The Self in the Song: Identity and Authority

in Contemporary American Poetry

by

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Contents

Abstract

Provocative recent scholarship has sought to revise, historicize, and challenge a commonplace of reading lyric: the illusion of personal encounter in the language of a poem. The work of lyric theorists has enriched and complicated potential answers to a persistent question: what do we encounter when we read a poem? In *The Self in the Song*, I argue that the work of Adrienne Rich, Mark Strand, Derek Walcott, and Charles Wright formulates similar questions and offers complex and resonant responses. I demonstrate the remarkable skepticism with which they portray the self, as an idea with political, philosophical, geographic, and theological implications. In poems that enact and foreground their own poetics, they articulate complex theoretical concerns about the artificiality of the speaking "I" and the belatedness of the self with regard to language. Moreover, I read their poetry as heralding and exemplifying the emergence of our complex contemporary poetics from an historical moment in the 1970s and 1980s when the work of poststructuralist theorists and practicing poets came into productive conversation, often centered around the question of the apparition of the self in literary language and its philosophical and political implications. The lasting influence of that contact demonstrates that the opposition of "experimentation" to "tradition," as articulated by the Language Poets and other historical poetic avant-gardes, is another false binary among many that have oversimplified the multifaceted history of American poetry. Although the four poets I consider have received varying degrees of scholarly attention, they are almost unanimously considered exemplars of what Charles Bernstein has dismissively called "official verse culture," both in the praise of its cultural arbiters and in the oppositional avant-garde critique of that culture. I read their work in and against these contexts, also using my reconsideration of their poetry as an opportunity to call for a fresh approach to the complexity of the illusion of personal encounter in the lyric poem, for new avenues to perceive the variety of writing and thinking across the spectrum of poetic practice in the United States, especially as we seek to understand what we mean by authority and identity in poetry.

Introduction

I celebrate myself and sing myself
                         WALT WHITMAN

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
                         EMILY DICKINSON

My two epigraphs inaugurate in American literature two apparently opposing lineages of thought about the nature of the self as we encounter it in poetry. At one pole, Walt Whitman would project an expansive, permeable self among and through his fellow men and women, across the continent and across time; all that would belong to him, he says, "as good belongs to you" (1.3). At the other pole, Emily Dickinson seems to whisper to a potential confidant: "Are you—Nobody—too?"—confessing the terror of being "Somebody" ("[I'm Nobody!]" 2, 4). The self is oceanic; the self is a prison. So far as Anglophone poetry in North America since Whitman and Dickinson has served as a stage for thinking about the self, that thinking has oscillated between celebration and denial, often demonstrating contradictory elements of one in the other. Is it possible, our poets have asked, to be a celebrated, sung self and "Nobody" at the same time?

In *The Self in the Song: Identity and Authority in Contemporary American Poetry*, I consider the idea of the self as a site where some of the most compelling debates in contemporary American poetry are staged. I argue that, while in the last forty years the avant-garde "Language poets" have claimed as a distinctive feature of their practice a radical critique of the lyric "I," similar interrogations have taken place (if by other means) in what Charles Bernstein has dismissively called "official verse culture." I examine works by Adrienne Rich, Mark Strand, Derek Walcott, and Charles Wright as case studies in the

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"mainstream" poetic deployment of the self, as four eminent poets of "official verse culture" whose work proves all the more significant because of its unrecognized contributions to interrogations of the concept of selfhood. I argue that their poems are remarkable particularly in the skepticism and provisionality with which they portray the self, features that enact complex theoretical concerns about the artificiality of the speaking "I" and the belatedness of the self with regard to language.

This dissertation offers a twofold critical intervention. Although the four poets I consider in my chapters have received varying degrees of scholarly attention, they are almost unanimously considered exemplars of "official verse culture," both in the praise of its cultural arbiters and in the oppositional avant-garde critique of that culture. By clarifying and emphasizing the ways in which their work, like that of the Language poets, complicates and enriches our idea of the self, my readings enlarge our understanding of their individual contributions to a broader spectrum of contemporary American poetry. Moreover, I demonstrate that the opposition of "avant-garde" to "official verse culture" is a false binary that persists despite the passé and arbitrary rhetoric that surrounds it. The persistence of this binary—like others in the history of American poetry ("formal" and "free" verse, "the raw and the cooked")—diminishes our understanding of contemporary American poetry and poetic history. In *The Self in the Song*, I acknowledge the welcome tonic the Language critique represented for the prevailing period style in its specific historical moment, but I also advocate a more inclusive picture of the varieties of our verse cultures and their heterogeneous approaches to the idea of the self.

The question of the self in various guises has engaged poets as well as twentieth century thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. Their interrogations of the status of the self—and of the figure of the author in particular—have destabilized concepts of authority and subjectivity in ways that have proven fruitful for theorists and poets alike. Barthes famously goes so far as to declare "The Death of the Author" (1967), arguing that "to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the

myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" ("Death" 148).

"As a result," Foucault writes, "the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing" (102-3). Derrida's work on the concept of authorship is characteristically evasive; nevertheless he lingers on the idea of the proper name as that which "says death even while the bearer of it is still living. [. . .] Death inscribes itself right in the name [. . .]" ("The Deaths of Roland Barthes" 34). In this conception of language, literature, and authority, the author is a function of language rather than its master or marshal. What Barthes calls "the prestige of the individual" is stripped from the "original" author and returned to its proper origin in language itself ("Death" 143).

The poststructuralist turn to language would destabilize far more than the figure of the author, as Jerrold Seigel observes in his encyclopedic *The Idea of the Self*: "In these [poststructuralist] schemas the departure or escape from the modern condition, and sometimes from the whole Western heritage that lay behind it, went along with attempts to proclaim or effect the end of the individual, the 'death of the author,' or the demise of the human self or subject" (4). Gerald L. Bruns elaborates on the literary implications of this radical shift: "Poetry as a work of lyric expression that gives intentional form to experience now gives way to a conception of poetry as the work of language, where the words of language are no longer construed as signs but have become, mysteriously, agents of their own activity" (354).[1] This shift in focus and value from the figure of the author to the idea of language allowed poststructuralist thinkers to claim a decentering of the author, the individual self, and the individual philosophical subject, all of which they identify as historical phenomena rooted philosophically in the Enlightenment and poetically in Romanticism. But the work of destabilizing of the self, and of language itself, has been an

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[1] The trouble with construing language as an agent of its own activity will manifest itself in challenging ways in the work of the four poets under consideration here, and particularly in the work of Mark Strand.

implicit function of poetry at least since Aristotle identified metaphor as "the application of a noun which properly applies to something else" (9.3, p. 34). If, as Aristotle argues, metaphor is one of (if not *the*) most important aspects of poetic language—that a noun can signify something other than itself—then poetic language is always semantically unstable (9.4, p. 37). This notion is the cause of both consternation and delight. The quality of poetic language that Roman Jakobson calls "poeticity"—"an element sui generis, one that cannot be mechanically reduced to other elements"—consists in part in this nominal instability, the capacity for some uses of language to say one thing, mean another, and to be understood as doing both at the same time (378). Moreover, the implicit contradictions of figurative language provide a useful avenue for approaching the paradoxes of the self, among them that what so many of us feel constitutes our individual or unique essence—self, soul, personality—is conceivable only in relationship to others.

Bruns's description of "poetry as the work of language" appears in an essay on Foucault, but his words might also serve as an accurate depiction of the aesthetics of the North American avant-garde "Language Poets." Lyn Hejinian, who has long been associated with Language writing, supposes that "writing begins not in the self but in language, which is far larger than the self, and prior to it. So writing, like reading, begins at a point which is 'not-I'," a point which poststructuralist theorists and Language poets alike might identify as language itself ("Roughly Stapled"). Drawing on these poststructuralist critiques of notions of the self and authorship, some Language poets have identified the portrayal or expression of the self as the basis for their critique of a poetic "mainstream" that Bernstein labels "official verse culture" ("Academy" 248). Oren Izenberg summarizes the Language critique as such:

> a rebellion against the perceived dominance of poetic modes that emphasized the fundamentally expressive and subjective nature of the art [. . .]. In contrast, the Language poets emphasized the arbitrariness of signification and the constructive character of meaning-making. In their hands, [language] was

neither a vehicle for the narration of selves, the communication of messages, or the transmission of feelings. It was, rather, a *medium*: matter to be arranged, disassembled, and reconfigured [. . .].   (784)

The Language poets' critique of the lyric portrayal of self was an innovative and compelling challenge to certain prevailing assumptions and habits of a mainstream branch of discursive, apparently "personal" poetry. Their critique, however, both depends upon and fosters an "us and them" rhetoric that clouds our picture of contemporary poetry and of the Language poets' contributions to it. Such rhetoric is common enough among avant-garde movements, and may even be necessary in order to coalesce disparate poets and ideas into a movement. Nor is the tendency to divide poetry into false binaries unique to avant-garde critiques or to the poetics of the United States. As Izenberg writes in *Being Numerous*: *Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*, one can oppose "Plato's account of the passion-driven and imitative poet (banished) and the properly devotional and moral poet (welcome) for example, or Schiller's classification of poets and stages of culture as 'naïve' and immediate or reflectively 'sentimental'" (5). To those examples I would add the opposition of "the raw" to "the cooked" in midcentury American poetry; an "experimental lineage" against a formal and metrical strain; the "school of quietude" against linguistically innovative work (Lowell, Tobin 174, Silliman "Monday"); or even Whitman against Dickinson, the binary with which I begin this introduction. Such binaries are false, but they persist because they are useful at least for the purposes of classification. Nevertheless, unless we use those binaries as points of entry into a conversation that complicates them, they obscure our picture both of contemporary poetry and its genealogy by oversimplifying—or even by creating—its supposed "camps."

One of the lasting effects of such false binaries is that, thirty years after the Language poets first framed their critiques of "official verse culture" and twenty years after those poets began to be subsumed into whatever official verse culture is supposed to be, the culture(s) of poetry are still described as divided; books and anthologies are still marketed

along those imaginary lines. We are more likely to imagine that the awarding of the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry to "postlanguage" poet Rae Armantrout represents a détente between camps rather than evidence that the metaphor of "camps" fails to describe with any accuracy the situation of contemporary American poetry. These issues may no longer dominate the pages of *Critical Inquiry* and *Social Text*, but they still insinuate themselves in anthologies and thus in college syllabi and the process of canon formation. That is to say that even if many scholars and poets have moved on to other concerns, many others have not.[2] Neither have the anthologists whose products still represent a powerful means of canon formation and transmission. The 2009 anthology *American Hybrid*: *A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, edited by Cole Swenson and David St. John, focuses on "the new poem—the hybrid—a synthesis of traditional and experimental styles" (Amazon.com tagline). In 2013, W. W. Norton published the second edition of Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry*, an anthology that "hopes to assert that avant-garde poetry endures in its

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[2] In December 2012, for instance, *Boston Review* published a forum, "Opposing Terms: A Symposium on the Poetic Limits of Binary Thinking," occasioned by Marjorie Perloff's essay "Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric," published in the magazine in May of that year. In her essay, Perloff reasserts her sense of the uniformity of contemporary poetic practice in the United States, describing a "poetry establishment" in which:

> Whatever the poet's ostensible subject—and here identity politics has produced a degree of variation, so that we have Latina poetry, Asian American poetry, queer poetry, the poetry of the disabled, and so on—the poems you will read in *American Poetry Review* or similar publications will, with rare exceptions, exhibit the following characteristics: 1) irregular lines of free verse, with little or no emphasis on the construction of the line itself or on what the Russian Formalists called "the word as such"; 2) prose syntax with lots of prepositional and parenthetical phrases, laced with graphic imagery or even extravagant metaphor (the sign of "poeticity"); 3) the expression of a profound thought or small epiphany, usually based on a particular memory, designating the lyric speaker as a particularly sensitive person who really *feels* the pain, whether of our imperialist wars in the Middle East or of late capitalism or of some personal tragedy such as the death of a loved one. ("Poetry on the Brink")

Boston Review poetry editors Timothy Donnelly and B. K. Fisher asked eighteen respondents for their opinions regarding binary thinking in contemporary poetry. I might count my own dissertation as, in part, a nineteenth response.

resistance to dominant and received modes of poetry; it is the avant-garde that renews poetry as a whole through new, but initially shocking, artistic strategies" (Hoover xxxii). The impetus for each anthology proceeds from the premise that American poetry is separated into separate camps of traditionalists and experimentalists. Moreover, as Izenberg demonstrates, the persistence of the premise of opposing camps extends itself from the classification and interpretation of poetry into the poetic practice itself: "What began as a description of the art has been adopted by the artist as an obligation; the poet's felt need to find a productive community and a usable past has turned into the demand to pick a side; and style has become less a way of solving artistic problems than a declaration of allegiance" (8).

Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with the persistence of the oppositional model has begun to coalesce. In a recent essay on Louise Glück, Reena Sastri notes the enduring presence of the false binary model of contemporary poetics. "In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries," she argues,

> it can be difficult to recognize the complexity of a poem [. . .] whose metalinguistic and metafictional reflexivity remerges through spare, deceptively plain language and whose philosophical curiosity resides in the company of psychological insight and emotional immediacy. [. . .] Poetic practices that disrupt, interrupt, or refuse the fiction of voice can seem the only alternatives to indulging a naïve belief in the author's speaking presence in the poem. Such a stark choice obscured the varied possibilities for contemporary poetic practice and makes rich and flexible theorizations of lyric the exception. (188)

Similarly, in a review of Hoover's anthology, Michael Robbins draws on Izenberg's argument (and on John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* and Alan Golding's *From Outlaw to Classic*) to illustrate just how anthologies such as Hoover's, Eliot Weinberger's *American Poetry since 1950*: *Innovators & Outsiders*, and Douglas Messerli's *From the Other Side of the Century*: *A New*

American Poetry 1960—1990 create a binary system of poetry stars even as their editors claim only to be observing and collecting them:

> The editors imagine that what they are doing is collating the productions of alternative traditions that already exist within the poetic field, that subvert and threaten the field's dominant modes of writing and thinking. Each of the above projects is explicitly predicated upon the notion that there is a "mainstream," an establishment, usually figured as "academic," against which the anthologized poets are bravely swimming. [. . .]
>
> In fact, it is closer to the truth to say that this anthology, and others like it, have *created* the "other traditions" of "postmodern American poetry," "avant-garde poetry," "outsider poetry," "new American poetry," and the like. If the avant-garde historically represents a struggle against the institutional forms of cultural domination [. . .], what must we conclude about an "avant-garde" that is completely absorbed by and into those very institutions? Both Guillory and Golding argue persuasively that canons are made in and by the university—their mode of transmission is the syllabus. And these days you're as likely to see Rae Armantrout as Mary Oliver on a course syllabus in contemporary poetry (or in the pages of the *New Yorker*). (388)

I quote Robbins at length to illustrate and also to expand upon his claim that the editors of these anthologies create the mainstream the same mainstream their anthologies implicitly critique. More generally, to critique "official verse culture" is to create "official verse culture." Even if that phrase no longer offers any descriptive work, it survives as a cultural marker. ("You will note the absence of a *Norton Anthology of Mainstream Poetry*," Robbins continues [389]). Indeed you may be "as likely to see Rae Armantrout as Mary Oliver on a course syllabus for contemporary poetry," but you are far less likely to find them both in the same anthology. Those anthologies that do attempt such aesthetic inclusiveness are marketed as such: we would have no need for an *American Hybrid* if we did not already take

for granted two separate genealogies that we suppose to be inevitable and potentially irreconcilable.[3] It should—but too often does not—go without saying that the sort of "hybrid" poem St. John and Swenson describe is neither new nor distinctively American. One would be hard pressed to find a poem in the English language—just to limit the search—that does not "hybridize" tradition and experimentation, naturalism and artifice, the pure sounds of language and their referential valences. One certainly finds such work among the poets of "official verse culture," the Language critique of it notwithstanding.

