fictive sphere." Section two is a place without sound, motion, and time.

Poem "2" illustrates the way that the temporality of section two, although it cancels out

the historical contingency and density of modernity, similarly cancels out the cry of mourning that was the place of poetic speech in section one, and relegates the poem as such to a merely mimetic, shadow-like representation:

2.

cataclysmic Pythagoras Things
not as they are

for they are not but as they seem
(as mirror

in mirror to be)

Sow bare grain it may chance
of wheet

Wheel of mutable time Fortune fabled
to turn

(known circumference attached to a frame)
Thoughts are born

posthumously

Dark as theology's secret book
the unsphered stars

are touchstones at a gallop Dark
irrevocably dark

(written on stray sheet) years ago
and the chained beast

stamping
But I am wandering off into irrational

magnitudes

Earth has turned away from the sun
and it is night

(Seventy lines about fields in the dark)

The march of history ("Wheel of mutable time Fortune") which in section one was so horrific, is now only "fabled / to turn." Measuring and immobilizing "Fortune" ("known circumference attached to a frame") defangs it by transforming it into an object of knowledge. There is, however, at times a forced tension to the poem's retreat into the Ideal—the poem, from a meditation on the known dimensions of a taxonomized circumference, wanders (and is drawn to) "the unsphered stars" which are "Dark as theology's secret book." This stint into the "unsphered stars" produces writing: "(written on a stray sheet) years ago." Quickly, the poem catches and corrects its own error ("But I am wandering off into irrational // magnitudes"), and the product of a return to "known circumference attached to a frame" is the nullification of writing: Instead of writing, the poem exhausts itself in mere dictation: "(Seventy lines about fields in the dark)." Rather than a persistent cry of mourning or whisper that silences the referential and mimetic faculties of language ("her cry / silences / whole / vocabularies / of *names* / for / *things*"), but can only name the dimensions of the trauma without transforming them, the poetic voice of section two is consistently pushed back into the realm of mere mimesis, consistent with the Platonist aesthetics of the *Republic*.[193] In place of the cry of mourning,

[193] I refer to the famous moment in the *Republic* when Socrates banishes poets from his ideal city (references below are from Grube 1992). It is something of an undertheorized commonplace that many avant-garde poets of 20th century America make sense of their break with the past—their self-pronouncement of newness—in the context of a break with a certain version of Platonist aesthetics. This is true of William Carlos Williams' apothegm, "no ideas but in things" (*Paterson* 6); Olson's "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT," which he adapted from Creeley ("Projective Verse"); Ginsberg's and Snyder's and non-dualistic poetics; and so on. The title of Allen Ginsberg's perhaps best-known statement of poetics, for example—"When the Mode of Music Changes, the Walls of the City Shake" (in Allen 1973)—paraphrases book IV of the *Republic*: "The foundations of music and poetry cannot be disturbed without danger to the state" (424c). On the one hand, Plato does not, with Ginsberg, celebrate the revolutionary potential of art to alter consciousness and culture. On the contrary, this very potential represents the greatest imaginable danger to the ideal city of the soul—simultaneously a collective, earthly politics. Music is "where license and lawlessness infiltrate most easily. This is because their medium is art and amusement where their presence seems unlikely to do harm" (424d). Poetry and mimetic art in general is the Trojan horse of the soul, by means of which degeneration slips in under the guise of night to pillage and murder.

On the other hand, even at the moment of moving from a strict program of censorship for mimetic

"Superstructures of allegory have been // raised." The power of poetry to effect a transformation is "a sorry thing dream in a Dream / remembering a dream // mimic presentation stained with mortality." The mere referentiality of poetic language—the mirror, as opposed to the lamp[194]—is the price paid for a one kind of Idealist transformation, which takes the lead of noise and transforms it into the gold of silence, the terror of the unknown into the gold of a measured circumference.

The textual universe of the second section is acknowledged as a "Shadow Emperor" in which "Symbols are imaginary the real / unseen (seems)." It turns out that the poem's eponymous second section is not, in the end, a "way out" for modernity. The "abstraction of the world's abstractions" relegates art to mere representation, and cannot effect the prefatory poem's transformation, changing paper to woods or woods to paper. Hegel's idealism, for Howe, does not heal the wounds of time, any more than Plotinus' contemplative or meditative retreat from matter can solve its dilemmas.[195] The retreat into idealism in the face of the trauma of modernity

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art to a general ban on mimesis—before his final reversal in book X, where Socrates allows poetry to "make her defense in lyric or some other meter" and to "return to us from exile" (607d)—in the movement of banning poetry, Plato reinscribes it in the very heart of the ideal polis: "the guardians' defense of the city must be located in the realms of music and poetry" (424c). This sentence demands at least two readings: 1. The guardians' defense must be located in the realms of music and poetry in the sense of a strict program of censorship—they must become the enemies of poetry who guard against its stinging lures with any available means; and 2. The guardians' defense must be located in the realms of music and poetry in the sense that they must themselves become poets and musicians, if they are to assure its wise stewardship. In any case, Plato—whose tragic potential was so great—chooses the latter path for philosophy. My own position is that Plato's characterization of poetic mimesis is far subtler and more ambivalent than it is often characterized. Ramona Naddaff offers a particularly erudite and incisive study of this complex ambivalence. See Naddaff, Ramona A. *Exiling the Poets: The production of censorship in Plato's Republic*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

[194] The use of this particular metaphor to characterize poetic mimesis is Abrams'. See Abrams, Meyer Howard. *The mirror and the lamp: Romantic theory and the critical tradition*. Vol. 360. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

[195] Here, as in all things Platonist, I owe a great debt to Sara Ahbel-Rappe, whose work on Neoplatonism—not to mention conversation and feedback at critical turning points in writing the dissertation—has been a constant encouragement. I am indebted to both *Reading Neoplatonism* and her edited volume of the Blackwell *Companion to Socrates.* See Rappe, Sara. *Reading neoplatonism: Non-*

("He plodded away through drifts of i / ce / away into inapprehensible Peace / A portable altar strapped on his back / pure and severe /… In the forests of Germany he will feed / on aromatic grass and browse in leaves") cannot solve the dilemmas of the accretion of historical time. In the context of a horrific modernity, the Idea as poem cannot redeem the shards of time without a passage through "some history of Materialism."

A closer focus on the internal aesthetics of section two has laid the groundwork for a reading of section three. This third section is in some ways the most interesting and hardest to decipher, both in terms of its poetics and in terms of the ideational form embodied in those poetics. The complete movement of the poem's three sections effects a synthesis, from the thesis of history ("some history of Materialism"), in the first section, through the antithesis of a retreat to the Ideal ("abstraction of the world's abstraction"), in the second section, to a synthesis of the opposed terms of the first two sections in the final, fragmentary poetics of the poem's unnamed third section. My reading of the third section will focus on its final page, which is remarkable in several respects and crucial to an understanding of the product of the poem's dialectical synthesis. Upon leaving second two's timeless stillness and reading the first page of the poem's third and unnamed final section, it might first appear that we have returned to the volume's beginning to experience yet another traumatic encounter with matter and history:

> Some particular place fleeting
> and fixed Particulars
> fleeting and frail
> Nature ties a body to my soul
> Conceiving inventing falsifying
> assuming
> I walk through valleys stray
> imagining myself free
> My mind's eye elegiac Meditation

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discursive thinking in the texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius. Cambridge University Press, 2007; and Ahbel-Rappe, Sara, and Rachana Kamtekar. *A companion to Socrates*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

embracing something
some history of Materialism

The Platonic contours of this passage are clear—from the timeless silence of the second section, "Pythagorean Silence," the poem must once again return to the "Particulars / fleeting and frail" of history, in which "Nature ties a body to my soul."

This is, however, a repetition with a difference. Unlike the poem's first section, which longed for the retreat from history and absolution from matter and modernity ("Abstraction of the world's abstraction / come and warm my icy feet"), this section begins by "embracing something / some history of Materialism." The poem's final page is worth quoting in full:

wicket-gate
wicket-gate

cherubim golden swallow

amulet instruction tribulation

winged joy parent sackcloth ash

den sealed ascent flee

chariot interpret flame

hot arc chaff meridian

in the extant manuscript SOMEONE
has lightly scored a pen over

diadem dagger a voyage gibbet

sheaf

weeds shiver and my clothes spread wide

The geography of this page is, on the one hand, the geography of the temple's inner sanctum, before which the seraphim hide their faces and cry holy. The repeated "wicker-gate" opens up

unto a highly compressed combination of Biblical, Neo-Platonic, mythical, and hermetic imagery that compose a climactic sacral landscape. We glimpse a restoration from emanation away from the One and the fall from the primal parent. To follow just one of these threads, the "chariot," "parent," "winged," and "ascent" firmly situate the transformative energy of this final page in the context of Plato's allegory of the chariot drawn by winged horses in the *Phaedrus*, representing the soul pulled either upwards and toward or downwards and away from Zeus as the primal father.[196] The final page is the last gasp of the poem's opening invocation and prayer ("Bark be my limbs my hair be leaf / Bride be my bow my lyre my quiver"), whether in triumph or defeat it is uncertain. And yet—the formal, poetic mediation of this sacral geography through maximal fragmentation is of the utmost importance to any reading. All of the page's various elements work together to produce a reading experience that is like nothing so much as that of looking over a deteriorated papyrus, ravaged and deleted by the movement of history and the passage of time: the visual layout of the words on the page, structured as it is by gaps and lacunae; the asyntactic clustering of disparate nouns; the direct reference to "the extant manuscript," and to scoring a pen over a text whose fragmentariness precludes complete comprehension. Words appear out of the darkness of the gaps and stutters of the text.

If a meeting and reunion with the historical other—the reality behind the classical text, its banished Eurydice—is the promise of redemption that the lyric offers, then, by the poem's end, this meeting appears in the shape that it in fact has: shattered and fragmented archival materials ("Particulars / fleeting and frail / Nature ties a body to my soul"). If this is an encounter with history as "actuality," it is an encounter marked ineradicably by matter, history, and time. It is not until it has passed through both the trauma of history and a nearly traumatic Pythagorean

[196] See Belfiore, Elizabeth S. "Dancing with the gods: The myth of the chariot in Plato's Phaedrus." *American journal of philology* 127.2 (2006): 185-217.

silence that the poem has power to transform the archive, however fragmentary and partial that transformation may be: "weeds shiver and my clothes spread wide." If this is the shape that a classical past takes, in Howe's modernity, then identification with it—as originary wholeness—has been identified as a *mis*identification, a necessarily partial interpellation that revels in the incompletion and impossibility of its redemptive project, and perhaps takes that very incompletion and impossibility as its plenitude.

Schultz, in *The Poetics of Impasse*, writes, "Howe's poetry… revises tradition through her self-proclaimed role as editor/interpreter of a series of prior texts… Howe begins from a place of mis-seaming and reconstructs (or sews together) traditional texts" (142). In *Pythagorean Silence*, the determinacy of the archive first appears as a "long pythagorean lustrum // nothing new can come into being" in the face of the historical density called "modernity." Howe's poem, in the end, finds that it needs both matter and spirit, both the Marx of section one and the Hegel of section two. It accedes to the accusation that Adorno leveled at Benjamin, and attempts to "straddle the boundary between magic and positivism."[197] A reading of the third and final section of the poem must take into account its status as the culmination of a "Pythagorean silence," and the result of the affective work of the poem. Such a reading, however, if it fails to take into account the poem's self-conscious engagement with history as the impossibility of an unmediated resuscitation of the past, will miss the uniqueness of the poem's negotiation of its themes. The difference of this repetition with a difference is most fully actualized in the formal dimension of the fragmentary poetics of the third section. In this omnipresence of historical mediation, we arrive at a shared context and ground for comparison for Howe and Bernstein's

[197] Adorno characterizes Benjamin's *Arcades Project* thus : "…one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched." See Adorno to Benjamin, 10 November 1938, in *Aesthetics and Politics,* ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980).

poetics. For each, the idea of the classical testifies to the disparity of text and meaning, archive and interpretation, a series of texts and the idea of "canon."

A Critique of Pure Citation: Charles Bernstein and the Sublime Object of Bibliography

> The Yellow Pages always seemed to me one of the most extraordinary literary works…. In many ways, the Yellow Pages is one of the great reflections of contemporary American life… it's just the details, just the reality. But even better than the reality is the imagination of reality that it presents—a reality that's even better than the real.
>
> Charles Bernstein, "The Yellow Pages: Outtake 1: Plotless Prose"[198]

Far more radically divorced from discrete forms than the paratextual reception of Ginsberg's "Malest"—and more irreverent by half than Howe's *Pythagorean Silence*—Bernstein's poetics invent classical texts from thin air. One of the most persistent and remarkable features of reception, in Bernstein's work, is the characteristic appearance of classicism apart from classical texts. In a virtuosic display of critical prowess, Bernstein demonstrates the contingency of canon and classical in a series of television commercials for the Yellow Pages. The commercials satirically present the Yellow Pages as the work of a single author. Though Bernstein's performance was relatively limited on the nationally aired commercials, the University of Buffalo's electronic poetics archives contain over an hour of outtakes in which Bernstein makes the case for the Yellow Pages' canonicity.[199] These outtakes include sustained

[198] Bernstein, Charles, and Jeff Preiss. "The Yellow Pages: Outtakes." *PennSound.* Ed. Hennessey. 2013. 27 May 2013. <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Yellow-Pages-Outtakes.php>.

[199] The whole thing is a comic tour de force, both the concept and Bernstein's execution: "as with so many artists who are doing things in genres, in forms, that are not what's expected, he's [the author of the Yellow Pages] underappreciated. People don't expect something like the Yellow Pages to be a literary work, a work of the imagination, and so he's treated more as just a compiler… This is a complete misreading of what the Yellow Pages is. if it was just information, it wouldn't have the power to compel

close readings of text and image (interpreting the juxtaposition of alphabetical headings: "from dancing to data"); anecdotes of personal sentimentalism for the text ("my earliest reading experiences were with the Yellow Pages, maybe opening the closet and having it fall on me, and then kind of waking up with the book open and starting to leaf through it"); the strategic deployment of critical cliché (from valorizing the phonebook's formal innovation, to periodizing the White Pages as modernist and the Yellow Pages as postmodernist); extended appreciations of the work's aural and metrical virtues ("In fact, the rhyme in the numbers as brought out in the Yellow Pages might very well be our modern form of couplet, may replace what people traditionally think of as rhyme"); and comparison of the Yellow Pages with Homer as epic poetry: "the movement of an oral culture recording itself in print." This performative invention of canonicity functions as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Ginsberg's revelation: Not only can the classical become the contemporary, and vice versa, but *anything* can become classical—from random strings of Greek characters to the Yellow Pages as epic poem.

My second section singles out several moments in Bernstein's prolific oeuvre, each of which demonstrates a different facet of his treatment of Greek and Latin language and textuality; and which—taken together—compose a classicism of linguistic surface and careful irony specific to Bernstein's poetics and definitive of a vital iteration of postmodernist classicism. Though the radical metatextuality of classicism is consistent in Bernstein's poetics,[200] I range over various applications of classical invention, from 1) in *The Sophist*, an untitled poem's invention of classical critical authority via citations, to 2) the invention of classical orthography

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you to read it, you know, page by page, hour by hour, and move you through every aspect of modern American life" ("Yellow Pages").

[200] The particular valence of challenge that Bernstein's poetics represent to classical reception studies becomes an important instance in the dissertation's conclusion, where I explore the methodological implications (and contradictions) of a classical reception studies without classical texts—for Bernstein's practice is clearly an instance of classical reception, and yet it operates entirely independently from particular classical texts.

and material text, in "Littoral," and finally 3) the invention of the past as such through "cum ipse"'s fantabulated "translations" of invented text. Although this section through a chronology of classical receptions in Bernstein's work, I take 1987's breakthrough volume, *The Sophist*—and the figure of poetic sophism developed therein—as an interpretive touchstone. First published in 1987 by Sun & Moon Press, the volume demonstrates an expansive range of style, voice, scope, and format: It is a characteristically plurivocal book. Bernstein's *Sophist* declares itself as breaking from a Platonist legacy—conceived as the "Idea of explaining the visible world by a postulated invisible world"—from within, characteristically intensifying the terms of a given discursive field to their maximal degree in order to critically satirize. Bernstein valorizes the Platonic figure of the sophist as one who constructs and affirms arguments purely based on their formal validity or persuasiveness rather than their relationship to an objective reality or truth. Bernstein develops a mode of poetic sophistry in which linguistic play is an end in itself. Donning the mantle of "sophistry" (as mere, eristic wordplay), Bernstein's poetics produce carefully constructed "surfaces"—of image, argument, reference, sense, the classical, and so on. In this most characteristic feature of Bernstein's verse, poetics constructs surfaces in which "geometric order," "temporal order," and "cosmetic order" stand parallel to each other: The cosmic order *is* "cosmetic order," and vice versa.

A primary trope of classical invention *ex nihilo*, in Bernstein's poetics, occurs in the trope of the citation, the bibliography, the obscure list of abbreviated references. The list is a mimetic device, creating tiny images of a classical past, abstracted from its textual and material thingliness. The list figures itself as a form of disciplinary, discursive authority that mediates between the otherwise inaccessible objects of its citation. The list "translates" between the numerically and qualitatively unapproachable body(ies) of tradition, consolidating its

hermeneutical import and distributing it to the reader: One can rely on these citations as a site of cultural and epistemological authority, because they themselves rely on "the classical." An untitled poem (figure 3.1**,** henceforth referred to as "Eudoxus") from *The Sophist* demonstrates this creation of erudition and classical allusiveness with a series of successive, abbreviated references ("*Hdt.* 1.65; *Hdt.* 1.99…"), many of which point towards dead-end passages: to lost texts of lost authors; non-existent sections of existing authors; or otherwise subtly distorted citations. The tone and register of "Eudoxus" are more somber that much of Bernstein's verse, conveying little of the overt sarcasm or savage irony which are his signatures. This is not to say that the poem is not ironic, but that its irony is more subtle and searching. Whereas Melnick takes the classical as created by language as the only point of contact between past and present, "Eudoxus" takes the second-order disciplinary mechanisms of categorization, abstraction, summary, and citation as creating the classical object.

Listed citation is the primary figure of order in the poem, textually consolidating the idea of tradition, representing mastery of cultural capital, and creating microcosmic images of classicism. The list functions as the device of abstraction that both organizes and grants perspective on an otherwise chaotic textual history:

> *Hdt.* 1.65; *Hdt.* 1.99; *Thuc.* 4.76; *Clearchus* 3; *Aesth. Per.* 400; *Eur. Tro.* 801; *Arist. Nub.* 914; *Xen. Cyr.* 6.4.3.; Soph. 726D; *Aesth. Ag.* 521; Il. 10.472; *Hes. Op.* 76; *Thuc.* 3.108; *Phys.* 24.13; *Od.* 8.179.

By creating a hyper-allusive, maximally pedantic demonstration of cultural mastery, the list figures itself as the surface of an immensely deep historical structure. The vertical text, "EUDOXUS," for example, encompasses a variety of potential allusions as well as the abject refusal of allusion. In keeping with the volume's title and themes, "Eudoxus" may allude to the Aristotelian *endoxa*, the received wisdom or common sense, culturally and philosophically

The order of a room.
Of rows of spoons.
A shifting.

$a_{u_{to}t^{e^{l_i}}_c}$
(hypostatization of space, the relations detemporalized)

a geometric order
an cosmetic order
a temporal order
public order

state ⟷ process

Ordering of a meal.
Of a hammer & boards & nails.
The ordering of a segment, or means. Of a slight.

Occurrence of distance scales.

Idea of explaining the visible world by a postulated invisible world.

I order the space by the cordoning of the _____, by the bluing of _____, by the capaciousness of a bleating, the pander of intention.