In what follows, I shall examine the work of Adrienne Rich, Mark Strand, Derek Walcott, and Charles Wright as case studies, four poets who have established significant presences in the "official verse culture" of Anglophone poetry over the last sixty years, and whose work deserves further recognition for its contributions to the theoretical problematizing of the idea of the self.[4] When we argue about the self in poetry, we are also arguing about what we believe poetry ought to do—how we read it, how we write it,

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[3] I want to emphasize that editors and commentators can participate in and perpetuate such binary thinking even as they critique it. To her credit, Cole Swenson remarks in her introduction to *American Hybrid*:

> The notion of a fundamental division in American poetry has become so ingrained that we take it for granted. [. . .] This anthology springs from the conviction that the model of binary opposition is no longer the most accurate one and that, while extremes remain, and everywhere we find complex aesthetic and ideological differences, the contemporary moment is dominated by rich writings that cannot be categorized and that hybridize core attributes of previous "camps" in diverse and unprecedented ways. (xvii)

I wholeheartedly agree with Swenson's claim that we take for granted a model of binary opposition that does not accurately reflect the life/lives of poetry in the United States. I do not believe, however, that the work of poetic "hybridity" as represented in *American Hybrid* is unprecedented. On the contrary, the hybridization of influences, forms, techniques, and ideologies in American poetry is as old as American poetry.

[4] Although I hope to illuminate some of the inaccuracies in Bernstein's and others' portrayal of this "official verse culture," I adopt the term here and throughout not only to dispense with the quotation marks but also because it provides a useful figure for the way Language writers viewed poetic culture at large, and in many cases for how the citizens of official verse culture viewed themselves.

and what social purpose(s) poetry might or should serve. The poets I study in my four chapters share these concerns and enact them in their poems. I do not seek to use their work to refute the Language critique of self, but to complicate it and illuminate its varieties beyond the front lines of the poetic avant-garde. Whether terms such as "mainstream" and "avant-garde" remain relevant in contemporary poetry, the practices of reading and writing suggested by such terms are richer for the enduring presence of Language writing as well as the poets of official verse culture whose work explores similarly "avant-garde" concerns. The work of the four poets under discussion here represent an "alternate route," as Jerome McGann once described Language poetry, to an enlarged and enriched conception of the idea of the self in poetry.[5]

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[5] I refer to McGann's seminal essay on Language poetry, "Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes" (1987).

To a reader unfamiliar with the debates in Anglophone poetics of the last forty years, the term "Language poetry" may simply seem redundant. No one, we imagine, would quarrel with the idea that poetry is made of language. One of the recurring issues in Language poets' writing, however, is that the language of which poetry is made (and, for that matter, of which speech, writing, and thought itself are made) had become taken for granted in the poetics of the American mainstream. They perceived the dominant poetics of the 1970s and 1980s as one in which the ideal of poetic language was transparent, speech-based, "naturalistic"—a vehicle for the speaker of the poem to express the tension of a particular situation in his or her "own voice." The transparent language of these "workshop poems" took for granted the materiality of language, using language instead to portray or express the experience of the self, another concept too easily taken for granted.

For the Language poets, these habits and assumptions represented an abandonment of Modernist values and, moreover, a capitulation to the forces of American commercial capitalism.[6] Bernstein, for instance, associates such "'common voice' poetry" with "bestsellers," "TV," and other products of "the ideological strategy of mass entertainment [.

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[6] In "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto," Ron Silliman et al. write:

> On analogy to the visual arts, where the 'avant-garde' is felt to be a virtual commonplace, the situation of poetry is as if the entire history of radical modernism—Joyce, Pound, and Williams notwithstanding—had been replaced by a league of suburban landscape painters. The elevation of the lyric of fetishized personal "experience" into a canon of taste has been ubiquitous and unquestioned—leaving those writing in other forms and to other ends operating in a no-man's land in terms of wider critical acknowledgment and public support.   (262)

The authors of the manifesto equate the aesthetic "suburban landscape painters" of official verse culture to a sexual predilection here, and elsewhere to sociopolitical oppression: "These reactions of the new right (referring to "red-baiting" essays in *Commentary* and *The New Criterion*) attest to a hysteria that is now part of the dominant literary code; in a larger sense, a delimitation of the aesthetically possible that has political implications—in the exclusion of difference from normative forms of communication and action" (263).

. .]" ("Artifice" 55). The parade of scare quotes is required here because the Language poets challenged these very notions as the normative language of American poetry; language, they believed, must not be reduced to a medium of mere referentiality. Marjorie Perloff writes: "Here, in a nutshell, is the still largely misunderstood animus of the movement: poetic language is not a window, to be seen through, a transparent glass pointing to something outside of it, but a system of signs with its own semiological 'interconnectedness'" ("After Language Poetry"). In stressing the materiality and ultimate strangeness of language, as Perloff observes, the Language poets owe much to the Russian Formalists and to the French poststructuralists. Because I am primarily concerned with the Language poets' conception of self, and particularly with their critique of the self as manifested in "official verse culture" or what Ron Silliman calls "normative writing," I will emphasize their debt to poststructuralist thought, and in particular to the strain of anti-authorialism in the work of Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault ("Language, Realism, Poetry" xvi). The efforts of Language poets to trouble the normative assumption of a single subjective speaker of a poem derive from and reflect poststructuralist efforts to destabilize the figure of the author itself. For the Language poets, the issue at hand is not just that the language of a poem is not a window through which the speaker views the world, but that the entire notion of the linguistically mediated "persona" who speaks the poem is a similarly unchallenged assumption accepted as a poetic truism since the Romantic period.

Since much of what follows concerns the Language critique of a lyric "I" that is supposed to correspond to and express the feelings of a coherent, if imagined, speaker, I should first offer the caveat that there is no single such critique, nor even consistent agreement as to what the self is, just as there is no single entity or practice named by the term "Language poetry." In what follows, I speak of the self most basically as the object of one's own consciousness, whether given or constructed—an essence often considered to be unique to each human. This, I recognize, is an oversimplification of a concept of remarkable complexity, but such an oversimplification is necessary in order to treat with

any clarity the sense of self we encounter in poetry. That self may seem to be far more than the object of one's consciousness, as in Whitman's understanding, or as in Dickinson's, far less. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen and Erik P. Wiebe address this issue lucidly and succinctly: "Simultaneously, it seems, the self is both 'me' and 'I'; it is both the object of experience and the experiencing subject; it is both the source and product of identity; it is immanent and physiological yet transcendent and immaterial; it is unique, singular, and individual, but also universal, plural, and relational" (Introduction 10).

In poetry, the concept of self is closely related, but not necessarily identical, to "speaker" or "persona," in the sense that we tend to perceive the language of a text as originating in the consciousness of a single unified person or entity. While this notion differs, too, from the concept of "author," "self" and "author" are inextricably tied in the work of the poststructuralist thinkers and Language poets whom I consider here, particularly as they both emerge from the "prestige of the individual," in Barthes's phrase or, in George Hartley's, "the key ideological concept of bourgeois society: the self-sufficient, self-determined individual free to participate in the marketplace" (37, qtd. in Lazer 66). In their manifesto, "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry" (1988), Ron Silliman et al. address the Language writers' attempt to divert the apparent confluence of "self," "speaker," and "author":

> the self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged
> and exploded in our writing in a number of ways. What we mean by the self
> encompasses many things, but among these is a narrative persona, the fictive
> person (even in autobiography) who speaks in his or her poem about
> experience raised to a suitably aestheticized surface.   (263)

That this understanding of self is taken for granted in "official verse culture," and that, moreover, this understanding of self is fundamental to the terms of such a culture, represents one of the bases of the Language critique of normative writing.

Rooted in this critique, the term "Language poetry" and its related practices emerge as an avant-garde from the broader poetic culture of the 1970s and early 1980s, a culture which they oppose on aesthetic and ideological grounds. About this culture Charles Bernstein writes: "There is of course no state of American poetry, but states, moods, agitations, dissipations, renunciations, depressions, acquiescences, elations, angers, ecstasies; no music to our verse but vastly incompatible musics [. . .]" ("State of the Art" 1).[7] Similarly, one of the stated "projects" of Bob Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry* "is to unravel recent received ideas of language writing as a uniform practice" (11). One of my own projects here is to unravel parallel ideas of "official verse culture" or "normative writing" as a uniform institution or practice. Nevertheless, I recognize that generalizations of such "musics" are necessary, however troublesome, if one is to present a workable picture of the practices and philosophies that make them incompatible (if indeed they are). Just as my attempt to distill a unified Language critique of the self must represent one such generalization, the opposition to a monolithic "official verse culture" represents another, as if that title suggested a single official culture rather than several. It is difficult, as Perelman admits, to offer a positive definition of the "socially and aesthetically complex and in places strained or contradicting" practices of Language poetry.[8] He suggests, rather, that "the

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[7] I find this comment of Bernstein's far more productive for thinking about the entire scope of contemporary American poetry—if such a consideration is even possible—than his division of the poetic realm into "official verse culture" and experimental writing. Since the term "official verse culture" has become something of a commonplace in Language writing about "normative writing," I quote from his "The State of the Art" in part to emphasize that Bernstein more often than not does justice to the complicated picture of the "state(s)" of American poetry.

[8] Alternatively, I would offer the following quotations, all of which seem to me succinct and accurate synopses of the work of Language writing:

> Here, in a nutshell, is the animating principle of much of the poetry to come: poetic language is not a window, a transparent glass to be seen through in pursuit of the 'real' objects outside it but a system of signs with its own semiological relationships. [. . .] {Ed} McCaffery himself points to the Russian Formalists, to Wittgenstein, Barthes, Lacan, and Derrida as sources of his theory, and indeed language poetics, in this first stage, owes a great debt to French poststructuralism.

movement has been more united by its opposition to the prevailing institutions of American

poetry" (12). Even as Language poetry itself has become more integrated into "official verse

culture" (as Perelman notes in his book), the institutions against which the Language poets

defined themselves and the aesthetic practices of those institutions remain difficult, if not

impossible, to separate. This entanglement represents one of the objects of the Language

critique.[9]

Those institutions, assumptions, and practices do not receive the name "official verse

culture" until Charles Bernstein's 1983 lecture "The Academy in Peril: William Carlos

Williams Meets the MLA," in which Bernstein defends Williams as a poet too radical to be

accepted by such a culture:

(Perloff, "Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Talent" 8)

> [. . .] the self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged
> and exploded in our writing in a number of ways. What we mean by the self
> encompasses many things, but among these is a narrative persona, the fictive person
> (even in autobiography) who speaks in his or her poem about experience raised to a
> suitably aestheticized surface.   (Silliman, et al. 263)

> One of the cardinal principles—perhaps *the* cardinal principle—of American
> Language poetics (as of the related current in England, usually labeled 'linguistically
> innovative poetries') has been the dismissal of 'voice' as the foundational principle of
> lyric poetry.   (Perloff, "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject" 405)

> [. . .] a loose set of goals, procedures, habits, and verbal textures: breaking the
> automatism of the poetic 'I' and its naturalized voice; foregrounding textuality and
> formal devices; using or alluding to Marxist or poststructuralist theory in order to
> open the present to critique and change [. . .] Thus—to be schematic about it—
> language writing occupies a middle territory bounded on one side by poetry as it is
> currently institute and on the other by theory. Language writing contests the
> expressive model emanating from workshops and creative-writing departments; but
> its potential rapprochement with post-structuralist theory and cultural studies has
> been slowed due to the specific histories of poetry it presupposed.
>   (Perelman 12-13, 15)

[9] See also Andrew Epstein's "Verse Vs. Verse" for a more detailed narrative on the conflicts arising
from the assimilation of the Language avant-garde into the institutions of "official verse culture,"
particularly concerning the Marxist origins of the Language poets' critiques and practices.

Let me be more specific as to what I mean by 'official verse culture'—I am referring to the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Antaeus*, *Parnassus*, Atheneum Press and all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all of the major university presses (the University of California Press being a significant exception at present). Add to this the ideologically motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through prizes and awards judged by these same individuals. Finally, there are the self-appointed keepers of the gate who actively put forward biased, narrowly focussed [*sic*] and frequently shrill and contentious accounts of American poetry, while claiming, like all disinformation propaganda, to be giving historical or nonpartisan views. [. . .] What makes official verse culture official is that it denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimation and funding. (248, 249)

For the Language writers, mainstream poets' claims to objective authority—perhaps, rather, their failure to make such claims as the result of their presumption to objective authority— were among the most alarming and damning tendencies of "normative writing." The claim to exclusive legitimacy was so fundamental to official verse culture as to be overwhelmingly ignored by the officials making (often implicitly) such claims.

Language poets sought to undermine official verse culture's assumption of its own meritocratic objectivity in order to expose the instability of that culture's foundations and of the notion of objectivity itself. Consider, for example, Hank Lazer's quotation of and response to J. D. McClatchy's *White Paper*: *On Contemporary Poetry*, a book of essays that Lazer takes as exemplary of the assumptions of "official verse culture": "McClatchy (1989)

claims, 'I bear no ideological grudges. In fact, my brief is against those who would make American poetry over into images of any narrow critical orthodoxy. Ours is a heritage of heresies' (viii). *And the ideology of no ideology is one such heresy*" (57, my emphasis). Language poets have also identified this "ideology of no ideology" in the perceived resistance of mainstream poetry to literary theory, which Perelman identifies as one of the wedges between "official verse culture" and Language writing:

> Many features of this literary battle were reproduced on a wider scale by the introduction of poststructuralist thought into the American academy. While both were housed in universities, creative writing departments and English departments generally had nothing to do with one another; the advent of theory made the separation wider. Language writing was easy enough to subsume under the category of theory of postmodernism as part of a large tendency attacking self, reference, and history. [. . .] The mainstream poet guarded a highly distinct individuality; while craft and literary knowledge contributed to poetry, sensibility and intuition reigned supreme. The mainstream poet was not an intellectual and especially not a theoretician.
>
> (13, 12)

I find much of Perelman's argument here convincing, although the stance that the mainstream poet was not an intellectual seems to me difficult to defend unless one deliberately conflates "intellectual" with "theoretician." But the latter noun is more relevant here: in the early Seventies, the reigning theory of reading and interpreting poetry remained the New Critical model of T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, and Yvor Winters, among others, propagated by their students and students' students in the ascendant workshops and creative writing programs that Bernstein and others identify as the incubators of "official verse culture." Perelman's hypothetical mainstream poet was not a theoretician but a New Critic, if only by default, and New Criticism was so entrenched in the academic

interpretation of poems as to be no longer a theory but an unquestioned, even invisible dogma.

I will return to the poetic habits these workshops also incubated, the models for which were New Critical "close readings" of poems, as these habits and practices represent vulnerable and even necessary targets of the Language critique. In the meantime, since Language writing has been so closely associated with French poststructuralism (an association I continue here) and so opposed to a verse culture rooted in New Criticism, I want to turn to the intersection of New Critical orthodoxy and the advent of poststructuralist theory in the seminar and workshop.[10] Of particular interest here is the status of the figure of the author—and by extension, of the self—in both methodologies. If we apply a loose definition of "critical theory," by which we mean the rigorous interrogation of one's own assumptions of belief and practice, then mainstream poetry was certainly not particularly "theorized." More accurately, the theorization represented by the midcentury advent of the New Criticism had become received, unquestioned practice to the extent that a fresh challenge to that theory seemed anathema not only to the method but to the entire spirit of reading poetry.

Because the reading practices of both the New Critics and the French poststructuralists attempt to marginalize the figure of the author from consideration of a text, it may be useful here to sketch some of the affinities and differences, both philosophical and methodological, in their approaches. I refer specifically to the principle

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[10] To my mind, the most succinct statement of this association is Marjorie Perloff's in "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject":

> [. . .] the critique of voice, self-presence, and authenticity, put forward in [Charles Bernstein's] *Content's Dream*, as well as in such related texts as Ron Silliman's own *The New Sentence* (1987) or Steve McCaffery's *North of Intention* (1986), must be understood as part of the larger poststructuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject, a critique that became prominent in the late sixties and reached its height in the U.S. a decade or so later when the Language movement was coming into its own. (406-7)

of New Critical "close reading" that excludes the historical, biographical author from a reading of a text, as opposed to the more radical, poststructuralist announcement of the "death of the author," the influence of which persists still. As recently as 2001, Michael North has called Barthes's "obituary" for the author "the single most influential contemporary statement on authorship," an essay that "transformed the New Critical distaste for the biographical into an ontological conviction about the status of language [. . .]" (1377). Barthes's obituary nonetheless demonstrates certain similarities, worth noting here, to W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's caution against "the intentional fallacy" in their seminal New Critical essay of that name. "The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's," they argue, "(it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it.) The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge" (1234). This sounds rather Barthean in its emphasis on the public quality of language, the privileged position of the audience, and the obsolescence of the author following the creation of a text. Gerald Graff has written, similarly, that

> the New Critics anticipated structuralism in their insistence that, as Eliot put it, 'the poet has, not a "personality" to express, but a medium,' and in their tendency to see the operations of this medium as eternal and ahistorical. If we follow this line of reasoning far enough, we arrive at the view that it is language that writes the poem, not the poet.
>
> ("What Was New Criticism?" 139)

Graff's argument for the affinities between New Criticism and structuralism (and, eventually, poststructuralism) is useful in its demonstration that these theories of poetry and authorship were not as distinct as the supporters or detractors of any one theory would have one believe, especially in so far as they conceive of the role of "personality" in poetry. On the other hand, Graff fails to characterize the importance of the break from New Criticism

represented in the view that language, not the poet, "writes" the poem.[11] The difference I would emphasize here is less methodological than ideological: although Wimsatt and Beardsley claim that "critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle," they nonetheless refer to the author, however potentially ironically, as "the oracle" (1246). In marginalizing the historical author from discussion of the text itself, the New Critics also managed to set the figure of the author above the proverbial fray of interpretive debate, reserving to him a certain honored status even while seeming to discredit the relevance of authorial "intent." Excused from history and even his own biography, the author becomes not a person but a myth. This is the myth that Barthes and others would dispel; "we know," he says, "that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" ("Death" 148).

The New Critics' bracketing of the biographical facts of the author's life in a discussion (or, later, a workshop) of the poetic text may have successfully marginalized the historical author in a discussion of any individual poem, but the figure of the author was still regarded as the subjective source—the genius—of the text. North and others identify the cult of the original genius with the "Romantic authors, most notably Wordsworth," despite the poet's cognizance of "poetic ventriloquism" as he expresses in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (North 1381, Stillinger 5-6).[12] Denis Brown identifies this Wordsworthian model of

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[11] Although I criticize Graff's argument here, I am sympathetic to his attempt to break down some of the illusory distinctions between literary camps and periods. To my mind, his argument in "The Myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough," another essay collected in *Literature Against Itself*, is more convincing, and of particular relevance to a consideration of postwar avant-garde claims for novelty in literature and the arts.

[12] Wordsworth is a popular choice as the "source" of the modern self, at least as we read the self in and into poetry. Robert Langbaum's argument in *The Mysteries of Identity* is emblematic:

> Wordsworth establishes, on naturalistic, psychological grounds, a self as transcendent as the old Christian self created and sustained by God. He establishes a new certainty about self and the self's perceptions, after the dissolution of the old Christian certainty had been articulated by Locke and the other empiricists. [. . .]

the unified self as an opposition to "the skepticism of Locke and Hume," arguing that Wordsworth's "model of the organically unified, developmental self provides merely a fuller and more humanized version of the integral self of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is this unified transcendent 'soul' which Modernist poetic texts like *The Waste Land* and the Pisan *Cantos* radically dismantle" (4). Moreover, this unified soul in the figure of the author represents the "prestige of the individual" to which Barthes and other poststructuralists object. "The author is a modern figure," Barthes writes, "a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'" ("Death" 142-3). Writing two years later, Foucault identifies the "coming into being of the notion of 'author'" as "the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences" (101).

The poststructuralists' emphasis on the concept of the author as an historical phenomenon rather than a transcendent concept allows them to argue against its usefulness entirely. In their avoidance of biographical criticism concerning the historical author of a text, the New Critics honor the eminence of the author as a figure. In their elegiac revisions of the idea of textual authority, the poststructuralists transfer authorial eminence to the phenomenon of language, which, to return to Lyn Hejinian, is "far larger than the self, and prior to it." The question of priority seems of particular importance here. The thinking self emerges from language and thinks (*homo sapiens*) language; the Cartesian *cogito* holds only as the thinker articulates its existence in the moment of the linguistic act. Seán Burke argues:

> Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida were not content with simply sidelining the
> authorial subject as in earlier formalisms. A phenomenological training had

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Wordsworth establishes the model of the modern self-creating, self-regarding
identity, which draws its vital force from organic connection with nature.   (46, 47)

taught them that the subject was too powerful, too sophisticated a concept to be simply bracketed; rather subjectivity was something to be annihilated. [. . .] An era of theory is underway in which language is 'the destroyer of all subject'—the author of literary studies, the transcendental subject of philosophies of consciousness, the subject of political theory, psychoanalysis, anthropology. [. . .] Man can no longer be conceived of as the subject of his works, for to be the subject of a text, or of knowledge, is to assume a post ideally exterior to language. (14)

In such an "era of theory," the role of language is not merely the medium of human knowledge and communication, but the basis and the limit of human knowledge and human existence. Ludwig Wittgenstein—another thinker the Language poets claim as an intellectual ancestor—famously observes that "the limits of the language [. . .] mean the limits of *my* world" (5.62, p. 63). If the human subject is indeed subject to—"thrown under"—language itself, then the human subject cannot be the ultimate source of the most "expressivist" genre in literature, the lyric poem. Such a notion allows the Language poets to argue against the aesthetic excesses of a "transparent lyric" that privileges the perceived individual voice of a thinking, speaking self. In doing so they also challenge the very foundations of the idea of the self in the poem. Barthes's opening question in "The Death of the Author"—"Who is speaking thus?"—must be asked anew (142).

I will return to the issues and complications in theorizing the lyric and to their implications for the poetry seminar and the poetry workshop, between which, as Perelman suggests, a theoretical gulf had opened. At the same time, I want to be careful not to draw a false analogy in which New Critical interpretive practice is to its poststructuralist counterpart as New Critical poetic practice—the ironic, impersonal "well-wrought urn" of Cleanth Brooks and others—is to Language poetry. Here the history of poetic and critical/theoretical production are not quite parallel. Rather, at approximately the same time the poststructuralist death of the author had begun to trouble the New Critical waters in the United States (Barthes's essay first appears in *Aspen* in 1967), the more personal and expressive Confessional mode was coming to prominence in American poetry as the period style of the workshops, magazines, and prizes that Bernstein would later call official verse culture. Susan Rosenbaum observes the emergence of Confessional poetry

> as part of a more general resurgence of neoromantic poetics and a turn to
> autobiographical practices after World War II. Allen Ginsberg's effort in
> *Howl* to 'stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame,
> rejected yet confessing out the soul' spelled an end to poetic impersonality
> (Eliot) and the New Critical bias against intention and affect. (296)

This New Critical bias, as David Perkins writes, had come to seem "repressive and elitist, and the dense, intellectual idiom and closure of New Critical poetry seemed artificial." Moreover, Perkins writes, the classroom was both nursery and tomb for the New Criticism. "Once it was being taught to students as dogma, it was doomed" (348). The New Criticism may have been "doomed" as an interpretive dogma, but the close reading practice of bracketing the author endured in the poetry workshop, even as—and, as I shall argue, because—the poems produced in those workshops were blurring the lines between the supposedly irrelevant "author" and the all-important "speaker" of a poem.

The poetry workshop presents a peculiar laboratory for both the New Critical claim for the obsolescence of the historical author and the poststructuralist argument for the death of the author. The primary method of the creative writing workshop remains the close reading of poems as derived from New Critical practice, emphasizing poetic techniques from title to closure with a mind to evaluation in addition to interpretation.[13] Given the author's physical presence at the moment of his or her poem's critique by the instructor and other members of the workshop, a methodological separation between the author of the poem and the speaker of the poem was a useful stance as a matter of interpretation and evaluation and, less theoretically, as a matter of tact. Indeed, the physical presence of the author in the poetry workshop may have contributed to the alienation between theorists for whom the death of the author constituted a valuable interpretive method and poets for whom the very idea seemed pedantic at best and absurd at worst.

That the conventions of the workshop—New Critical in spirit if not in letter— coalesced at the same time the "Confessional" poems of W. D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and others were gaining praise and winning prizes helped to install this "workshop poem" as a period style that has endured, in some branches of the mainstream, to this day.[14] The persistence of workshop axioms like "find your voice" and "write what you know" testifies to the premium placed on an author's individual "style" (McGurl 23). In an era that valued the "first thought best thought" experience of poetic composition in

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[13] The "standard form of the workshop," as Mark McGurl describes it in *The Program Era*, "consists of students sitting around a table discussing each other's stories, with the professor sitting in as a moderator and living example of an actual author" (4). As McGurl admits, his study focuses exclusively on fiction, although in this case, "stories" and "poems" would be more or less interchangeable.

[14] That all three of my examples of Confessional poets were involved in workshops in the Fifties and Sixties as students or instructors is as much a testament to the emergence of the workshop as part of the process of accreditation for poets as it is to the emergence of the Confessional aesthetic within the workshop institutions.

addition to the product of that composition, the concept of style might have seemed to extend beyond the words on the page to the author's experiences themselves. In the context of such muddying of personal experience and authorial craft, the workshop separation between "author" and "speaker"—even when simultaneously reading the two as versions of each other—seems an almost Trinitarian article of faith, more often professed than explained. No matter whose voice was perceived as the "voice" of the poem, the Confessional poem was also unmistakably lyric (at least per a New Critical understanding of the genre), in the sense of "a kind of poetry that expresses personal feeling [. . .] in a concentrated and harmoniously arranged form [. . .] and that is indirectly addressed to the private reader [. . .]." (Jackson, "Lyric," 826). What was sanctioned aesthetically became canonized logistically: the major institutions for accrediting poets, from the graduate workshop to the glossy magazines (and even among many of the "little" magazines), also privileged the lyric form because of the economic concerns of time and space. In circumstances where a workshop may allow thirty minutes to read and critique a poem, or where a magazine can offer a page or less to print a poem, the lyric benefits from both the rule of convention and the law of scarcity.