Figure 3.1: Untitled poem ("Eudoxus") from Charles Bernstein's *The Sophist*

as peg on which to hang

E
U
D
O
X
U
S

the orderliness of letters
of the gravity of the fog

a gloom of shellac

"There are some solid facts that are indisputable."

the ordering of a lemon
a pear
a translucence. the orderliness
of a failing.

Hdt. 1.65; *Hdt.* 1.99; *Thuc.* 4.76; *Clearchus* 3; *Aesth. Per.* 400; *Eur. Tro.* 801; *Arist. Nub.* 914; *Xen. Cyr.* 6.4.3.; Soph. 726D; *Aesth. Ag.* 521; Il. 10.472; *Hes. Op.* 76; *Thuc.* 3.108; *Phys.* 24.13; *Od.* 8.179.

The border of a square, of
pineapple, of a gap among.
The bordering of a forgetfulness.

He says that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but some other *aperion* nature, from which come into being all the heavens and the worlds in them.

embedded forms of understanding which philosophy takes as its starting point: "Empedocles said this and that; Anaximander claimed such and such; Many define happiness as x and y." The following (mis)quotation of such an *endoxa* from Simplicius supports this allusion:

> He [Anaximander] says that it is neither water nor
> any other of the so-called elements,
> but some other *aperion* nature,
> from which come into being all the
> heavens and the worlds in them.[201]

In the this context, "Eudoxus" may allude to anecdotal accounts of a student of Plato by the same name, who became an influential astronomer in his own right and may have headed the Academy for a brief period.

At the same time, the "classical" alludes to nothing at all: If one does take time to track down the references (those that can be tracked down), he finds that they point to an artful potpourri of misdirection, suggestive passages, clever inventions, textual disfigurations, and careful ambiguities. "Eudoxus" can only appear as "endoxa" if linguistically disfigured, and the supporting "endoxa" transforms Anaximander's *apeiron* nature (infinite or indefinite) into *aperion*: a non-existent word, misspelling, or neologism built from the compound *apo-* and any number of possible substitutes: *erion* for wool, thus *aperion*: the quality of *having had the wool pulled away*, and so on. Likewise, a reference to Eudoxus the student of Plato alludes only to a historical absence: none of Eudoxus' texts survive; his name is suspiciously allegorical (*Eudoxus:* honored); and his anecdotal biography is littered with clichés. Tracking the references

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[201] The original translation of Simplicius which Bernstein quotes appears in *The Presocratic Philosophers* (I have italicized the quoted material):

> Of those who say that it is one, moving, and infinite, Anaximander, son of Praxiades, a Milesian, the successor and pupil of Thales, said that the principle and element of existing things was the *apeiron* [indefinite, *or* infinite], being the first to introduce this name of the material principle. *He says that it is neither water nor any of the so-called elements, but some other* apeiron *nature, from which come into being all the heavens and the worlds in them.* (107).

Kirk, Geoffrey Stephen, John Earle Raven, and Malcolm Schofield. *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selcetion of Texts*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.

down adds no more to the hermeneutics of the surface list: its effect does not rely on it classical citations, which are its "sublime objects of bibliography," but on its own formal appearance as a scholarly list. The authority is self-generating. Indeed, "Eudoxus" grounds classicism upon its obfuscating non-significance. The list is a figure for the disciplinary work of representing an organized body of classical material, creating a fantastic object. The sum effect is the "lure" of historical depth—of "the classical" as an objective historical ground of tradition, education, learning, humanism—which leads infinitely sideways, always suggesting but never delivering.

Whereas "Eudoxus" explores the autonomy of classicism from classical text through the telescope of citation, 1996's electronic text "Littoral" (figure 3.2) grabs a microscope and studies classicism at the most basic levels of material symbol. The text superimposes syntactically opaque verse onto a background of English words transliterated into Greek orthography. The text's orthographic classicism begins with a quotation from Bernstein's introduction to Laura Riding's *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words:*

> The publication of *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* brings to completion one of the most aesthetically and philosophically singular projects of twentieth-century American poetry. No North American or European poet of this century has created a body of work that reflects more deeply on the inherent conflicts between truth telling and the inevitable artifice of poetry than Laura (Riding) Jackson. This conflict ultimately led, in 1941, to Riding's renunciation of poetry; it is also the basis of this long *summa contra poetica*, which she wrote with her husband, Schuyler Jackson, over a near forty-year period starting around 1948.[202]

The transformation of the source text above into the arcane Greek background of "Littoral" follows the "shape" of Greek orthography rather than its particular historical genealogy: Ψ [psi] becomes "Y" because of the material similarity of its shape, rather than the expected transliteration according its phonic significance*: ps*. A more appropriate term than transliteration

[202] Bernstein, Charles. "Riding's Reason: An Introduction to Laura [Riding] Jackson and Schuyler Jackson," Rational Meaning: Toward a New Foundation of Words"." *College Literature* 24.3 (1997): 138-150.

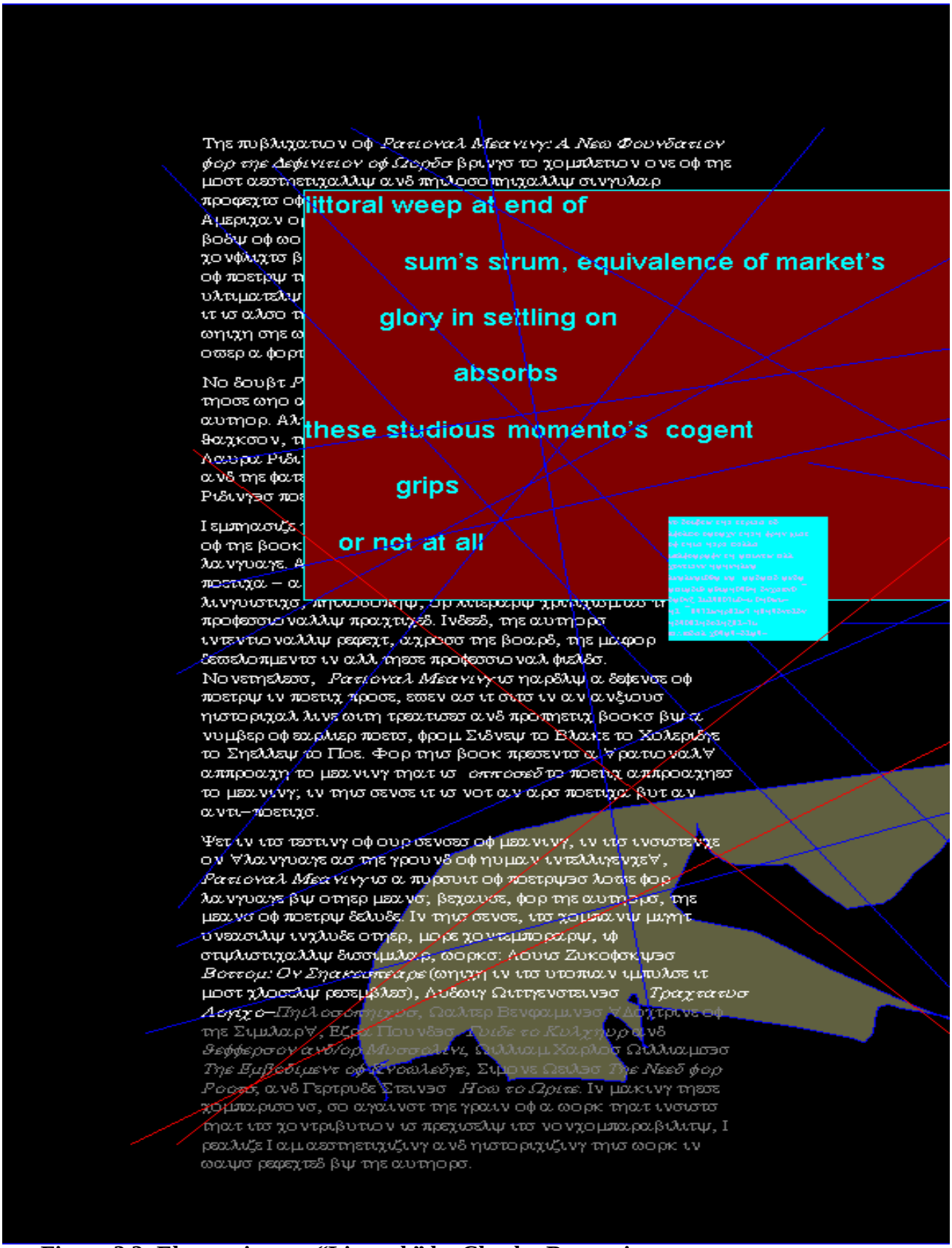

Figure 3.2: Electronic text, "Littoral," by Charles Bernstein

for Bernstein's procedure, here, might be "transorthographication." Recalling Zukofsky's literalism in *Catullus,* this orthographic classicism of pure visual resemblance represents a radical form of "littoralism." The classics are "littoral" in multiple senses: the borders and frame of tradition; the "litter" of tradition (casting back to Adorno's "debris"); "literal" as the bare materiality of orthography or text, or as the reduction of the classical sublime object of ideology to a function of the literal Greek symbol; a "littoral [s]weep" that forever runs parallel to beach and water, always suggesting mediation and connection while in actuality separating.

We can productively expand these various valences of "littoralism" to account for different modes of classicism in Bernstein's poetics. On the one hand, we might read Bernstein's brand of literalism as an ironic criticism of the disciplinary self-assurances of academic classicists. If read in this way, Bernstein takes Zukofsky and Ginsberg's criticisms of institutional classicism as an exclusivist form of covert subject formation and magnifies them to hyperbolic proportions: Classicism creates—not an American or white or male Catullus from a heterogeneous and foreign cultural artifact—but a coherent text from nothingness, an imaginary object of knowledge that actively deflects its knowers from the realization that there is nothing to know. Bernstein's hyper-literal obfuscation comments on classicism as a covertly elitist epistemology, the purpose of which is to conceal and safeguard its knowledge and make of itself a cult of hermetic initiates. Bernstein is deeply concerned with modes of consolidating scholarly and critical power, and in his poetics, institutional classicism's foremost function is to guarantee the cultural authority of discipline and institution by regulating the flow of cultural capital. This regulation takes place in autonomy from particular texts, though it grounds its function in the appearance of historical depth and reliance upon tradition.