This picture of the Confessional lyric as the default mode of the workshop and its debt to the New Critical model must be further complicated, however, by attending to what Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have called "lyricization"—the modern tendency to read all poems as generically lyric. "In Western poetics," Jackson writes, "almost all poetry is now characterized as *lyric* [. . .]. Over the last three centuries, *lyric* has shifted its meaning from adjective to noun, from a quality in poetry to a category that can seem to include nearly all verse" ("Lyric" 826). I have argued above that the Confessional period style emerged from a reaction against the aesthetic values of the New Critics as well as the New Critical practice of close reading in the poetry workshop. In her *Dickinson's Misery* and elsewhere, Jackson claims that even as the New Criticism fell from favor in its conception of the poem as object and the poet as oracle, its reading practices helped to install the lyric

as a genre that stood for all poetry. If the lyric came to stand for all poetry, then the Confessional poem came to stand, if not for all poetry, then for the normative mode of a verse culture in the process of becoming official. Jackson writes:

> [I]n the consolidation of 20th-c[entury] lit[erary] crit[icism] [. . .] the process of lyricization was accomplished, and a broad idea of the lyric became exemplary for the reading of all poetry. That example emerged from and was reflected in the predominance of the New Criticism, which took up a model of the personal lyric close to Eliot's as the object of close reading. In different ways, Am[erican] critics [associated with the New Criticism] assumed Eliot's definition of the personal lyric and used I. A. Richards's focus on individual poems in his "practical criticism" to forge a model of all poems as essentially lyric. That model was primarily pedagogical, but it became a way of reading that, in turn, influenced the way poems were written, and it remains the normative model of the production and reception of most poetry.[15]   ("Lyric" 832-3)

That the poem should seem to represent the experience of a single, subjective lyric speaker is a symptom of postromantic and neoromantic poetics in general, but it is more immediately a consequence of a multifaceted privileging of the short lyric coincident with an aesthetic of individual experience and feeling. It is to this aesthetic—"poet after poet writing his or her 'sincere,' sensitive, intimate, speech-based lyric"—as well as to the ideology of its poetics, that the Language poets objected so vehemently and, to my mind, often quite effectively (Perloff, "Avant-Garde Community"). When one considers these contributing factors, it is much easier to sympathize with the Language poets' view that to

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[15] For Jackson, this model of interpretation was so powerful as to extend well beyond poetry: "[Yvor] Winters's lyricization of poetry [. . .] thus extended to a lyricization of literature tout court, with the result that the reading of lyric became for Winters, as for New Criticism generally, the test case, the zero-sum game, of literary interpretation, and literature became the test case of cultural interpretation" (*Dickinson's Misery* 93).

undermine a particular aesthetic might mirror or even enable the undermining of everything from official verse culture to consumer capitalism itself.

It must be noted, though, that critiques of the normative mode arose from within official verse culture as well as from without. Notable among these critics were Donald Hall, who argued against the homogenization of poetry resulting from academic institutionalization, and the New Formalists, who based their arguments for a "new narrative" on their sense of the monotony of the free verse personal lyric. What Language writers called "transparent," "naturalistic," and "expressivist" Donald Hall called the "McPoem" (7). Of the "official verse culture" institutions of poetry and their effects on the production of poems, Hall was even more succinct (10): "*Iowa delenda est!*" What the Language poets perceived as a problem of aesthetics and philosophy Hall understood as a problem of mass production and professional (as opposed to aesthetic) ambition:

> At sixteen the poet reads Whitman and Homer and wants to be immortal.
> Alas, at twenty-four the same poet wants to be in *The New Yorker*. [. . .]
> We write and publish the McPoem—*ten billion served*—which becomes our
> contribution to the history of literature as the Model T is our contribution to
> a history which runs from bare feet past elephant and rickshaw to the vehicles
> of space. [. . .]
>
> To produce the McPoem, institutions must enforce patterns,
> institutions within institutions, all subject to the same glorious dominance of
> unconscious economic determinism, template and formula of consumerism.
>
> (4, 7-8)

Mark Jarman and Robert McDowell, two poets associated with the New Formalism of the 1980s and 1990s, offer a similar critique to different ends in their essays for *The Reaper*.[16] In their manifesto, "Where *The Reaper* Stands," they write:

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[16] Although the most famous New Formalist critique of official verse culture remains Dana Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" (1991), in which Gioia condemns the academic institutionalization of poetry,

> Most contemporary poets have forgotten [the Reaper]. Navel gazers and mannerists, their time is running out. Their poems, too long even when they are short, full of embarrassing lines that "context" is supposed to justify, confirm the suspicion that our poets just aren't listening to their language anymore. Editors and critics aren't listening much, either. Despite their best, red-faced efforts, their favorite gods—inaccuracy, bathos, sentimentality, posturing, evasion—wither at the sound of *The Reaper's* whetstone singing.
>
> (1)

Elsewhere, Jarman and McDowell are more specific about the shift they propose, one that includes a new emphasis on narrative rather than the ubiquitous free verse lyric of the workshop and little magazine, such poems "too long even when they are short." "American poetry has become anecdotal," they write; "short narratives concerning interesting or amusing events are sprinkled through meditations. These small stories are objects of the poet's beguilement. [. . .] But the poet who beguiles the reader with the story itself will answer that need in all of us—to learn about and understand our lives" ("The Elephant Man of Poetry" 46, 45).

A reader sympathetic to the Language critique might seize upon this last assumption—that the crafting of a narrative somehow offers genuine understanding rather than an artificial and illusory coherence—to suggest that what the New Formalists offered as an alternative to the institutional lyric was just another permutation of the same. The same reader might also argue that Hall's argument about poetic (as opposed to professional) ambition simply represents the replacement of one temporary canon with another that seems more permanent only because the assumptions that hold it in place are even more thoroughly internalized among poets and readers. My point here is not to endorse any one of these critiques of the dominant mode of the time, nor do I wish to defend that mode in

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Jarman and McDowell focus their critique more narrowly on the aesthetic excesses they find in the period style of the Seventies and Eighties, and on proposing a "new narrative" as an alternative.

its own right. I want to emphasize, rather, that the Language critique of official verse culture was one, if more radical and more lasting, among several. This critique persists not only because of its salience, but also because this salience allowed Language poets, allied with theoreticians in literature departments, to remake in their image the verse culture they had so successfully critiqued.[17] The Language poets' critique of self and their poems themselves have come to share the contemporary canon with the objects of their critique. This uneasy relationship is the subject of Andrew Epstein's "Verse vs. Verse," which explores the potential issues implicit in the absorption into official verse culture of so forceful a critique of that culture. I am more interested here in demonstrating that one reason official verse culture could absorb (to an extent) Language poetry was that the Language poets' critique of self was being enacted in some aspects of that culture, that Language poetry's proximity to theory provided a vocabulary for the investigations of selfhood I shall examine in the work of Rich, Strand, Walcott, and Wright.

My claims for the variety in official verse culture should not threaten the power of the Language critique of self, even as I would challenge its uniqueness. In fact, I believe that the Language poets' welcoming of critical theory into their own poetics has allowed us to see more clearly these theoretical issues at play in the work of other poets. Indeed, I want to stress that a poet need not imagine her- or himself to be writing "theoretical" work in order for that work to contribute to an ongoing theorization of the self or of poetry. Official verse culture was (and mostly remains) predicated on the "prestige of the individual," an idea that continues to be ratified in the poems official verse culture produces, publishes, and canonizes. This fact does not dismiss poststructuralist or Language claims for the decentering of the self; rather, it should demonstrate just how great was the Language poets' challenge in their attempt to explode the self "as the central and final term of creative practice" (Silliman et al. 263). For the Language poets, the self as presented and

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[17] For a detailed account of this process, I recommend Bob Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry* and especially Andrew Epstein's "Verse Vs. Verse."

privileged in official verse culture and throughout bourgeois society was at best an illusion and at worst a mechanism of oppression. Nevertheless, as Burke has shown, the more one attempts to jettison terms like "self" and "author," the more inevitably these figures haunt our discussions of literature.[18] Just as Eliza Richards contends that "it is difficult to imagine how one would go about discussing poetry if we were forbidden to use the terms *voice*, *speaker*, and other vocal terms [. . .]," it remains difficult to contemplate or discuss ourselves in poetry without also speaking of our selves (1525). If nothing else, the Language critique bares the mechanism of self-craft in our poetry. In order to assess more accurately the specific import of that contribution, we must acknowledge when and how other poetic practices accomplish similar ends by different means. We must also credit the work—and the problematizing—of self-fashioning in the official verse culture that once seemed a music incompatible with Language poetry.

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[18] This apparent paradox has proved especially troublesome as Language poets and poets who bear their influence have begun to receive more and more prestigious recognition for their individual work, most notably the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry to Rae Armantrout's volume *Versed* (2009). To her great credit, Perloff has addressed the troublesome persistence of the self and the "prestige of the individual." In "Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject," she writes that

> contemporary poetics has not satisfactorily resolved the relation of what [Fredric] Jameson calls the "new depthlessness" to the "genius" position now occupied by those evidently deep (read complex, difficult) theorists, whose word is all but law. [. . .] If genius theory is passé, if there is no such thing as unique style or authorial presence, why are these names [Adorno, Althusser, Freud, Lacan, Hegel, Nietzsche, Lyotard, Laclau, Marx] so sacred? If Foucault has pronounced so definitively on the author, why are we always invoking the name of the author Foucault? Again, if in the current climate we dare not claim canonical status for Beckett or Brecht, why does Walter Benjamin enjoy that status so readily?   (410)

Despite Charles Bernstein's claim that "official verse culture is not mainstream, nor is it monolithic, nor uniformly bad or good," Language writers and their advocates have tended too often to treat the poetry of "official verse culture" as mainstream, monolithic, and uniform all at once ("The Academy in Peril" 248). This is certainly an understandable tendency: an avant-garde must align itself against a prevailing sensibility, not a multitude of them.[19] Moreover, the tendency among Language writers to underestimate official verse culture was mirrored in that culture by a phobic skepticism that treated the Language project as a unified and pernicious threat to the mainstream ideal of poetry. Language writers have themselves criticized this tendency in official verse culture more piquantly than I might here. For my purposes I shall linger on the idea that, Bernstein's caveat notwithstanding, Language writers and those sympathetic to them have neglected poetic innovations in official verse culture with which they might otherwise sympathize, even in some of the very poets named as exemplars of the Language critique. Consider Marjorie Perloff commenting on Charles Wright:

> What *is* different [between Silliman or Howe's treatment of autobiographical
> material and Charles Wright's treatment of same] is not expressivity or
> subjectivity as such but the *authority* ascribed to the speaking voice [. . . .]
> There is no way Silliman or Howe could write such a poem [Wright's "*Disjecta*
> *Membra*"] because there is not a romantic *Einfuhlung* into the external—is
> there an external?—world. And, in this respect, we can differentiate quite

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[19] Perloff is especially perceptive on this point in her observation that the arguments of some Language poets "testif[y] to the characteristic avant-garde need to transform one's immediate adversary—in this case the 'natural' speech-based poetry dominant in the sixties—into a permanent condition and to make the case for one's own oppositional circle as having some sort of avant-garde purity and priority" ("Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Talent").

readily between their ethos and that of such mainstream postromantic poets as Charles Wright or Mark Strand or Louise Gluck [*sic*].

("Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject" 432, 433)

Perloff's bias toward Language poetry recommends her as one of the most important and eloquent prophets of the "movement;" however, she fails in this case to see the values she expounds in Language poetry—for instance, as we shall see, a poetry that "incorporates its own poetics"—at work elsewhere ("Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Poet"). As for Perloff's critique of Wright, I doubt there is a contemporary poet *more* skeptical than Wright is of the authority of the speaker or the self. But Wright's doubts do not easily fit into a Language schema; the episteme and poetics of his work owe as much to medieval apophatic theology as they do to poststructuralism. I attend to Wright's vocabulary of doubt in more detail in my second chapter. For now I hope this example will illustrate a "theoretical" concern in official verse culture that the Language poets have too rarely credited. This fact, too, should call to mind that the various factions of the poetic spectrum are divided along so many narcissisms of the small difference. Moreover, their movements among and against each other occur more gradually than the sudden coups we may in hindsight imagine them to have been.

We may note such geographical metaphors in Bob Perelman's mapping of Language writing as "a middle territory bounded on one side by poetry as it is currently instituted and on the other by theory" (15). In a similar spirit, Perloff writes that one consistent "principle" among the many variations of Language writing

is that poetry incorporates its own poetics, that it has a theoretical base. Perelman's own "Marginalization of Poetry," Bernstein's "Artifice of Absorption," Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* and *Melville's Marginalia*, Rosmarie Waldrop's *Reluctant Gravities*—all these are works that use poetic figuration and structure to present a particular poetics as well. As such, *theorypo* or *poetheory* as we might call it, was positioned as the very antithesis to the

epiphanic lyric of the Writing Workshop.

<div align="right">("Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Talent")</div>

Although Perelman and Perloff are certainly both correct in their claims for the importance of critical theory to Language poetry, their adjectives here are too limiting. Language poets may credit the notion of a theoretical base underlying their own poetics more readily than would the authors of the "epiphanic lyric of the Writing Workshop," but this no more qualifies the Language poem as unique than it disqualifies a theoretical basis for the workshop poem. Again, neither poet nor reader needs to identify as theorist in order to engage issues relevant to critical theory.[20]

When we read poetry of any style or movement with its theoretical implications in mind, no matter the poet's apparent affinity or distaste for critical theory, we can see more clearly how the question of the self is posed across the poetic spectrum. In the study that follows I focus on four poets of official verse culture because I believe that their contributions to these challenging theoretical issues have been underestimated or altogether ignored. In their work we may observe the persistence of the idea of self, of speaker and author, despite their skeptical and provisional portrayals of the self. In general among these poets, the self persists as Silliman describes it in "Who Speaks," as "a relation between writer and reader that is triggered by what [Roman] Jakobson called contact, the power of presence. There is no subject that is not, strictly speaking, intersubjective" (373). Silliman elaborates: "Neither the spoken voice, nor the 'I' that speaks graphemically on a sheet of paper, nor the body of the reader in front of an audience can ever truly *be* the self of the poem. What you or I or any other reader or listener might bring to the text [. . .] participates in that construction" (372). If we agree to Silliman's account of the poetic self, then this is true of the construction of all poems. Silliman might argue that Language

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[20] A self-identifying theorist may agree more readily with this proposition in reverse: that a theorist who writes a performative or exuberant prose—Jacques Derrida, say—might rival many poets for wordplay, metaphor, and even emotive power.

poetry allows the self-as-relation as a basis for the construction of the poem, while official verse culture seems to ignore the matter altogether. I argue that Rich, Strand, Walcott, and Wright employ the figure of the self with comparable skepticism but by different means. It has become a commonplace of the commentary on Language poetry that the practices of Language writing allow the reader or audience to participate more actively in the construction of the poem.[21] In this model of poetic creation, the mechanism of self-fashioning is laid bare; the reader creates the poem and its author as he or she reads; the self in the poem is between them. Far from being unique to Language poetry, though, we shall note a similar technique at work in Mark Strand's *The Monument* (1978), in which the sense of the poetic self persists between an assumed author and a hypothetical translator, or in Adrienne Rich's radical call for a more inclusive, Whitmanesque "we" to replace the "I" of patriarchal society.

The sense of self as crafted in the contact between one being and another forms an aspect of the model of selfhood Paul Ricoeur proposes in *Oneself as Another* (1990). Ricoeur argues "that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other [. . .]" (3). Ricoeur's sense of a relational self extends as well to the relations between the different versions of self in one biological person, relations that constitute what he calls "narrative identity" ("Narrative Identity" 73, *Oneself as Another* 113-68). Ricoeur asks:

> [D]o we not consider human lives to be more readable when they have been

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[21] For instance, Marjorie Perloff: "the constructivist aesthetic of Language poetry insisted on the making process itself, in all its anti-closure, incompletion, ad indeterminacy [*sic*]" ("Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Talent"). Charles Bernstein: "—In the end, a result of this conscious constructing is that of 'making strange', the 'alienation effect': To be able to see and feel the force and weight of formations of words, dynamics that otherwise go unnoticed; to feel it as stuff, to sound the language, and in doing so to reveal its meanings" ("Thought's Measure" 74). Hank Lazer: "[Lyn Hejinian's *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*] provokes in the reader a self-consciousness about how we do go about constructing (or taking or granted) continuities in the poem. And while the poem no longer offers us a single topic that it is 'about,' the poem does involve us in a dialectical tradition between possible continuities and radical discontinuities" (41).

interpreted in terms of the stories that people tell about them? And are not these life stories in turn made more intelligible when the narrative models of plots—borrowed from history or from fiction (drama or novel)—are applied to them? [. . . S]elf-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies.   (*Oneself as Another* 114)

It is not difficult to trace Ricoeur's proposal for a self crafted in relational, narrative space back to the model of self-fashioning through self-doubt that Wordsworth offers in *The Prelude*, especially if we consider Ricoeur's comment that "in many narratives the self seeks its identity on the scale of an entire life [. . .]" (115). If we do, we find that even the constructed, constructive "self" of the poem as proposed by Silliman and others inevitably shares a great deal of ground with the "tidy" (though they are often anything but) narratives of poems, novels, fictions, and even of our own inner logic of experience. To be fair, Silliman himself admits the insufficiency of his own position:

while I *personally* agree with Bob Perelman that 'the represented self . . . centered within a nest of moral, thematic, and metaphorical coherence,' presenting a 'prefabricated, conventional unity,' suppresses much of what I consider to be most important about living in the real world, I explicitly want to reject proposing that my own solution to this quandary of the writer might be generalizable and of prescriptive value to others. Any solution to the problem of ventriloquism and the crisis of the self in the poem is not to be found in writing as I do. What does seem evident is that evading the question altogether represents an even worse alternative.   ("Who Speaks" 369)

Far from evading the question, the ideas of self, voice, identity, authority, and subjectivity

are being engaged productively throughout our various verse cultures, among our supposedly incompatible musics, as we shall see in the work of the four poets under consideration in this study.

I would endorse a reframing of what Silliman calls the "crisis of the self in the poem." What may seem an immediate crisis in need of a solution might be more productively figured as a question—in Barthes's phrase, "Who is speaking thus?"—that modern poets and audiences have asked themselves in various terms at least since Samuel Taylor Coleridge's objections to the ventriloquism he perceived in Wordsworth. The shift in terms from speaker to language may foreground our sense of the force and priority of language, but it is less successful in killing the myth of the author, subject, or self in literature. In Gerald Bruns's account of the poststructuralist decentering of the author, he writes that "the words of language [. . .] have become, mysteriously, agents of their own activity" (354). When I first quoted Bruns's passage on Foucault, I emphasized its applicability to the aesthetic of the Language poets. Returning to it now, I wish to stress Bruns's adverb *mysteriously*, for the argumentative move to suggest language as the agent of its own activity remains as troublesome as it is provocative. Seigel addresses this move in his consideration of "Derrida's conclusions about selves and subjects," which he calls "tautological deductions from his initial, and unsustainable, presumption that language can be conceived as active and operative in the absence of subjects who speak it [. . .]" (632).[22] Susan Stewart offers a useful compromise between the oracle of the author and the cult of the text:

> Language exists before our individual existence: language, a thing made of our
> own nature, is at the same time our vehicle of individuation. When we express
> our existence in language, when we create objective linguistic forms that are

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[22] Seigel's commentary on Derrida is especially interesting for my purposes because of his claim that "the cultural and political power Derrida attributes to deconstruction, namely to be the vehicle of a permanent promise of liberating transformation, has its roots in a place he sought to empty of meaning, namely the Kantian transcendental subject, reconceived as a source of transcendence by Schopenhauer, and transmitted by Nietzsche and Heidegger" (632).

intelligible to others and enduring in time, we literally bring light into the

inarticulate world that is the night of preconsciousness and suffering.　　(3)

I find Stewart's final claim here to be a bit grandiose, but I would endorse and underscore

the paradoxical notion—and its implications in the poems under discussion here—that

language precedes us, is larger than us, and yet is a thing made of our own nature. Apart

from its users, language exists only in the abstract, despite claims for the "anonymous"

language of the THANK YOU on cafeteria garbage bins (Silliman, "Who Speaks" 361), the

STOP signs at our intersections. That we cannot locate the source of language in a particular

instance —whether it be speaker or scriptor—does not necessarily imply the lack altogether

of such a source.

Whatever the validity of its theoretical premises, the most important and lasting

contribution of Language poetry, to my mind, has been the restoration of attention to the

materiality of language in the poem, no matter whether the language of the poem is

construed as a vehicle for the expression of a self. The Language writers' complication of

the normative, discursive mode of the Sixties and Seventies has proven a boon for the

poetries of the avant-garde and of official verse culture as well. But I must temper my praise

for the lasting influence of Language poetry as it has manifested (married to a post-New

York School mannered insouciance) in the "Elliptical" poetry that emerged in the Nineties

and ascended to the level of a period style in the Oughts. Tony Hoagland summarizes this

mode as "the mimesis of disorientation by non sequitur," and supposes that "if the Plath

generation was obsessed with psychological extremity, and the eighties generation with

narratives of self, the generation of the oughts has been obsessed with exposing the

fallibilities of perspective" (441, 444).[23] What was, in the work of the best Language poets, a

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[23] Hoagland elaborates on the aesthetic of the Elliptical poem, proposing the following five "features
of a period style":

1. A heavy reliance on authoritative declaration.
2. A love of the fragmentary, the interrupted, the choppy rhythm.

radical challenge to some of the most fundamental assumptions of normative poetry has become (as is often the fate of the avant-garde) in its less imaginative heirs a faddish impersonality wholly dependent upon the conventions and institutions the Language poets had originally sought to undermine. I want to suggest that my study of the work of Rich, Strand, Walcott, and Wright also represents an opportunity to reconsider the reductive binary logic with which contemporary poetry has been judged. Certainly no one would mistake their poetic practices for those of Language poets, but neither should we mistake their poetics for perpetuations of the same unexamined, authoritative "I" called into question in the Language critique. Their use and reappropriation of conventions common in official verse culture articulate and enact complex theoretical questions should testify to the aesthetic and intellectual force of their poetry.

In my first chapter, "The Nothing That I Am: Mark Strand," I argue that Strand's poetry celebrates and denies the self at the same time, as if he were responding to Hamlet's question "To be or not to be" with the answer "Both and neither." The self in Strand's poems an empty vessel, personality reduced to commodity. Much of the available criticism on Strand remarks upon the quality of self-denial or even self-annihilation in his work; I argue that the more Strand's poems strive to "evacuate"—to undo those characteristics that constitute—the self as portrayed in poetry, the more they affirm the self in its apparent absence. This chapter represents a necessary critical intervention, since much of the available scholarship on Strand's work limits itself to his early poetry, published between 1964 and 1980. Moreover, far too little of this criticism has addressed *The Monument* (1978), a work I read as Strand's *magnum opus* and the lens through which to view his early work as

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3. An overall preference for the conceptual over the corporeal, the sensual, the emotional, the narrative, or the discursive.
4. A talent for aphorism.
5. Asides which articulate the poem's own aesthetic procedures, premises, and ideas.   (448)

Of these features, we may note the influence of Language poetry in a love of the fragmentary, an overall preference for the conceptual, and especially the articulation of a poem's own aesthetics.

reflected, complicated, and even parodied in his recent work. Throughout the chapter, I demonstrate that what has been read as mere solipsism in Strand's work is a more complicated, often paradoxical, grappling with the idea of the self, an attempt to affirm and deny the self at the same time.

My second chapter, "This This: Charles Wright," argues that Wright's poetry, in its attempt to transcend human solitude in pursuit of the divine, constitutes its own evacuation of the self. Wright's poems have articulated the notion that to transcend this solitude in pursuit of the divine would require transcending the limited self—a possibility he doubts even as he attempts to enact it. Whereas other readers have considered Wright's poetry as a form of spiritual autobiography (Andrew Mulvania), as a *via negativa* (Bonnie Costello), or as an enactment of negative capability through formal organization (Stephen Cushman), I synthesize these readings to describe what I call Wright's "apophatic poetics." By this I imply not only Wright's debt to the medieval vocabularies of doubt about the unknowability of God, but also the concerns he shares with poststructuralist thinkers about the fallibility of language. Wright's poems represent a bridge between the particular theological and epistemological doubts of medieval Christian mystics and poststructuralist concerns with the arbitrariness of linguistic signification. Wright's apophatic poetics attempts to use language to evacuate the self into divinity, despite his belief that the divine and linguistic foundations of human existence are both fundamentally unknowable.

My third and fourth chapters shift from the individual philosophical and theological interrogations of selfhood in the work of Strand and Wright to the broader political underpinnings of the self as manifested in the poems of Adrienne Rich and Derek Walcott. Although the political concerns of both poets—from Rich's feminist critique of patriarchal society to Walcott's postcolonial critique of empire and their shared skepticism of capitalism—seem to align with the political sympathies of the Language critique, Rich and Walcott's choices to write in "traditional" poetic forms complicate their political and poetic identities. My third chapter, "In Which Our Names Do Not Appear: Adrienne Rich,"

argues that the self as conceived of in Western culture—that is to say, in patriarchy—is a privileged position from which women have been systematically excluded. Rich aspires to nothing less than a new conception of the self, and her poems enact her ongoing interrogation of what such new conception might or ought to entail. Moreover, those poems often demonstrate the complex intellectual and ethical entanglements associated with such a radically ambitious project. Rich chooses, for instance, to write "in the oppressor's language," opening what Marjorie Perloff perceives as a lacuna between Rich's politics and her poetics. I argue, however, that this apparent contradiction between radical politics and traditional poetics is the very source of the power of Rich's poems to claim "I am she: I am he" or "We are, I am, you are" as the same state of being.

Derek Walcott, similarly, has been criticized for choosing "Western" literary forms—iambic pentameter, the sonnet, the Homeric epic—over the dialects and forms of his native West Indies. For Walcott, however, the violent yoking of one island's "standard English" and another's "patois" derives from his own mixed ancestry and his itinerant sense of home. In "Divided to the Vein: Derek Walcott," I argue that Walcott portrays the self as divided and ambivalent, a flux between places, ancestries, languages and poetic forms. "[E]ither I'm nobody, or I'm a nation," he writes, even as his poems challenge a simplistic either/or definition of selfhood. In order to clarify Walcott's complex literary fashioning of an identity for himself and his homeland, I adapt the term "chorography" from Richard Helgerson's work on Early Modern English maps and chronicles. To comprehend Walcott's relationship to place, it is necessary to illuminate the intimate—to the point of inseparability—relationship between this poetic chorographer and the place(s) he maps. That said, the inclusion of Derek Walcott in a study of "American" poets may seem incongruous. I might defend the inclusion by saying that Walcott has lived and worked in the United States for much of his life, and that his influence on the poets and poetics of the United States continues unabated. Certainly I believe that these statements are accurate. I am more interested, however, in the idea that Walcott sees himself as both American and

not American, both troubling and troubled by the range of that adjective's associations and his sense of his own identity as fluid. Walcott, like Rich, Strand, and Wright, works to define the self in his own poetic terms even as his poems undermine any stable definition.

The paradox is appropriate: as we shall see in the case studies that follow, we often approach the concept of the self most successfully by tangling ourselves in paradox. To commodify, efface or mock the self only masks its endurance in poetry and thought. To flee the self for the promise of divinity only renders the self more achingly present. To seek to define the self as a collective entity, to trouble the binaries between self and other, risks erasing the very differences—some oppressive, some precious, some both—by which we have defined ourselves. To aspire to an idea of the self founded upon place and history is to risk losing all of the above. Paradox makes sense of contradictions via poetic logic: through the peculiar power of metaphor to reveal by obscuring. Despite the significant aesthetic, political, and personal differences among them, these four poets, as much as any other movement, have inherited the sometimes celebratory, sometimes skeptical concerns with selfhood of Whitman and Dickinson, and of Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault. In their poems we find the self to be as rich and troubled a concept as it was when Whitman proclaimed himself "a kosmos," when Dickinson supposed "Ourself behind ourself, concealed—" (Whitman 24.1, "[One need not be a Chamber—]" 13).

Chapter One

The Nothing That I Am: Mark Strand

If indeed American poets since Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman have asked whether it is possible to be at once "Nobody" and a celebrated, sung self, then Mark Strand has answered: "Yes and no." The self in Strand's work is an empty vessel, a pure poetic commodity, which makes it the perfect speaker for poems that dwell on and in the idea of nothing. Strand presents a self that is mere gesture, a parody of personality so fragile— "what I wake up into and fall out of when I go to sleep"—that it constantly threatens to withdraw into the naught from which it has inexplicably emerged, the "blank" which is the final term of a poetry of simultaneous egotism and egolessness (Personal interview). Strand fetishizes the idea of nothingness because the idea, like his deployment of the self, is itself paradoxical: one cannot neither imagine nothing, nor—despite the obsessive reductions of Strand's poems—can one *be* nothing. Strand is always weighing Hamlet's great question, not as a decision to be made but as a consequence to be understood; his poems imagine a world where to be and not to be can both be accomplished at the same time. In Strand's work, the self is an illusion, but it is an illusion necessary to fashion coherence out of inchoate existence, to fashion poems out of the language that creates us, through which we create a fleeting, illusory identity we call the self.