On the other hand, we might read against the grain, and find that this obfuscating movement simultaneously satirizes his own poetics. It is difficult to miss at least some element of self-satire in this text. The obduracy and "difficulty" of "Littoral" is nothing more than a spatial effect, inviting a parallax shift that pierces the seemingly obdurate shroud of Language poetics. But who could access this parallax shift, beyond those with at least some degree of hermetic initiation into classicist epistemology (an initiation that Bernstein himself both shares and openly employs)? The text reproduces both classical and modernist obfuscations even in parody, mobilizing prodigious facility with the codes of institutional capital and historical literacy to maintain its critical authority, and in a canonizing gesture of Language poety's marginal canons. The "classicist" herself can gain no traction or authority vis-à-vis Bernstein's poetics, because the appearance of sophomoric buffoonery opens up into complex negotiations of the classicist's own cultural currency—literacy in both disciplinary code and material text. Despite the internal critique of highbrow allusiveness, the poet is inescapably intertextual. Bernstein's signature presence is one of institutional literacy, allusiveness, and self-satirizing critique of the same.

"Littoral," similarly to *Pythagorean Silence*, passes through an encounter with the non-relation of classicism and classical text and the material inheritances of classical and canon. Its poetics are contingently "absorb[ed]" by "equivalence of market's / glory." In stark contrast to Howe, it does not matter whether or not the reader pierces the obfuscation of meaning via Greek orthography ("these studious momento's"). The question of the text's relationship to an intellectual reality beyond its boundaries is moot: It "grips / or not at all" with equal facility. Bernstein's "orthographic classicism" parodies and reproduces classicism's generation of interpretive possibilities and hermeneutical coherence by situating meaning at the littoral zone of

surface and depth. At the same time, it empties out these classical depths: The reader who approaches the work vis-à-vis its negotiation of these same systems of cultural reference and authority finds that the appearance of historical depth leads only sideways, skipping along a two-dimensional plane of self-reference. In this, Bernstein moves towards a kind of hyper-literalism that goes far beyond Zukofsky's homophony or Spicer's "language as furniture."

In linking Bernstein's poetics of hyper-literalism to Zukofsky, the dissertation has come full circle, and it is thus fitting that the next and final poem explores a poetics of classical translation. The untitled poem from 2006's *Girly Man* (henceforth referred to by its first words, "cum ipse") invents a "recently discovered" fragment of a Latin poem—complete with scholarly commentary and translation—that blends real Latin words divorced from context with invented words that maintain some sonic and morphemic resemblance to "Latin." The poem combines the various forms of autonomous classicism that we have already explored, from the use of the scholarly footnote, to the invention of Latin neologisms, disfigurations, and atomistic quotations from ancient and contemporary sources. In addition to these discrete modes of producing classical distance, the piece represents a complex meditation on metatextual strategies of distance and remove, employing a nested series of interrelated strategies of classical distancing. The sum effect is a complex performance of the multiple, simultaneous planes of constructing "originality" and original texts:

> Cum ipse plectrum maribilus factotum
> Grandio decorum ludicare plenus est
> Amo digitalis flagrentia moribund
> Ammo ipse luminatti finitudo
> Regio masturboris terminus reglutino
> Habitatio potentia paternitus mea
> Quod perpetuo obduro nunc nobilis
> Causam Excrucio belle fugit veritas
> Quisquam fortunatus modo pumex
> Ave mediocris grammaticus

> Opera circumsiliens modo quamquam
> Proximus nostrum ignorare arbitraris
>
> [This fragment has been reconstructed from documents recently discovered near Rome. It is believed to be derived from a poem by Claudio Amberian, who was an advisor to Nero, although little else is known about him. Many lexical and grammatical irregularities characterize this no doubt debased text; my translation tries to remain as literal as possible, providing in English an experience close to what it might have been like for the first Latin auditors of this self-cannibalizing work. –Charles Bernstein
>
> With itself plucked marble, factotum
> Grand with ludicrous decoration, is full
> I love 'finger stimulation' without shame, deadly
> Ammunition itself infused with final light
> The king handles himself terminally, comes unglued
> My fatherhood enhouses my potency
> On the grounds that perpetual obdurance is now
> To conduct torture a pretty flight to truth
> Anyone blessed just pumice
> Farewell grammatical ordinariness
> Works wobbling with only little qualms
> Near our arbitrary ignorance.

The "Latin" text involves a combination of misspellings (amo, "I love," becomes "ammo"; mirabilis "wonderful" becomes "maribilus"), lexical choices drawn from wildly different periods in the history of Latin (factotum, for example, is a feature of Medieval Latin that does not occur in classical Latin), Latinate English words that could can be parsed in Latin only as morphemic fragments (we could read moribund, for example, as a partial fragment of "moribundus"), and mismatched or disjointed parts of speech. All of the fragment's Latin can be creatively parsed as some form of Latin or "debased" Latin—as I discovered while attempting to translate Bernstein's invented Latin:

> With this wunderfol jack-of-all-trades poet
> I make seemliness playitize greatly, it is complete
> I, burning, love fingery dy-
> I *llluuuv* brighttened men, finishalization.
> A line, masturbatorily, an end, I unglue
> my powerful dwelling, fatherish
> which I, someone famous, perpetuate. Now I am hard.

> I torture the reason. Truth flees prettily.
> Anyone blessed only pumice.
> Farewell middling phililogist.
> Dancing labor, just dancing around. Although
> near us, you testify that you are unknown.

The textual and philological creation of this fragment is, however, but the first and most mundane of recreations. The multiple ascending levels of removal from the imaginary source are dizzying, dazzling. The Latin that appears above is not the text itself, but rather a "reconstruct[ion]." Rather than moving a fragmentary text closer to wholeness, the reconstruction takes an unknown quantity of material from multiple "documents" and *produces* a fragment. The source documents for the "poem as fragment" that appears on the page are not "a poem by Claudio Amberian" but "derived" from a poem by Claudio Amberian. The groundless biographical snippet itself—"an advisor to Nero"—serves not to contextualize the already thrice-removed reconstruction, but to attach it to an absence of context ("little else is known about him").

The final and most confabulated removal is the translation itself. "My translation tries to remain as literal as possible." "Literalism," here, involves a combination of hyper-literal "bluebookisms"—piece-by-piece translations that display knowledge of particulate sense without an understanding of the phrase's broader relationship to individual parts or semantic context as a whole. Add to this the conceit of "providing in English an experience close to what it might have been like for the first Latin auditors," and the resulting "translation" of the reconstructed fragment is a comic marvel. The tortured progress of the English text is the very device that creates the illusion of "direct" access to a distant original, and the stilted edge of nonsense that cuts the English reading denies a likewise nonsensical original. Classicism creates the illusion of a stilted, partial, broken transition between impermeable mediums of ancient/contemporary,

Latin/English—and it is only this thin illusion of skewed translation that conceals the non-existence and non-sense of the original. Classicism functions as an arsenal of editing strategies that create distance and distortion, thereby producing the mirage of an unbroken, ideal original. Highly artificed and carefully crafted, the mechanisms of classicism as an academic discipline consistently appear as obfuscating devices in Bernstein's work. They conceal rather than reveal meaning. This takes the forms of 1) the invention of scholarly erudition or classical pedagogical authority through the formal device of the reference, allusion, and footnote; 2) the invention of difficulty through the formal device of orthography; and 3) the invention of the idea of an "original text" as a site of displaced longing through the formal devices of foregrounding critical intervention and nested distancing procedures. Each of these classicisms interweaves the ironic "invention" of the classical with highbrow allusiveness and lowbrow farce. Each of these moments isolates the textual and linguistic mechanisms of classicism as an academic discipline from the "object" of classicism in Greek and Latin texts. The mechanisms of classicism move autonomously through the text as the purely formal dimensions of consolidating textual authority; multiplying allusiveness; generating a sense of profundity by pointing outside themselves to unidentifiable sources; and concealing and obfuscating an otherwise transparent meaning.

Bernstein's poetics both reproduce and empty out the movement of the classical in a series of "avenues filled with adjacencies"—a classicism in pianissimo. Sure, Bernstein savagely mocks various forms of disciplinary knowledge, assumption, and practice. However, this mockery turns just as easily inward to the assumptions of his own milieu. Take, for example, the 'democratizing' claims of Language poetry.[203] I cannot imagine an undergraduate—not to

[203] Jeff Derksen characterizes one version of this claim: "Hejinian's model of an open text and the rejection of closure refigure the reading subject…. Briefly put, structurally opened texts allow the reader

mention a lay reader—whose first reaction to an encounter with Language writing would be a giddy sense of freedom in its "egalitarian" semantics. Reading Language writing for enjoyment or even sense often requires some combination of contagious enthusiasm on the part of an instructor, uncommon openness on the part of a student, or years of training in abstruse academic neo-hermeneutics. Language writers—theoretically engaged as they are—do not tend to create egalitarian communities of sense production—unless of course we mean democratic enclaves of meritocratic savants. No, Language writing creates communities of professional readers, and works (most often unintentionally) to keep those without the predilection or training outside the circle. We should be grateful. Language writers create jobs for critics, jobs that no one else can fill.

Bernstein is, ultimately, an unbiased ironist and practitioner of farce, whose satirical force turns equally on all it encounters, and whose negative critique employs the very procedures it targets. [204] In Bernstein's poetics, this functions as both participation and satire. Bernstein caricatures the clichés of his own milieu just as savagely as the clichés of the "expressivist" opposition. Even in savage satire, the linguistic surface that characterizes Bernstein's verse registers its own participation in the processes it targets. The horizon of expectations is a closed circuit, whose negativity is not, for Bernstein as for Hegel, a moment of transformative surplus.

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to construct meaning as a nonalienated producer in a similar (or homologous) position as the writer. As with the cultural studies project, subjective agency is located in the reader/consumer as the producer of contextual or localized meanings" (52). See Derksen, Jeff. "Where Have All the Equal Signs Gone?." *Assembling Alternatives* (2003): 41-65.

[204] For one example of the constant ironies, see the relatively consistent "clarity" and "expressive transparency" of Bernstein's translations of Catullus, as opposed to Zukofsky:

> None, says my woman, would she want to marry more
> than me, not if Jupiter himself insisted.
> says: but what a woman says to a smitten lover,
> on wind, should be written, on running water

Bernstein, Charles. Trans. "Catullus 70." *PennSound.* Ed. Hennessey. 2005. 13 March 2013. <http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Zukofsky-Catullus-excerpt.html>.

Ultimately, the reader becomes himself the object of Bernstein's grand farce if he reads it as sincere critique. Rather, Bernstein critiques the sincerity of irony, the sophistry of sophistry, the sophistic appeal to the surface of language and argument as itself a source of plenitude. I find in Bernstein an intense irony. Rather than a pessimistic or nihilistic assessment of the possibilities of poetic power, this becomes a liberating realization that unlocks a field of linguistic play. Zukofsky's necromancy becomes Bernstein's necrophilia: If one cannot escape the corpse of tradition, one may as well "enjoy the symptom."'

Conclusion

A sense of both the shared context and disparate valences of Howe and Bernstein's poetics offers resources for expanding our conceptions of the range and scope of canon and innovation. We might locate the shared context of Howe and Bernstein's poetics in the figure of the corpse. For each poet, the material, historical reality that composes the idea of "canon" is a series of disparate limbs—a Frankenstein, sewn from looted parts, thrown together mish-mash. There are no "core texts," only "corpse texts." Each takes classicism's contingency, density and the undeniable fact of mediation as the context in which poetics takes place. The practice of poetics is always an encounter with historical constructedness, the determinative force of the contemporary horizon of expectations, and the ways in which writing involves cannibalizing the past. "Canon," "classical," and "tradition" will always already be assimilated into and reflective of the total syntax of the present, even or especially when one desires to write of the disparity

between plain white printing paper and a deciduous forest: “We that were wood.” These shores are absolutely—irrevocably—distant.

And yet Howe’s distinct ambivalence—tenderness, even—towards the historical other cuts against the grain of her interpretive assimilation into the relatively polemical, tightly regulated critical discourse of what Language poetry is and can be. In some ways, the dissertation’s ongoing concerns with canon debates, avant-garde studies, and poetics merge in the embedded narrative of a particular kind of institutional reception of the avant-garde. Canon wars and poetics collide in the discursive synonymy of avant-garde critique and the rejection of tradition, with the role of the classical in this embedded narrative functioning as a critical test case or metonym. In the institutional reception and assimilation of avant-garde practice, the synonymy of canon and hegemony in the canon wars overlaps with the synonymy of canon and hegemony in avant-garde critical discourse. The obligatory nature of such critical axioms might be thrown into relief by a short essay in *My Way: Speeches and Poems*, in which Bernstein interprets Howe’s poetics. Even as a sympathetic reader, personal friend, and cultural ally, Bernstein is at pains to jettison history from Howe’s poems and minimalize the role of canon, classic, and history:

> Look at words as site of historical memory, as compost heap decomposing the past. Writing can engage the attention in such a way as to obliterate awareness of this border, this site, or can engender a hyperactive awareness of the page’s opacity and impenetrability… Here’s the rub: the historically referential (exophoric) dimension of Howe’s work is not used to ground the poem in an extra-linguistic truth any more than the literary allusions that permeate her work are there to send readers back to canonical sources (as if in replay of High Eliotic Modernism).
> Break open the fixtures of historical representation and literary space, so the *work*… exists at the border of representation and presentation, allusion and enactment, surface and depth. The poems are marked by resonance not reinscription. Howe’s art, that is to say, is fundamentally aesthetic and ethical, not historical or narrative… History is a lie, but we are no better than dupes or fools if we ignore it.[205]

[205] Bernstein, Charles. “‘Passed by Examination’: Paragraphs for Susan Howe," in My Way: Speeches and Poems (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 100-103.

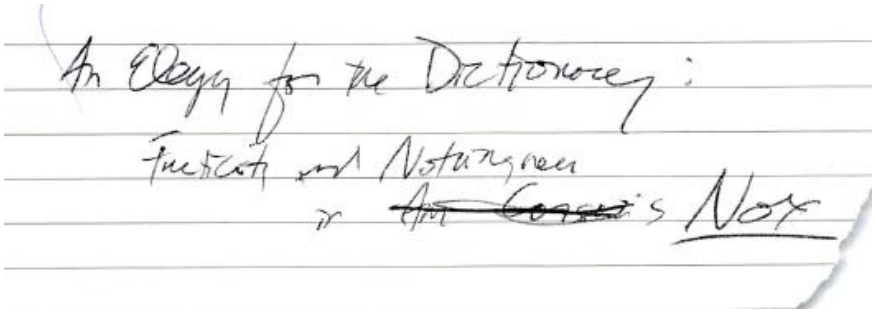
The sense that poetic practice cannot be both avant-garde and open towards constructions of canon and tradition is often a facet of authorized critical discourse about Language poetry and other avant-garde movements.

It is at this point that I would like to claim that the dissertation's multiple meditations on questions of canon war, reception, and poetics are not, after all, so terribly multiple; and that my argument on behalf of canon is in many ways an appeal to avant-garde poetics; and my argument on behalf of avant-garde poetics is in many ways an appeal to classicists. For Howe, it is true that there is no classical or canon as such: there are no core texts, only fragments, scraps preserved in the desert, texts and irretrievable contexts, censuses, and so on. Yet, although the canon to which we have access—the idea of the classical as it appears to us—is a corpse, and has no living substance in its own right, "canon" nonetheless exerts an ethical call upon the writer or reader who enters its archives: "That is what is so dear to me about Olson's book [*Call Me Ishmael*]. It's a book of love even if it does rightly discuss cannibalism" ("Talisman Interview" 158). To return to *Pythagorean Silence's* prefatory poem for a moment, we might read it in light of and as a figure for the canon. Though the words printed on the pulped corpse of tradition (the transformation of "we that were wood" into plain white paper, "a Physical Universe playing with words") are non-coincident with the realities they purport to represent, nonetheless the material archive testifies that something was there. Canon reminds us that the reality it purports to represent—the organic text of the tree—is wholly disparate from its current form as text and archive. The words written on the surface of history, the words we read as "history" and "canon" and "classical," testify that they are completely disparate to canon and classic—something derived from and written on its corpse. Nevertheless, they also testify to the incontrovertible fact of history: "a work of love even if it does righty speak of cannibalism." Against the grain, I

suggest that an understanding of the relationship of the classical to avant-garde practice is both less understood and more urgent than ever before to a well-rounded picture of contemporary avant-garde poetics, and essential to understanding of the nature of the avant-garde's break with and relationship to tradition, canon, and history.

Conclusion:

Strange New ~~Classical~~ Reception Studies



The dissertation's title promises "strange new canons": Strange new canons, in the sense of classical canons in alliance with the strange and the new, with avant-garde movements or the marginal interests of displaced groups; strange new canons in the sense of counter-cultural canons, canons of avant-garde writers and texts; canons strange and new as canons that are not the ossified affirmations of a literary period, but speak rather to an "originally heteronymous intent" that may have existed at the *site* of cultural development: the canon as avant-gardes that have been assimilated; the canon as that process of cultural development—and literature's participation therein—in relation to which classical texts are artifacts or remnants; and strange new canons as the productive contexts in which "the new" takes shape: canonicity as the ground of cultural innovation. Such canons stretch across multiple temporalities, including but not limited to the drive towards an approximate (if impossible) reconstruction of the "original"

meaning of the text (the past of the past); the evolving shape of the past as it persists in the contemporary horizon of expectations (the present of the past); and, tantalizingly, the future(s) of the past and of the present. For this reason, I argue that poetry and poetics have the potential to play a unique role in the processes of cultural development, or at least in the forms of its archives and self-representations: Though the institution might reign over the past of the past, and popular media its present, its futures belongs to the poets.

In this spirit, I turn to two contemporary works—Anne Carson's *Nox* and Johannes Sigil's "Snub-Poemed"—before returning to elaborate the shape and implications of the poetics of reception considered herein.[206] These tantalizing examples gesture towards the ways in which the dissertation arrives at an introduction, rather than a conclusion, to the ongoing vigor and indeterminate futures of reception in American experimental poetics. For *Nox* and "Snub-Poemed," as for Bernstein, "the classical" leads horizontally, leaping through adjacencies of the present. The classical object results only from its cultural reproduction in the present, and as a reflection of the present's limited horizon of expectations. Unlike Bernstein, however, they find that the present can point without touching, and linger in classicism's depthless absences, yes—but also in its presences. Like Bernstein's *Sophist*, Anne Carson's *Nox*, published in 2010, lingers in the metatextual interaction between the mechanisms of classicism as distinct from the "objects" of classicism in Greek and Latin texts. Like Bernstein's "cum ipse," *Nox* takes as its domain the nested depths and heights of representation, creating an exquisite depth and substance—of a classical past, of a brother hardly known—that nonetheless remains a "surface effect" of language. In a way, *Nox* goes further even than Bernstein: It offers a poetics in which it becomes impossible to distinguish between the object and its textual representation, not only of a

[206] Carson, Anne. *Nox*. New Directions, 2010. Sigil, Johannes. "Snub-Poemed." Ms. Comparative Literature Library. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

classical past, but of physical piece of paper, the entries in a lexicon—the life of a brother himself. Part translation, part scrapbook, part lexicon, part exhaustive trot, and part elegy for an estranged brother, *Nox* began its life as a "singularity"—a hand-composed memento circulated among friends through the mail (figure 4.1). The printing of the volume is itself a thing of artistry, meticulously reconstructing the depth and textures of the three-dimensional original:

Figure 4.1: Front cover and side-view of Anne Carson's *Nox*

The printing goes so far as to retain (in opaque ink) the appearance of thin, transparent parchment, reproducing the ghostly transfer of bleeding ink or charcoal from a facing page. At the same time, the appearance of depth contrasts jarringly with its absence—the reader will repeatedly reach to *touch* the dimensional surface of the text, to find only smooth, unbroken paper beneath. *Nox* gives us a luxurious representation of physical and material minutiae, but a self-conscious representation nonetheless.