Many critical responses to Strand's work have emphasized his apparent retreat from the world and from the self. In "Negative Capability" (1981), her seminal essay on the first half of Strand's poetic career, Linda Gregerson writes: "When Mark Strand reinvented the poem, he began by leaving out the world. The self he invented to star in the poems went on

with the work of divestment: it jettisoned place, it jettisoned fellows, it jettisoned all distinguishing physical marks, save beauty alone" (5). In *Mark Strand and the Poet's Place in Contemporary Culture* (1990), the first critical monograph on Strand's work, David Kirby remarks: "Both the pleasure and the paradox of reading Mark Strand lie in the realization that the Strand persona, even though he seems at first to be withdrawing into the cocoon of self, is in fact stepping away from the self, away from the Technicolor cartoon of contemporary life [. . .]" (3). Peter Stitt writes (1983) that "so deeply does the speaker feel the ugliness of reality, its power to render death and destruction upon him, that he attempts to retreat farther and farther from it." But such a retreat is inevitably compromised if the speaker also finds himself to be "a void, a nothingness" ("Stages" 202). In a more recent monograph, *Reading Mark Strand* (2007), James F. Nicosia argues that "Strand is a perpetual elegist of the self, not so much for himself as a person, but for himself as a poet [. . .]. Throughout his career, Strand reveals a single persona who sees himself as two versions of himself, as someone else, or as no one at all" (ix, 15). Of these readings, I find Gregerson's and Kirby's most convincing, as their essays on Strand's work pay due attention to the wit, paradox, and complexity of Strand's apparent withdrawals. But even these readings are between twenty and thirty years old; the evolution of Strand's work (and of the poetic cultures of the United States) since then demands a more timely examination than Gregerson or Kirby can offer and a more thorough assessment than recent scholarship on Strand allows. Nicosia's monograph, despite numerous keen insights and sensitive readings of Strand's work, is too compromised by the anxiety of its Bloomian influence, insisting on reading Strand through his "precursor" Wallace Stevens, and it ignores almost altogether *The Monument* (1978), a hybrid work that I consider the ultimate expression of Strand's poetics (ix). Moreover, Strand's work—and especially *The Monument*—requires fresh attention not just for its aesthetic achievements but also for its unheralded contributions to theoretical interrogations of a decentered self.

In this chapter I shall argue that Strand's early poems evacuate the speaking self of the poem so completely that what remains is a mere performance of the self marked by existential angst and a smirking wit. In these poems, Strand's speaker seems to strive toward apparent—and often ironic—self-annihilation: "In a field / I am the absence / of field." ("Keeping Things Whole" 1-2). "I empty myself of the remains of others. I empty my pockets. / [. . .] I empty myself of my life and my life remains" ("The Remains" 1, 12). "I give up my clothes which are walls that blow in the wind / and I give up the ghost that lives in them. / I give up. I give up" ("Giving Myself Up" 13-14). "More is less. / I long for more" ("The One Song" 15-16). In my reading of Strand's early work I introduce a previously unremarked parallel between Strand's poetry and the philosophical thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose claims about the self echo through Strand's poems. Although Strand's dialogue with Wittgenstein remains implicit (as opposed, for instance, to his imagined conversation with Jorge Luis Borges in "Translation," a more recent poem), it also presents a resonant example of Strand's engagement with and enactment of philosophical and theoretical concepts.

This first phase of Strand's career reaches its apex, and its logical endpoint, in *The Monument*, a poem that defies its own status as a poem, an epitaph for "no one," and a text that would "unwrite" itself even as it is written. One of this chapter's contributions to the available scholarship on Strand is to position *The Monument* as the center of Strand's body of work, and as the lens through which to view the rest of his career. The speaker of *The Monument* dedicates / addresses / dictates the work "to the translator of THE MONUMENT in the future," whose task it becomes to translate the text—and to perpetuate its author—into that same future. In a career throughout which he has engaged, commodified, and parodied the idea of the self, *The Monument* is Strand's most salient meditation on, his satire of, and his striving for literary and literal immortality. After *The Monument*, Strand found himself unable to write poems that satisfied him, and he did not publish a book of new poems between *Selected Poems* (1980) and *The Continuous Life* (1990) (Aaron). By then, Strand's

approach to the self—and to poetry itself—had changed. If evacuating the self proved impossible, Strand would parody it instead. Strand's early poems mock the idea of the self by emptying it of individual attributes, introducing it to similarly empty doppelgänger figures, claiming that the self is nothing whatsoever. The speaker of these early poems is far too deadpan ever to engage in the sort of buffoonery that marks his later career, in which Strand sends up the idea of the self by mocking the idea of himself, satirizing the persona of the famous poet and refashioning it as a subject for his poems. If Richard Howard is right that Strand's early poems "narrate the moment when Strand makes Rimbaud's discovery, that *je est un autre* ['I is an other'], that the self is someone else, even something else," then in the early poems the Strand persona both courts and rejects itself (594). And in the later poems the Strand persona mocks the persona of Mark Strand.

Strand's most recent—and, he claims, his last—book, *Almost Invisible* (2012), is a testament of the textual figure of the author watching its originating intelligence, the historical author, disappear (Personal interview).[1] The "I" of the self—what Whitman called "the Me myself"—disappears in inverse proportion to the emergence of the textual inscription "Mark Strand" (74). Or, in the words of Jorge Luis Borges: "I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in [Borges]. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him [. . .]. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him" ("Borges and I" 246-7). I choose the comparison to Borges strategically, and not only because of Borges's acknowledged influence on Strand. Borges is increasingly admired for the contributions to literary theory represented by his poems, "fictions" and "nonfictions."[2] Although Strand is too prominent a citizen of official

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[1] Even in speculating in conversation about whether *Almost Invisible* will be his last book, Strand exhibits the deadpan wit of his poems: "Well, I may write a sequel," he has said. "If I do, it won't come out until after I'm dead, and it will be called *Invisible*" (Personal interview).

[2] See Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Borges and Derrida: Apothecaries;" Herman Rapaport, "Borges, De Man, and the Deconstruction of Reading," and Edna Aizenberg, "Borges and the Hebraism of

verse culture to be adopted by the poets and theorists friendly to any "official theory culture," his work resembles Borges' in its philosophical and literary theoretical implications. The detached persona of Strand's poems would never deign to descend with the Language Poets to an explicit, prosaic critique of the idea of the self. Strand's approach is more tangential; like Borges, he enacts complex theoretical ideas in his texts instead. Strand's early poems perform a version of the bourgeois self so completely that his portrayal becomes an implicit critique of the idea. From *The Monument* onward, through parody and mockery, Strand "unwrites" the commodified self he spent the first half of his career fashioning. The language of his poems always risks—always courts—canceling itself just as it is written; perhaps more accurately, it cancels itself in *being* written. The poetic ideal to which Strand aspires is "the text already written, unwriting itself into the text of promise" (*The Monument* 38). Only in the tightening knot of such a paradox is it possible for Strand to realize the great achievement of his poetry: the synthesis of the said and the unsaid, of being and nonbeing, of everything and nothing.

Contemporary Literary Theory" (all collected in Aizenberg's *Borges and His Successors*); see also Michael Wood's "Borges and theory" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges.*

Strand's early poems appeared amid the great flourishing of American "Confessional" poetry. W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* were published in 1959, Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* in 1960, as Strand, then in his twenties, began to publish in journals and magazines. Strand's first book, *Sleeping with One Eye Open*, appeared in 1964, the same year that John Berryman brought out *77 Dream Songs*, for which he would receive the Pulitzer Prize. Sylvia Plath—a poet of Strand's own generation—had written *Ariel* primarily in the winter of 1962-63; the book was published posthumously in 1965. Like any period style, Confessional poetry began to engender contrary reactions just as it became solidly entrenched as a dominant mode. Confessional poetry had arisen—or at least benefited—from a widespread rejection of "the ethos of New Criticism" which, as David Perkins writes, had come to seem "repressive and elitist, and the dense, intellectual idiom and closure of New Critical poetry seemed artificial." Moreover, Perkins writes, the classroom was both nursery and tomb for the New Criticism. "Once it was being taught to students as dogma, it was doomed" (348). Numbering Strand among a group of "better Surrealist poets," Perkins notes that "Surrealism also appealed to American poets as an alternative to the Confessional style—general where it was particular, cool where it was strident, impersonal and mythical where it was personal" (560). While I differ from Perkins in identifying Strand as a surrealist (Strand has in fact identified himself as a "fantasist" rather than a "surrealist"), I would emphasize that Strand's early work indeed seems cool, impersonal, and—if vaguely—mythological or fantastical (*Cellar Door*).[3] Whatever the most

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[3] Asked to compare his version of surrealism with that of James Tate, Strand replied:

> I don't think of myself as a surrealist. I think of myself as a fantasist. Surrealism was a social and political movement as well as a literary movement. We use the word "surreal" rather loosely. I consider myself a fantasist because I'm not really part of a program. There's no social program behind my aesthetic.   (*Cellar Door*)

accurate label—if a label is required—for Strand's early work, the distinction between his

poems and Confessional poetry is especially relevant. Strand's poems perform the gestures

of the Confessional mode so well that they undermine them in their portrayals of a

coherent, dramatized lyric speaker. When the speaker of Robert Lowell's "Commander

Lowell" recalls: "Anchors aweigh, Daddy boomed in his bathtub," we tend not to doubt

(even if we should) that this is Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV speaking of Commander

Robert Traill Spence Lowell III (35). Strand's speaker is unidentifiable as an historical

person in this way because Strand has stripped from the speaker any potentially

individualizing qualities. Instead of dramatizing events that have already happened, Strand's

speaker—urbane, ironic, detached to the point of solipsism—portrays "events" that have

not happened or that are imagined happening. The tone of Strand's early poems is both

anxious and resigned to the inevitable realization of his worst fears. In Strand's first two

books this angst is palpable but remains undefined. Not until *Darker* (1970) does Strand

seem to make the "discovery" Howard describes, that he becomes faced (I use the word

deliberately, given Strand's interest in the image of the mirror) with the notion that the self

is something other than what it seems. Yet a vague sense of division troubles him from the

first pages of his first books. The epigraphs of Strand's first two books help to demonstrate

this sense of a schism within, or a reflected double of, the self: "Let one eye his watches

keep / Whilst the t'other eye doth sleep"—suggests a separation necessary for survival in a

dangerous world (Beaumont and Fletcher 27-8). But such a separation also usurps the unity

of the self, as is further demonstrated in the epigraph to *Reasons for Moving* (1968), from

Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius:" "—while we sleep here, we are awake

elsewhere and that in this way every man is two men" (10). This movement, from a single

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The temptation to label Strand a surrealist may reasonably follow the dreamlike, allegorical poems of his early books. In Strand's poems, however, this tendency is less a matter of following the subconscious, associative logic of dreams and more a method of articulating the schism within the self, a division to define his career.

self both awake and asleep to the status of "every man [as] two men," defines the movement of Strand's early poems.

The first (and title) poem in Strand's first book, "Sleeping with One Eye Open," demonstrates the foreboding of Strand's early poems, an ominous view of the world that Strand will come to temper with a humor so wry it too often goes unnoticed. The speaker of "Sleeping with One Eye Open," like the speakers of Strand's epigraphs, lies with one eye in the world of the waking and the other in the world of those asleep. Just as the shadow of the earth divides the face of the moon in half, the speaker too feels unnervingly divided:

> It's my night to be rattled,
> Saddled
> With spooks. Even the half-moon
> (Half man,
> Half dark), on the horizon,
> Lies on
> Its side casting a fishy light
> Which alights
> On my floor, lavishly lording
> Its morbid
> Look over me.
> [. . .]
>   The shivers
> Wash over
> Me, shaking my bones, my loose ends
> Loosen,
> And I lie sleeping with one eye open,
> Hoping
> That nothing, nothing will happen.   (15-25, 31-7)

Strand's sleeper at once sleeps and wakes, inhabiting and speaking through the fugue state of Beaumont and Fletcher's shepherd and Borges's divided sleeper. The music of "Sleeping with One Eye Open" consists in Strand's formal enactment of that fugue: in these uneven couplets, every second line rhymes with its predecessor so closely that the rhymes are nearly—but necessarily not exact—echoes. The echo effect is amplified by the fact that each matching rhyme arrives immediately in the following line rather than being delayed by the four intervening iambic feet of the heroic couplet. Strand's technique does not allow

the ear time enough to forget and remember the sound of the rhyme; instead, the instant

juxtaposition of the rhyming words emphasizes the similarities and differences that

constitute the rhyme. A closing triplet (open/hoping/happen) resonates further in its two

slight variations, disrupting the poem's otherwise even balance of couplets. The cumulative

effect recalls the technique of W. B. Yeats's "Man and the Echo," in which the speaker

hears the spectre of his own voice calling back, disembodied and utterly changed: "[*Man.*]

And all seems evil until I / Sleepless would lie down and die. // *Echo.* Lie down and die" (17-

19). In the apparently negligible distance of a line break (in Strand's case, or a stanza break

in Yeats's), the speaker's voice returns as someone else's voice or, just as unsettlingly, as

one's own voice speaking unfamiliar words. The formal control of "Sleeping with One Eye

Open" belies and amplifies the ambiguities of its speaker. These ambiguities—and the

anxiety and wit that arises from them—will come to define Strand's career.

Other early poems are similarly dark, occupying the Rilkean space between beauty

and terror.[4] Strand's ominous, foreboding lines carry the anxiety of what cannot be

communicated because it cannot be known, but only anticipated. Stitt writes:

> What we see [in Strand's early poems] is a dissociation of sensibility not
>
> unlike that which Eliot used to speak about, in which the mind feels alienated
>
> from the 'body' (meaning the flesh or material substance, as opposed to the

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[4] In "Violent Storm," for instance, Strand writes: "For [those asleep],

> The long night sweeping over these trees
> And houses will have been no more than one
> In a series whose end
> *Only the nervous or morbid consider*. [my emphasis] (9-12)

Similarly, in "Old People on the Nursing Home Porch," he watches as

>   the evening
> Reaches out to take
> The aging world away.
>
> And soon the dark will come [. . .] (22-4)

spirit). [. . . T]he central issues in Strand's early poetry are psychological and

depend far less on reality-states than on the impressions, feelings, and beliefs

of a single, perhaps atypical, perceiving mind.   ("Stages" 201)

Denis Donoghue criticizes this tendency in Strand's early poems, which Donoghue

characterizes as "giving hypotheses exactly the same status as facts. The immediate result is

that both worlds are equally sinister. [. . . T]he trouble is that a poet who cries wolf must

offer more evidence than the cry itself. Mr. Strand asserts menace, but the evidence does

not appear" ("Objects"). Nicosia offers a slightly different reading: "Strand is preoccupied

with the power of the malevolent world to insinuate itself between himself and his goals,

whether the latter be unity with nature, communication, friendship, love, or even sleep" (19-

20). Both Donoghue's and Nicosia's readings assume that the poet "crying wolf" recognizes

the source of his fear. On the contrary: Strand's early poems cry out because he does not

know what approaches, whether wolf or anything else.