If Ginsberg was a poet whose drive to poetic innovation led through philology, Anne Carson is a philologist whose drive to material preservation and capture leads through poetics. But contra Ginsberg, and despite the text's encyclopedic exhaustion of minutiae, *Nox* finds that its objects will not resolve as presence, no matter how microscopic and detailed its representations. A central device occurs in the repeated mediation and appearance of Catullus 101, Catullus' famous elegy for his brother, as it informs and is in turn informed by the work of mourning, remembering, releasing, translating, and failing to translate the scant textual mementos of a brother's life. The opening pages present us with the first of several appearances of Catullus 101 (figure 4.2), a typeset, machine-printed text clipped from an edition (we don't know which) and transformed into a singular physical artifact in the hand-made context of *Nox*. In foregrounding its own movement between life and archive, material reality and textual reproduction, *Nox* draws our attention to the ghostly pre-history of the Catullan poem, moving from manuscript to manuscript and from hand to hand through many centuries, arriving at last in modernity's reproducible fonts. But these typeset and homogenous characters do not belong to an abstract text—they have been physically cut from a particular copy of a particular edition, the only one of its kind. The clipping itself shows signs of "reception," both as preservation and corruption, deteriorating into yellowed age, water-blurred ink, minute creases, and impressions

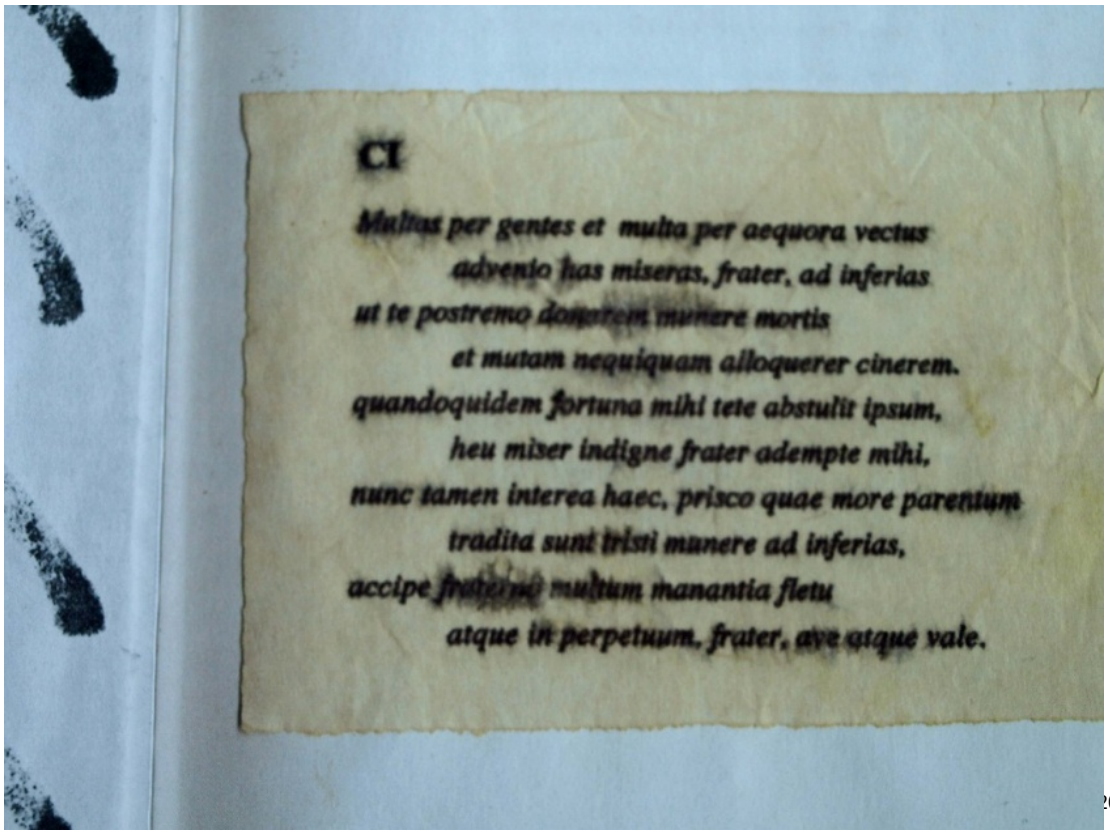


Figure 4.2: Clipping of Catullus 101 in *Nox*

[207] Below is Carson's translation, as it appears in *Nox:*

> Many the people many the oceans I crossed—
> I arrive at these poor, brother, burials
> so I could give you the last gift owed to death
> and talk (why?) with mute ash.
> Now that Fortune tore you from me, you
> oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,
> now still anyway this—what a distant mood of parents
> handed down as the sad gift for burials—
> accept! soaked with the tears of a brother
> and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.

Comparing this somber, direct but delicate version with an alternate translation of the same poem from *Men in the Off Hours,* there titled "Multas per Gentes et Multa per Aequora Vectus (Through Peoples Through Oceans Have I Come)" might offer a sense of the breadth of Carson's poetic reach:

> *Catullus buries his brother.*
>
> Multitudes brushed past me oceans I don't know.
> Brother wine milk honey flowers.
> Flowers milk honey brother wine.
> How long does it take the sound to die away?
> I a brother.
> Cut out carefully the words for wine milk honey flowers.
> Drop them into a bag.
> Mix carefully.

of dirt and stain. Somewhere in its life, the clipping entered Carson's manuscript, a fragment in its own right entering into this further meditation on fragment and mourning. And we read this page only through the window of its meticulous, mass-reproduction in *Nox.* By the end, the reproduction of the hand-produced, cut-and-paste Catullus text itself has deteriorated into illegibility, despite (or because?) of the uncanny, material density of the archive. The disciplinary simulacra of the classical mirror the nothingness and paucity of facts themselves. If a dead brother is like a dead language, he can be recovered only in traces, fragments, memorial ruins, hauntings, approximations, and vanishings.

Despite its mournfulness, *Nox*'s meditation on the irreconcilability of material and text, object and representation, is also a meditation on their layered interpenetrations. For *Nox,* there is something *more*—call it "the smell of nothing":

> When my brother died his dog got angry, stayed angry, barking, growling, lashing, glaring, by day and night. He went to the door, he went to the window, he would not lie down. My brother's widow, it is said, took the dog to the church on the day of the funeral. Buster goes right up to the front of Sankt Johannes and raises himself on his paws on the edge of the coffin and as soon as he smells the fact, his anger stops. "To be nothing—is that not, after all, the most satisfactory fact in the whole world?" asks a dog in a novel I read once (Virginia Woolf *Flush* 87). I wonder what the smell of nothing is.

Something has gotten under the dog's skin, some absence. Nothing at all has gotten underneath the dog's skin: Nothing is bothering it. Counter-intuitively, the material archive of the body does not intensify the dog's mourning, or create the illusion of a once-animated reality or living person. Rather, it *proves* to the dog its nothingness, its disparity from the living master. In this, the nothingness and paucity of *Nox's* classical facts are both an emptying out and a reassurance. The figure of "the smell of nothing" suggests a classicism that exercises itself in obtaining and accessing the non-existence and counter-factualism of "our" tradition—it can smell a lie; as well

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Pour onto your dirty skeleton.
What sound?

Carson, Anne. *Men in the off Hours.* Vintage, 2009.

as a classicism that lingers in the sensory presence of the lost, like Zukofsky relishing its "luminous night": "I came to think of translating as a room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end." Despite the non-equivalence of lexicon and language, archive and reality, *Nox* remains a work that is somehow both more mournful and hopeful than Bernstein's classical simulacra, a quixotic blend of the unflinchingly nihilistic and the stubbornly credulous.

Like Carson's *Nox*, American poet Johannes Sigil's "Snub-Poemed" (figure 4.3), appearing below and as the dissertation's frontispiece, meditates on the "exquisite artifice" of its classical object, simultaneously the exquisite artifice of the human, the lyric, and so on. The poem's title puns on the characteristic description of Socrates as "snub-nosed," visually "poeming" the first century Roman copy of Lysippos' bust of Socrates by recreating its outline with partial phrases, strings of characters, quotations, misattributions, and paraphrases.[208] In so doing, the poem foregrounds its representational veracity—its transparency as a site of access to the bust of Socrates that "stands behind it"—as well as its artifice, the highly textual, mediated, and fragmentary nature of its relationship to an original, and of "the original" itself as a textual lightshow—a thaumaturgical spray of beams or misty hologram of the wizard's face. The figure of Socrates is particularly fitting for such a meditation, representing one of the most "humanized" faces of a classical past, a site of the undeniably human basis of its idealized representations, a manifest presence. The sense of an original peering out at us, however, finds no textual basis except a series of mediating frames, much like the multiple, competing ancient representations of Socrates (Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes); the bust of Socrates upon which "Snub-Poemed" is modeled (a copy of a copy, produced by a sculptor whose anecdotal

[208] See Lapatin and Walters for discussions of Lysippos' and other plastic representations of Socrates. Lapatin, Kenneth. "Picturing Socrates." *A companion to Socrates* (2006): 110; and Walters, H. B. "A Portrait-Statuette of Socrates." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 45 (1925): 255-261.