     Nor is Strand willing to particularize the figure that is threatened, the figure of the

self. When Strand does define the self, he does so negatively. Instead of saying what the

self is, he says what it is not, as in "Keeping Things Whole." Perhaps Strand's most

succinct—and certainly his best known—articulation of his idea of the self, "Keeping

Things Whole" also represents Strand's most overt engagement with Wittgenstein's early

theses on the self and solipsism. This context for Strand's poems has gone too long

unexamined in readings of the poet's work. In introducing it here, I am less interested in

remarking upon Strand's debt to Wittgenstein than I am in demonstrating a context in

which philosophy (or "theory") and poetry are engaged in similar work. Some of

Wittgenstein's propositions from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* even read like a primer

for Strand's portrayal of liminality in "Keeping Things Whole" and other early poems.

"That the world is *my* world," Wittgenstein writes, "shows itself in the fact that the limits of

the language (the language which only I understand) mean the limits of *my* world [. . .]. The

subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world" (5.62, 5.632, pp. 63, 64).[5]

In "Keeping Things Whole," Strand's speaker explores what a literal enactment of Wittgenstein's thinking might entail:

> In a field
> I am the absence
> of field.
> This is
> always the case.
> Wherever I am
> I am what is missing.   (1-7)

These lines represent not only the intersection of self and world but also of ideas and things. Strand's choice of articles is important here, as he blurs the boundaries between the abstract and the concrete even as he delineates the apparently precise boundaries of the self. In *a field*—that is, in any such specific, physical space—the speaker is the absence of *field*(ness), so to speak.

Wittgenstein is careful to distinguish between "*my* world" (emphasis his)—the limits of which are one's own language—and "*the* world" (emphasis mine). If the subject does not belong to the world but represents a limit of the world, then the subject who moves through a field will always represent both "the absence of field" and of that particular field. Moreover, if the subject does not belong to the world, and (as Wittgenstein asserts) "the world is everything that is the case," then the subject himself is not the case (1, p. 5). His identity, whatever it is, must be defined negatively. He must understand and represent himself in terms of what he is not ("I am the absence," "I am what is missing") by limning the boundaries between the self and the world, the self as idea and the self as experiential phenomenon. In "*my* world," the self is all, as it separates me from "the world," but the phenomenon of the self is only an interruption—and a brief one, at that—in the continuity of the surrounding world. As the speaker remarks in the second stanza:

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[5] My citations from Wittgeinstein refer both to specific propositions in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the relevant pages numbers in the volume to which I refer, *Major Works*.

> When I walk
> I part the air
> and always
> the air moves in
> to fill the spaces
> where my body's been.   (8-13)

In the first stanza, the speaker distinguishes "field" from "a field," the general from the particular. Here a similar tension obtains between "I" and "my body": it is the "I" who actively walks and parts the air; when the air rushes in to occupy the vacuum the speaker has left, it fills "the spaces / where my body's been." The shift in Strand's nouns suggests a question the poem does not answer: is there a difference between "I" and "my body"? Given that language can be both bodily (as in speech) and unembodied (as in the written word), how do we then determine the role of the body in mapping where the self ends and the world begins? Although the poem does not address these issues, they recur in Strand's work, most notably in *The Monument*, in which the Strand speaker imagines being perpetuated into the future via textual translation. In its closing lines, the poem does offer something between an *ars poetica* and an ethics:

> We all have reasons
> for moving.
> I move
> to keep things whole.   (15-18)

Just what the speaker keeps whole by his continuous movement is unclear, nor do we learn which of those "things" he moves *from* or moves *toward*. What is clear in "Keeping Things Whole" is Strand's portrayal of the self as a provisional figure, defined only by what—and where—the world is not. This is a self utterly divided from the world even as he longs for wholeness, even as he moves in an attempt to achieve it.

Other poems in *Sleeping with One Eye Open* and *Reasons for Moving* (1968) portray still more radical—and increasingly farcical—divisions within the self. In a number of poems in these first two books, the Strand speaker portrays himself as visited, haunted, or even attacked by various visitors and interlocutors. These poems snicker at their own anxieties,

complicating their Rilkean fear with laconic humor, a winking acknowledgment of their own absurdities. In doing so Strand manages to avoid the airless earnestness that characterizes and compromises too many lesser poems in the Confessional mode. In such poems—"The Accident," "The Mailman," "Poem," The Tunnel"—the anxiety of what may happen becomes the absurdity of what does happen. What happens is more absurd yet because of the speaker's alternately slapstick reaction or utter indifference to events. In "The Tunnel," for instance, the speaker performs various conventions of fear and grief to the point of nonsense; gesture follows gesture with such escalating intensity that it becomes impossible to read them seriously:

> I weep like a schoolgirl
> and make obscene gestures
> through the window. I
> write large suicide notes
> and place them so he
> can read them easily.
> I destroy the living
> room furniture to prove
> I own nothing of value.   (19-27)

The illusion of individual personality that we often read into the speakers of poems is undercut in such lines, in which all that we might think of as constituting a self is either abandoned or parodied. When the speakers of these poems are dismembered by intruders ("Poem") or run over by trains ("The Accident"), we do not sense that anything individual has been attacked. What might otherwise be destroyed in these incidents—"places," "fellows, all distinguishing physical marks" in Gregerson's words—has always been already evacuated from the poem. I follow Gregerson's reading, in which she observes that this "self divided itself for dialogue: the *I* became an *I* and a *you*, an *I* and a mailman, an *I* and an engineer; the face appeared on both sides of a mirror, both sides of a printed window, both sides of a printed page" (6). I would go further, however, to argue that these interlocutors act as doppelgängers, as harbingers who either mediate between the divided self of the

speaking persona or who represent another aspect of the persona's self. They bring

messages to—and of—the speaker. Or, more hauntingly, they themselves are the messages.

Through the majority of Strand's first two books, he represents the Rimbaudian self-

as-other as a literal other, an ominous (if absurdist) doppelgänger. These visitors are

ominous and alien because they are visions of the self who exist in the world of which, to

follow Wittgenstein's argument, the speaker himself is not a part. If the speaker recognizes

himself in these others and the others as himself, he does not consciously betray this fact in

the course of the poems. This changes with "The Man in the Mirror," the concluding poem

of *Reasons for Moving.* In "The Man in the Mirror," the Strand speaker must face himself as

other and understand the other to be himself. He makes a discovery similar to what Borges

reports in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius:" "We discovered," Borges's narrator reports, "(such

a discovery is inevitable in the late hours of the night) that mirrors have something

monstrous about them" (3).[6] The "something monstrous," as it is articulated in Strand's

poems, is the mirror's reflection, its apparition of the self. The arc of *Reasons for Moving*

dramatizes the eventual, if inexplicit, realization—itself portrayed in "The Man in the

Mirror"—that these uncanny others who visit the Strand speaker and engage him in the

dialogue that become the poem are, in fact, the self itself.

"The Man in the Mirror" achieves Strand's fullest articulation of his aesthetic to this

point in his career. Harold Bloom calls the poem "at once phantasmagoria and simple

narcist [*sic*] self-confrontation, an inescapable, daily, waking nightmare" ("Dark and

Radiant" 136). The waking nightmare to which Bloom refers, and which "The Man in the

Mirror" articulates, is the horror and hilarity of the self that is and the self that is reflected,

the self that sleeps and the other, Borgesian self that is awake elsewhere. What begins as a

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[6] The word "monstrous" is a significant choice of words in translation (*monstruoso* in the original
Spanish), the word "monstrous" meaning *grotesque* but also suggesting *admonitory*, coming from the
same Latin root as the word "monument," which will play its own significant role in Strand's poetics
(*OED*).

comic love poem to the self in the mirror becomes complicated as the speaker sees himself reflected and understands himself—and not simply the reflection of himself—to be other:

> I remember how we used to stand
> wishing the glass
> would dissolve between us,
> and how we watched our words
>
> cloud that bland,
> innocent surface,
> and when our faces blurred
> how scared we were.
>
> But that was another life.   (21-9)

This speaker, like those of other poems in *Sleeping with One Eye Open* and *Reasons for Moving*, feels irreparably separated from himself. Here, however, the mirror that separates him from his reflection also allows him to sympathize with it; the "you" in the opening lines of the poem becomes a "we" in this memory. What allows the speaker to see himself also undermines that sense of self. Thus, what Bloom calls "simple narcist self-confrontation" is hardly simple: it is the confrontation of one's waking self with the fact of the self's artificiality, and its legibility, as facilitated by the intervention of the mirror as well as the language of the poem. As Gillian White remarks, "What makes oneself legible as a concept is also what undermines the very idea of wholeness; this idea is literalized by the mirror" (Message). Moreover, when "our words" fog the mirror's glass and blur the figures' reflections, we understand that language, like the mirror, acts both as a tool for connection and the agent of rupture.

The introduction of a fantastical element into the poem—the departure of reflection from the mirror—allows Strand to literalize the conceptual concerns of the poem: "The mirror was nothing without you" (60). When the reflected figure does returns, diminished "under layers of heavy skin, // [its] body sunk," its apparition is still more unnerving (76-7). The poem reaches a sort of climax with the speaker's confession: "I look at you / and see myself / under the surface" (105-7). The modifier "under the surface" complicates this

already-complicated moment of epiphany: the most literal reading of this line assumes, to paraphrase, that the speaker sees himself under the surface of the mirror. But it may also be that the speaker sees in his reflection what is under the surface of himself. Either prospect is terrifying, for the self seen in the reflection is "like a shade [. . .] / frail, distant, older / than ever" (113, 115-6). The mirror allows one, over the course of a lifetime, to watch oneself age and decline. One may well believe that the self is something other or more than the body, but the mirror argues otherwise. David Pears's study of Wittgenstein (a passage Bloom quotes in his own review of *Reasons for Moving*) is especially relevant here:

> But what is this unique self, of whose existence he feels assured? It is neither his body nor his soul nor anything else in his world. It is only the metaphysical subject, which is a kind of focal vanishing point behind the mirror of his language. There is really nothing except the mirror and what the mirror reflects. So the only thing that he can legitimately say is that what is reflected in the mirror is reflected in the mirror. (75)

If the self is indeed an illusion, then the mirror is an illusion of an illusion; to glance into the mirror is to step into a hall of mirrors in which, appropriately reflexively, what is reflected is what is reflected. Strand's speaker comes to understand:

> It will always be this way.
> I stand here scared
> that you will disappear,
> scared that you will stay. (117-20)

Strand concludes *Reasons for Moving* with these lines, establishing the problem that—now recognized—must be dealt with in his subsequent work. The confrontation of "The Man in the Mirror" surfaces the angst that everything one believes constitutes the self is as intangible and provisional as the face in the glass. Jacques Lacan anticipates the unsettling experience of the self confronting itself: "The point is not to know whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather to know whether, when I speak of myself, I am the same as the self of whom I speak" (430). In Strand's poetry, however,

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simply to speak of the self is to invent or project a new self, and so the desire for sameness that Lacan articulates—the desire for wholeness that Strand himself has articulated—is impossible to attain. "Some things I wish I could forget," the speaker says in "The Man in the Mirror," almost offhandedly (88). None more than the self.

Having established the essential problem of his worldview and of his aesthetic in his first two volumes, in *Darker* (1970) the Strand speaker can now begin his idiosyncratic project of divestment, seeking to become nothing as Whitman seeks to become all. "I am beginning / again without anything," he writes in "Giving Myself Up" (16-17). But one cannot be without anything and still exist; to begin again is to foil the speaker's own drive toward nothingness. This tension, latent in *Sleeping with One Eye Open* and *Reasons for Moving*, becomes acute in *Darker* and chronic for the rest of Strand's career. Among the poems of *Darker*, the this tension is most acute in "My Life" and "My Life By Somebody Else." The more the speaker finds literal divestment (emptying his pockets, his shoes) insufficient, the more he relies on the act of writing as the only way to proceed with the figurative deprivation of "giving up" the self. The wickedly titled "My Life" portrays a passive, practically inanimate speaker whose "life" can hardly be said to be his: "The huge doll of my body / refuses to rise. / I am the toy of women" (1-3). Three such women appear in the poem, representing different generational categories but, like the speaker, absent of any real life of their own. Although the speaker portrays himself as a "doll" and a "toy," he also reduces the figures of mother, wife, and daughter to archetypes significant only in their relationships to the speaker. Having attempted to give up his possessions and empty himself, he now empties all the figures in the poem of any distinguishing characteristics. First, the speaker's mother "props" him up "for her friends," begging, "Talk, talk" (5-6). "I moved my mouth," he recalls, "but words did not come" (7-8). The image of the speaker is that of a ventriloquist's dummy, a second self who one pretends is speaking—and whom, often enough, one can blame for saying the dangerous words voiced by the true speaker.

In the small space between third and fourth stanzas, the figure of the mother disappears and is replaced by the figure of the wife, the second of the poem's three women who make the speaker their toy. The dummy-speaker claims to be unable to speak, but he continues to narrate:

> My wife took me down from the shelf.
> I lay in her arms. "We suffer
> the sickness of the self," she would whisper.
> And I lay there dumb.   (9-12)

Although voiced by the figure of the wife, "the sickness of the self" articulates in a phrase the central concern of Strand's poetry as a whole. If knowledge of the world begins with knowledge of the self, then to discover, in Howard's words, that the self is someone or something else alienates us from even our most basic assumptions. To be aware of the self's artificiality and yet to be unable to inhabit anything other than that construct defines the Strandian sickness of the self. In "My Life" the speaker—his lines having already been read on his behalf—"[lies] there dumb," and remains so as the third woman of the poem—the daughter—offers "a plastic nurser / filled with water" (13-14). Here the speaker is quite literally infantilized: "'You are my real baby,'" the daughter tells him (15). Finally the speaker seems to come alive with an exclamation of sympathy (17): "Poor child!" He is able to act now, if only to

> look into the brown
> mirrors of her eyes
> and see myself
>
> diminishing, sinking down
> to a depth she does not know is there.   (18-22)

Little in Strand's poetry, of course, cannot become a mirror. The eyes of the daughter literally reflect the speaker's image as he peers into them; more importantly, they manifest the person into which the speaker's identity—his very genetics—will disappear. The line and stanza break present this understanding with cold exactness, severing the potential moment of tenderness between father/baby and daughter/mother.