"Snub-Poemed"

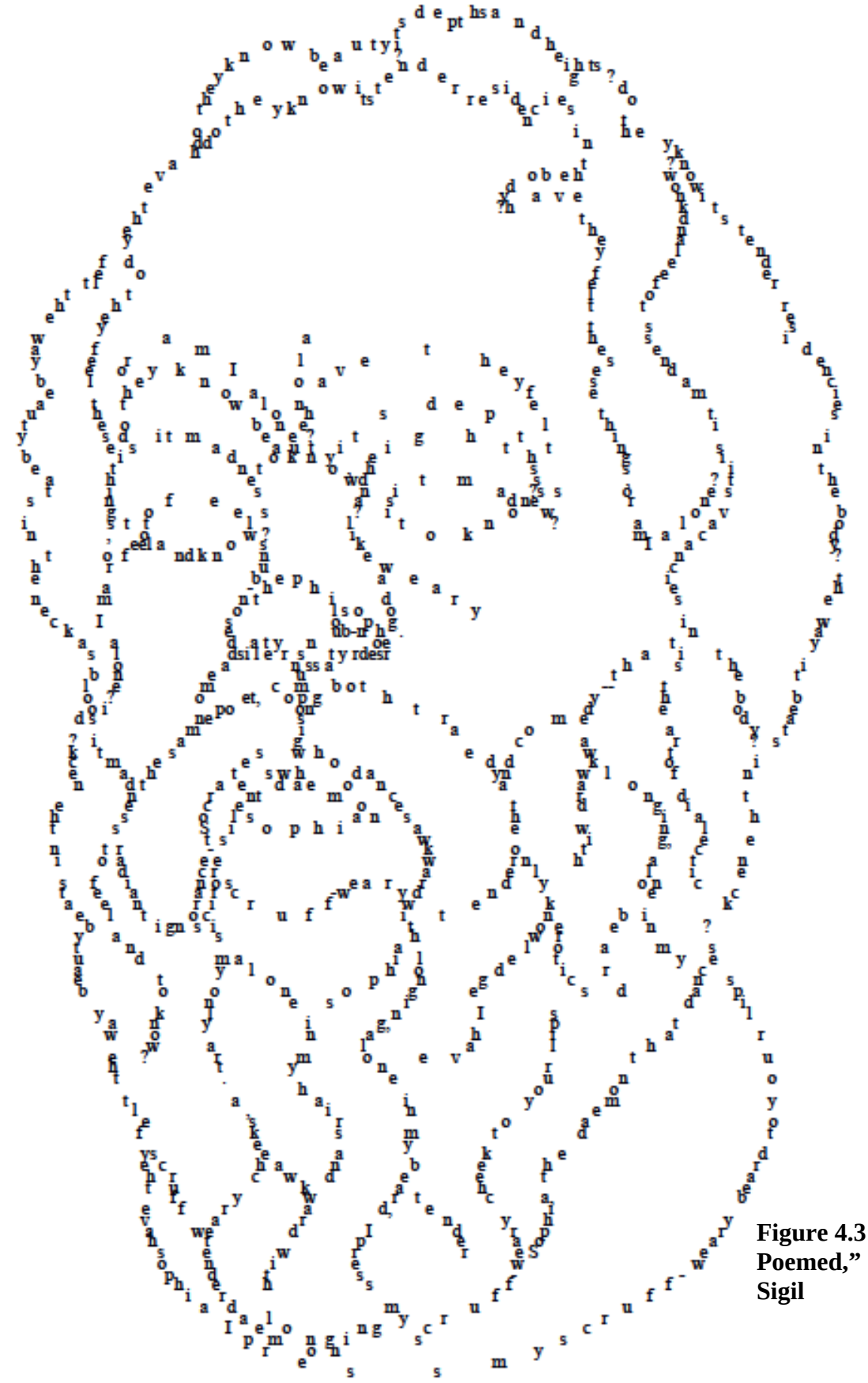

Figure 4.3: "Snub-Poemed," Johannes Sigil

maxim claimed, “Other artists make men as they are. I make them as they appear.”); the oscillating history of the reception of Socrates, wherein he appears in turns as the empirical “face” of critical negativity—the death of tragedy—and then again as the Socrates of the *Symposium*, or Nietzsche’s “Socrates who dances.”[209]

The hermetic text that composes the image of Socrates represents an alluring concatenation of absurdity and quiet sentiment, consisting in a collage of Socratic aphorisms (“the same poet composing both tragedy and comedy”); allusions to various Platonic dialogues (“satyr”; “the philosopher is a dog”); soundbytes from the history of Socrates’ reception (“Socrates who dances”); poetic articulations of Platonic philosophy in the first-person (“is it madness to feel and to know?”); lyricized renditions of the same that blur the boundaries between them (“awkward with longing”); as well as quotations and paraphrases of the poet’s own work, self-consciously (mis)attributed to “Socrates” and woven into the fabric of intertext without indication of where one ends and the other begins. The repeated “I press my scruff-weary beard to your lips” occurs in a slightly different iteration in 2013’s “anxiety/immortality,” worth quoting because both versions speak to the multiple senses of receptive “poeming” and “snubbing” in “Snub-Poemed”:

> [2]I’ll *aufheben*
> yr Latinate
> brain matter,
> & press my scruff-
> weary cheek
> against the mouth yr hippo-
> campus feeds[210]

[209] Both characterizations come from Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music* (Penguin, 2003). James I. Porter’s *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on the Birth of Tragedy* (Stanford University Press, 2000) first introduced me to these multiple “Socrates” internal to Nietzsche’s thought. For an intelligent if somewhat dated intellectual history of the reception of the figure of Socrates in Mill, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, see Levi, Albert William. “The idea of Socrates: the philosophic Hero in the nineteenth century.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17.1 (1956): 89-108.

[210] Sigil, Johannes. “anxiety/immortality.” *Versal* 11 (2013).

On the one hand, “Snub-Poemed” snubs the classical by “putting words in the mouth” of Socrates, making the classical figure stand for its own, local poetics, ventriloquizing the present through the mouth of the past. The ventriloquism of the “beard” or “scruff” might speak to the ways in which a bearded institution presses its image into a classical text, or receives its bearded impression, or in turn *presses* that image to the lips of the pedagogical subject. Or again, it might speak to the ways in which, from Aristotle to Alvin Plantinga, the concrete physicality of Socrates’ “snub-nose” becomes the characteristic abstraction in philosophical discussion of “qualities”—the way that Aristotle transforms the “snub-nosed” dramatic figure of the ugly, satyr-like Platonic Socrates into an arbitrary analytical example: “a quality, say as in the case of the snub-nosed”—and the ways in which this physical characteristic offers, at bottom, only the illusion of irreducible fact: Is the “snub-nose” a physical description, or a Platonic invention, chosen as a “snub” to Socrates’ detractors?

Similar to the dual functions of assimilation in Zukofsky’s work, Sigil’s receptive “poeming” encompasses both destruction and preservation, consumption and excretion, abstraction from embodiment and embodiment of abstraction. The Socrates created by “Snub-Poemed” is such an assimilation, transforming a series of fragmented material characters into a human face; and it is also a movement *against* such an assimilation, refusing to give up the countless threads of textual mediation that compositely form “Socrates,” asking the textual reality to speak for itself. The classical text is not the aggressor in this erotic interplay: “[I’ll] press my scruff- / weary cheek / to your lips.” The text does not kiss: It presents itself for a kiss, requesting a tender, perhaps even maternal impression of lips on bearded cheek—the contradiction of the elder or ancient becoming once again the child, in its turn requiring the “lips” of the present to respond to its need. Aggressive yet tender, antagonistic but pleading, this

receptive "*aufheben*" empties the Latinate register of the hippocampus into a "hippo- / campus" (perhaps a bloated cultural institution?). At the end, we find that the boundary in "Snub-Poemed" between myth and fact, ideal and historical, is indiscernible—indeed, that perhaps this distinction is more pedestrian and less urgent than we might have first imagined. Like *Nox*, "Snub-Poemed" offers a glimpse into the irreducible, three-dimensional interiority of the classical, and even of the "humanist subjects" constructed within its matrices—even as it insists on the two-dimensionality of the same, the lie of the classical, the disparity between idea and text, text and object. We see a fragmented arrangement of characters; we see the face of Socrates.

More than ever before, the texts of classicism have a wildly ambivalent status in the poetic avant-garde. Modernism's reception of "Classics" intimately bound their legacy with experimentalism's self-imposed demand to "make it new": "All in all," writes Ginsberg, "I (and most of my poetic confreres) have arrived at the "Classics" thru Pound. Singlehandedly he has rescued them from the oblivion they occupied in the murky human heads of formal "teachers" paid by institutions to cultivate that area of letters" (56).[211] For Ginsberg and other experimental poets after modernism, the productive legacy of Greek and Latin intermingles with modernism's legacy of formal experimentation, linguistic innovation, and poetic resistance. Each poet considered in this dissertation takes some position with regards to classicism's potentials as a critical capacity that might cut through the present's narrow constructions of cultural authority, and as a model for *re*-creating the image of the past according to the peculiar needs of the present. The various values and images according to which classicism represents the textual past participate in and at times create the present. For these poets, "classicism" is a machine that

[211] Auden, WH, et al. "An "Arion" Questionnaire: the Classics and the Man of Letters." *Arion* (1964): 6-100.

creates originary texts, and originary texts in turn create reality. Create new "originals" and one creates new realities.

On the other, the classics continue to represent the hegemonic institution of academic poetry and criticism. The pre-established tension between the aesthetic vanguard and the hegemonic institution has grown ever more bitterly polarized, and this increasing antagonism plays out on the battleground of "classicism." The horizon of expectations is the record of what has been done, and the vast archive of the *destruction* of what has been done: an overwhelming graveyard of defanged works. This graveyard of defanged works composes the present, in important ways, both promising and threatening with assimilation. In this way, Zukofsky's perspicacious critique of classicism paradoxically functions as an exercise of the same. In the very movement of piercing the shroud of universality, Americanism, and cultural centrality imbued to texts by classicism, Zukofsky's critique—necessarily, according to the laws of philology radical or stodgy—pull its own rabbits from its own hat. As for Zukofsky, the classics for these authors represent a wildly fluctuating site of sedimented power and critical possibility.

Although the meaning of the classical in experimental poetry after modernism is more ambivalent than ever before, there is no doubt as to its continued urgency. The bluntest, least speculative (but still startling) effect of the dissertation is to demonstrate that, from high modernism to Language, neither intense criticism of classics and canon, nor the progressive shift away from particular texts into metatextual modes of reception, has seen a significant decrease in the receptive circulation of the classics in both the popular imagination and poetic practice. Perhaps the most quizzical aspect of classicism's persistence is in the progression towards metatextual modes of reception. One way of seeing this movement into the metatextual is as the progressive atextuality of classicism or tradition; another way of seeing it is as the progressive

textuality of reality. The New American Poetry shifted the focus of poetics from epitextual to paratextual modes of classical reception, emphasizing the processes rather than the content of classic and canon, and the ability of classicism to persist beside a text's discrete language. The poetics of paratextual reception explore the historical contingency of classic, canon, and tradition. This shift in emphasis both proceeded from and potentiated a heightened sense of the formal dimensions of social experience, a parallax shift in which the objective, universal, and given, resolved as built (Catullus the singer of plainspoken American English resolves as a local invention),[212] and the attendant realization that that which has been built can also be demolished or modified (if the classical can become American and the American classical, why can't the Beat become classical and the American become Beat?).

The poetics involved in affecting this transition from content to process involved a number of complex, often self-reflexive, formal and aesthetic strategies. Ginsberg's paratextual or procedural classicisms began with an intensive, epitextual engagement with a Latin text, and proceeded towards isolating—and thereby appropriating—aspects of the classical from the classic text. Spicer, for his part, explored the same phenomena as basic conditions of poetics, language, and culture: Try as one might to escape the predetermined forms, they limit the shape of poetics as the synapse limit the shape of the accepted chemical. In this sense, both Ginsberg and Spicer's poetics were already beginning to explore the existence of classicism apart from classical texts—the paratextual or epiphenomenal classicisms related to Greek and Latin texts. The shift to metatextual strategies of reception in Language poetry hinges around an additional encounter with the historical density of the affirmative nature of the present, the impotence of mere "arrangements of words" to affect its cultural and social syntax. The same contingency that

[212] This shift seems to be related at least in part to the proliferation of new media technology.

initiates the transition from the epitextual to paratextual resolves as the catalyst for the transition to the metatextual.

The narrative shift from paratextual classical reception to metatextual is somewhat more than I have led the reader to expect—in some ways it is the central disciplinary challenge of the dissertation—challenge, both as a hurdle to overcome, and as a gauntlet thrown down. The movement to metatextual reception foregrounds a number of questions that I did not fully develop in the context of Chapters Two or Three, but which, I believe, involve perhaps the most urgent methodological risks and potentials for reception studies as a discipline and methodology. If classical reception, for many of these poets, moves beyond Greek and Latin texts, what obligates classical reception studies stop at Greek and Latin texts? Likewise, on what grounds does one treat Bernstein's poetics as instances of classical reception—offering themselves as they do as ideal objects of *classical* reception studies—in light of the fact that they contain no classical texts? Having stopped at ancient Rome, touching only lightly on its movement through the wildly rich and complex development of Ginsberg's oeuvre—arguably the most influential oeuvre in 20th century poetics, to be sure—how complete is our understanding of the ultimate function, development, influence, and evolution of reception in Ginsberg's verse? Why does classical reception studies stop at Ancient Greece, and arbitrarily refuse to follow classicism into Israel or India? How complete would our understanding of Spicer be if it only looked at the function of Greek and Latin texts in his verse, refusing to examine the assimilated, homogenous presence of other textual traditions—Anglo-Saxon, Biblical, Egyptian—whose side-by-side juxtaposition with the Greek is essential to its meaning and work? On what basis?

May I suggest that "Greek and Latin language" is not a methodology—at best, it is a disciplinary habit—at worst, a closed ideological circuit. If classical reception studies is to truly

follow the implications of the dual contingency and density of its foundations to their limits, then classical reception studies cannot be—or cannot merely be—"classical" reception studies, but must become, once again, reception studies: *Rezeptionsästhetik*. The poetics explored in this dissertation imply that classicism can be a productive social force, a site of cultural development, by turns offering the resources to negate the present's affirmative nature and creating newly affirmative identifications, into which the present might grow. For this promise to be more than a parlor trick, Greek and Latin, canon, and classical must be able to lead legitimately beyond themselves. Reception studies, if it is to be worthwhile, must be equally able to understand how canon becomes anti-canon, how a truly negative energy might develop *within* the context of the tradition's dialectical pull, but also move legitimately beyond it in an arc of true rupture, rather than mere accretion. My challenge to reception studies is that it must be able to account for the legitimately new, that which negates what came before, both within the canon and without. Greek and Latin texts are illustrative metonyms for the processes of reception and the historical articulation of culture and archive as such. But to end at Greek and Latin, full stop, is to amputate the fruits of what this perspective makes possible. For classical reception studies to truly fulfill its calling and unlock the fullest potentials of the discipline called "classical reception studies," it must forsake classical reception studies, moving beyond it to become merely—fully—*reception* studies. Reception studies should be a participant in the process that Ginsberg describes as "the elements of reference have multiplied" and in the creation of tradition(s).

If to classical reception studies I propose an increased emphasis on the contingency of classical texts—the ability for a Greek text to be Indian or Semitic, or a string of random characters to be Greek—then to discourses of poetic innovation and avant-gardism I propose the challenge of classicism's historical density. The avant-garde critical impulses traced out in this

dissertation are already well acquainted with—and in some ways begin in—the contingency of the classical, the ways in which the museum walls invisibly ground their objects, creating Catullus as straight, Homer as white, the classical as "our origin." The reaction against classicism as a guarantor of cultural capitalism has been so strong that it has sometimes blinded itself to its reliance on the museum walls, or the ways in which it comes into being as a critical subject from within the museum walls:

> …and this is the great democratic vista of our mutual endeavor in arts and letters, the source of our greatest anxiety and our greatest possibilities. In literary studies, it is not enough to show what has been done but what it is possible to do. Art works are not just monuments of the past but investments in the present, investments we squander with our penurious insistence on taking such works as cultural capital rather than as capital expenditure. For the most part, our programs of Great Books amount to little more than lip service to an idea of Culture that is encapsulated into tokens and affixed to curricular charm bracelets to be taken out at parties for display—but never employed in the workings of our present culture. ("A Blow Is Like An Instrument")

Ironically, in arguing that "there are no core texts," Bernstein's critical position becomes deeply idealistic, basing itself on a cultural "should" that ignores the material reality of the cultural "is"—there *are* core texts, and understanding and mastering the institutional literacies that create them as such is the pathway that Bernstein himself takes to 1) awareness of the contingency of Greek and Latin vis-à-vis "core text," and 2) working against the institutional codes that make them handmaidens to high culture snobbery. In this instance, Bernstein's poetics are wiser than his criticism. The access to and proficiency in these forms and literacies is often crucial in the movement against them, and the capacity that might allow various avant-garde moments to influence the center.

I believe it is time to reexamine canon debates and the place of classical texts as part of a shared cultural vocabulary in classroom instruction in light of the question, "Removing the canon from classroom instruction denies access and acquisition of cultural literacy to whom?" If

acquisition of and literacy in some degree of cultural capital has been a key factor in especially the bid for cultural position and capital by marginalized voices, then concealing or denying access to the most embedded artifacts of literary capital denies the access to the very resources that often make "position-takings" possible.[213] This is true particularly in light of the fact that the regression of the classical from university curricula has done little to alter its presence and hermeneutic power as embedded in the broader culture beyond the reach of the institution. The idea of the classical remains a keystone in the regulation of literacy and the distribution of cultural wealth. Without some sense of the processes whereby Homer became white, will not the walls of the museum remain invisible? The poetry herein 1) argues against the institutional decline of canon, and 2) suggests alternate strategies of disseminating that canon as utilizable capital—"capital expenditure" as Bernstein names it. Though "How did Homer become white?" first appears as a rhetorical jibe—obviously Homer is not white, Catullus not American, and so on—it must be asked a second time as a truly searching question: how *did* Homer become white? The answer to this question will in turn propose a third: "How might Homer *un*become white?" Has the time come for a "minority history" of the canon itself?[214] Although reception studies and avant-garde classicisms reveal that there is nothing "inevitable" about canon's "embodiment of hegemonic cultural values," neither do they offer assurances that asking these questions will produce measurable results. Nevertheless, removing these texts from the classroom guarantees the invisibility of vast portions of the museum walls.

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[213] Bourdieu develops this concept in *The Field of Cultural Production.* See Bourdieu, Pierre, and Randal Johnson. *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. Columbia University Press, 1993.
[214] See Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (New Edition)*. Princeton University Press, 2009: ""The expression "minority histories" has come to refer to all those pasts on whose behalf democratically minded historians have fought the exclusions and omissions of mainstream narratives of the nation" (97)

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of classicism is its invisibility. Classicism folds itself into the past such that the boundary between text and representation vanishes. Indeed, one of classicism's most characteristic gestures is to offer the *image* of a textual fantasy—to make visible the previous generation's misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and recreations of an invented or inaccurate classical past—as the very movement that appears to lift it above the historical fray and assert its objectivity. Classicism hovers at the boundary between critique and ideology, and its double-binds produce simulacra of the past that are difficult to separate from the "actual" historical and textual realities they purport to make intelligible. The double bind of classicism is that its ideological fantasies arise out of the very processes of attempting to access or reproduce the "actual" classical text, to make it available to the present. Whether his intentions are noble or disingenuous, the tyrant in this scenario holds the only keys to the overthrow of tyranny, and only tyranny may overthrow the tyrant. Language *is* the illusory blue screen of representation, and thus the classical—its image, its hegemonic forms, the drive for an "authentic" classical past underneath or behind the images—is a crucial trope in which the distance between degrees of illusion might collapse, offering the residual, briefest glimpse of the alien kernel at the heart of the present.

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