Not only does "My Life" function as a merciless parody of a family dynamic, it also satirizes the portrayals of family politics central to many poems in the Confessional mode. "My Life" offers none of the specific domestic traumas of Plath or Lowell or their imitators; the poem's characters are little more than props. We do not suppose that any of the events of "My Life" have actually taken place any more than we assume that the three "women" in the poem are actual women. In fact, these three figures are as interchangeable in their control of the speaker as the speaker is objectified in his passivity. The portrayal of ventriloquism works at two different removes, as the speaker finds himself "toyed with" by women who, if we extend to them the assumption of anima we grant the speaker, become the toys of the hand writing the poem. The true ventriloquist wrestles himself out of the poem by depicting himself as helpless within it.

The desperate courtship of "My Life By Somebody Else" resembles that of "The Man in the Mirror" but raises the stakes so that self-as-other evolves into self-as-muse. In doing so the self splits (again) into one figure who does the writing and another who *is* the writing. The longing that animates the poem echoes the division and reunion of "The Man in the Mirror" so closely that the final stanza of "The Man in the Mirror" could stand as an epigraph for "My Life By Somebody Else":

> It will always be this way.
> I stand here scared
> that you will disappear,
> scared that you will stay.

Likewise, the opening line of "My Life By Somebody Else"—"I have done what I could but you avoid me"—recalls the essential conflict of "The Man in the Mirror" (1). In this way the poems mirror each other. Here is "My Life By Somebody Else" in full:

> I have done what I could but you avoid me.
> I left a bowl of milk on the desk to tempt you.
> Nothing happened. I left my wallet there, full of money.
> You must have hated me for that. You never came.
>
> I sat at my typewriter naked, hoping you would wrestle me

to the floor. I played with myself just to arouse you.
Boredom drove me to sleep. I offered you my wife.
I sat her on the desk and spread her legs. I waited.

The days drag on. The exhausted light falls like a bandage
over my eyes. Is it because I am ugly? Was anyone
ever so sad? It is pointless to slash my wrists. My hands
would fall off. And then what hope would I have?

Why do you never come? Must I have you by being
somebody else? Must I write *My Life* by somebody else?
My Death by somebody else? Are you listening?
Somebody else has arrived. Somebody else is writing.   (1-16)

The speaker courts an elusive muse, an undefined other whom he seems to need. Why he

needs such a muse is unclear until the final stanza, where the speaker asks, as if only as a last

resort, "Must I have you by being / somebody else?" The implication is that the speaker

knows he can have the muse *this* way, but would prefer an easier route. He would prefer not

to "write *My Life* by somebody else [. . .,] / *My Death* by somebody else," but he seems not

to have a choice. All other methods have failed.

Significant, too, is the poem's departure from the domestic dynamic of "My Life,"

where the speaker claimed to be the "toy of women." Here he maintains absolute

possession over the figure of the wife. The speaker "offers" the wife to his muse as one

would offer an object; he "s[its] her on the desk and spread[s] her legs," only for nothing to

happen. The archetypal female figures of "My Life" remain objects here, to be possessed

sexually but ultimately to be passed over. The wife—to write "his wife" would overstate the

agency the speaker "allows" her—is no muse compared to the muse of self; she becomes

bait for the fish he wishes to catch. The self is muse *and* lover; the self is all, but the self is

nothing. The concluding quatrain flails in desperation. Unlike the denouement of "The

Man in the Mirror," with the continuing uneasy presence of the reflection, here the speaker

laments that his muse never comes. Until he does, of course, and matters become still more

complicated: "Somebody else has arrived. Somebody else is writing." In this ambiguous last

line, we cannot be sure if the speaker is addressing his muse, or if his gambit has worked and that the "Somebody else" who has arrived and writes *is* the longed-for muse. And of course the poem we are reading is "My Life By Somebody Else."

The self of the Strand poem—whoever it is—is no longer the passive figure of *Sleeping with One Eye Open* and *Reasons for Moving*. *Darker*—especially in "My Life by Somebody Else"—marks a new point of departure, as Strand will increasingly speak of the self as something that is written. Writing becomes an act that creates the self and, in theory at least, an act that can erase it. "Somebody else is writing," the speaker says at the end of "My Life By Somebody Else." The poems of *The Story of Our Lives* (1973) enlarge these themes, as if actually producing the work itself that "My Life By Somebody Else" suggests. Somebody else is writing the poem(s), and the writing itself is somebody else. The "stories" in *The Story of Our Lives* unwrite themselves in the process of their writing; that is, their erasure (and the self's erasure) is written into them. Or, in Gregerson's phrasing, "[E]ach poem contains a story which contains a poem which steadily dismantles containment" (16). Containment might be dismantled as the poems proceed, but the self remains both within and without the poem. There is no story outside the story; there is no life outside the story. "This morning I woke," says the speaker of the title poem,

<div style="margin-left:2em">

          and believed
there was no more to our lives
than the story of our lives.
When you disagreed, I pointed
to the place in the book where you disagreed.   (3.1-5)

</div>

If there is no more to life—"theirs" or "ours"—than the story of the life, then the act of writing petrifies as it creates. Writing enables existence but traps those who exist within the limits of what is written. Even he who writes the story is trapped within the story: if he writes, he writes because it has been quite literally dictated that he do so. Roland Barthes articulates a variation of this notion in "The Death of the Author": "As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say,

finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (142).

The act of writing memorializes, and the written story becomes monument instead of life. The speaker can now recognize: "*It was words that created divisions in the first place, / that created loneliness*" (6.8-9). For a self whose existence depends on words, which is in fact predicated on language, words create not only loneliness but everything else as well. Strand himself has remarked, in an interview with David Brooks: "I often feel that words get in the way, but then I have nothing but words" (qtd. in Kirby 8). Strand might have said, just as accurately, *I* am *nothing but words*. His speaker finds: "The book will not survive. / We are living proof of that" (7.1-2). And as the story of which he is made concludes, the poem reveals echoes of Strand's words from earlier poems, earlier books. He and his companion "look into the mirror across the room. / [. . .] The book goes on" (6.3-4). The book goes on with its presumptive author helpless within it. As Barthes articulates the "return" of the author: "It is not that the Author may not 'come back' in the Text, in his text, but he then goes so as a 'guest.' If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet [. . .]. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author" ("From Work to Text" 1329-30). An author in Strand's poetics especially can never be more than a paper author, a paper self. As Strand has said:

> Another set of obligations occurs when you write. [. . .] If you're writing poetry, the ideas of lineation, meter, et cetera; all this takes you away from the informing experience, and so the experience of writing *becomes* the experience. It's not simply representing or abstracting from that initial experience. It becomes a participation and a creation: participating in, creating the poem, if indeed you're writing poetry. In other words—I've said this in my poems too—the poem erases the world, erases the experience. In

order for a poem to have primacy it has to relinquish whatever hold the initial

experience, the informing experience might have had.   (Personal interview)

Here and throughout *The Story of Our Lives*, the story takes precedence over the lives it tells; but as with any of Strand's works of erasure or "untelling," only a self can write. No matter how many times the speaker attempts to rewrite the story, he only undoes the story by doing so. Strand's poetry from *Sleeping with One Eye Open* to *The Story of Our Lives* builds as an unlikely Künstlerroman, the story of which is the artist continuously attempting to abscond not only from his art but from himself. None of it so far has succeeded. In order to undo the self, Strand must build himself a monument.

Perhaps it is appropriate that most succinct and salient commentary on *The Monument*—a letter from Octavio Paz to Strand—has never been published. The letter, dated 17 January 1978, is archived among Strand's papers at the Lilly Library at Indiana University. "I [. . .] entered the monument," Paz writes,

> and, while I was visiting it, walking through the corridors, circles, arches, terraces, gates, walls, passages, bridges, cells, underground gardens, Labyrinths, I wondered—[is it] a mausoleum, a cenotaph, a burial urn, a pyre, a pyramid? No: it is a Text. It is not a place but a house of words where the meanings and its tribes (feelings, visions, impressions, echoes) appear and disappear and reappear again. . . I love very much your text, shifting and ever changing shape, refusing to reveal itself, poem perpetually undone, always in the blessed state of "almost unfinished" [. . .].   (Letter)

Paz's paradox—"almost unfinished"—is appropriate for the paradox that is *The Monument*. Strand's Monument, as Paz notes, is neither monolith nor memorial, but a Möbius strip continuously turning upon itself, or the point of the ouroboros that is both tongue and tail. The 52 short prose sections of *The Monument* thread quotations from other authors—among them Sir Thomas Browne, Friedrich Nietzsche, Miguel de Unamuno, and most notably Walt Whitman—amid Strand's own "blank prose" (47). Dedicated and addressed "to the translator of THE MONUMENT in the future," the premise of *The Monument* is to discover a way for the author's work—for the author himself—to be translated into the future, into a provisional eternity. Just as it defines itself, it defies itself, "the text already written, unwriting itself into the text of promise" (38). "I speak for nothing," its speaker says, "the nothing that I am, the nothing that is this work. And you shall perpetuate me not in the name of what I was, but in the name of what I am" (9). *The Monument* is Strand's song of myself, of many selves, of no self at all.

If *The Monument* is Strand's inversion of Whitman's "Song of Myself," it is also Strand's most coherent version of an *ars poetica*. The speaker who wishes to be translated into the future simultaneously "translates" other authors into the text to be translated, placing himself among the "immortals" in the process. These sections ruminate on nothingness, and often on the impossibility of imagining the nothing from which we come and to which we return. All poets write against various disappearances: the nothing of silence, of nonbeing, of being forgotten, of never being recognized at all. These, too, are the fears against which Strand has shored his monument, mocking the authorial desire for immortality even as he enacts it. He tells us that the Monument itself "is a void, artless and everlasting" (9). But the Monument—the collaboration between speaker and translator—is the speaker's only chance for survival. "In what language do I live?" he asks. "I live in none. I live in you" (6). Much as the theoretical writings of some critical theorists—Jacques Derrida, for instance—might called "performative" or even "poetic," Strand's poem / prose / Monument represents a poetically inflected enactment of salient and persistent theoretical questions of identity, authority, textuality, translation and lyric voice. Strand's text—that "house of words where the meanings and its tribes [. . .] appear and disappear and reappear again"—constructs and nullifies its own poetics, often on the same page.

The word *monument* derives from the Latin verb *monere*: to advise or remind (*OED*). A monument may stand, monolithic, but its standing presence also "speaks" to those who need advising or reminding, who have forgotten or who never knew in the first place. Likewise a monument marks an absence; in standing and speaking it is the metaphorical presence of the absent. This is in fact the method by which the monument warns: *Siste, Viator*—stop, traveler—and consider that toward which you travel. The absence marked by a monument can also be, as Derrida has argued, a condition of writing itself. "For a writing to be a writing," Derrida claims,

> it must continue to "act" and to be readable even when what is called the
> author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he

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seems to have signed, be it because of a temporary absence, because he is dead or, more generally, because he has not employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his desire to say what he means, in order to sustain what seems to be written "in his name."

("Signature Event Context" 8)

As we shall see, exactly what is meant by "in his name" becomes its own matter of complexity in the course of *The Monument*. The writing of *The Monument*, in order to continue being a writing and to continue the being of its author, must not only be readable in his absence but writeable as well. Although the name "Mark Strand" appears as the author of the book entitled *The Monument*, "mark"ing the work as it would mark the place of burial, The Monument as it is spoken of in the text is authorless, anonymous. It perpetuates its lost author in that it perpetuates language, which is all that remains of the self who created it. As such it also perpetuates its translator, who allows the original language to continue in recreating it. Derrida might argue that this continuation of the original language is characteristic of all texts, but what distinguishes *The Monument* is its overt concern, its textual (rather than contextual) concern with this (not only) Derridian idea. Both author and translator function here as Barthesian "scriptors," "agent[s] of language" "rather than [. . .] controlling consciousness[es]" (Bennett 15). And since it is language that has created the self, to act as an agent for the language here is also to act as an agent for the original authoring self. "Mark Strand" must mark the text and be demarcated by it even after Mark Strand has vanished from it.

Consider, for instance, the status of the texts from which Strand quotes throughout *The Monument*, the original authors of most of which had vanished well before *The Monument* appeared. At first glance these quotations serve as epigraphs to what will follow in Strand's text. However, the word *epigraph*—with its sense of standing outside the writing itself—is a misnomer in this instance, given that the quotations are presented without immediate

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attribution[7] and are separated from each other or from the author's words only by the blank space of a paragraph break. As such they become "translated" into *The Monument* via a mechanism similar to that by which, as we shall see, the author hopes that his (and his translator's) words will translate himself into the future. The promise of the future is that existence should go on indefinitely, that the future will always be available to become the present. The premise of *The Monument*—to discover a way for the author to be translated into the future—is central as well to "Summa Lyrica," Allen Grossman's own eccentric meditation on poetic immortality, and a work that can seem written with *The Monument* in mind. "The function of poetry," Grossman writes, "is to obtain for everybody one kind of success at the limits of the autonomy of the will [. . .] The kind of success which poetry facilitates is called 'immortality'" (209-10). According to Grossman, poetry facilitates immortality via "the convergence of meaning and being in presence" (210). Such a convergence, both authors concur, is possible only in the reader or translator. Grossman argues that "at any moment of reading, the reader is the author of the poem, and the poem is the author of the reader. The honor of creation is not with one or the other, but among them" (214). Thus, although Strand writes that "my voice is sufficient to make The Monument out of this moment," the voice is sufficient only insofar as it is heard, or read, or translated into another moment, the moment in which both author and translator write. Author and translator, writer and reader, are not only immortalized—monumentalized—by the work, but created by it. The act of creation is not a matter of a first cause or unmoved mover, but the ongoing work of both creator and created.

While Derrida, Grossman, and others can illuminate *The Monument* just as other writers cast shadows on it, *The Monument* demands especially to be read in the context of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." Kirby writes that "of all the poets who hover over *The Monument*, Whitman is the one whose spirit is most pervasive" (57). Similarly, Bloom reads

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[7] These quotations are unattributed in the immediate text, although their authors and sources are credited in a section of notes that concludes the book.

The Monument as "gently parodying" "Song of Myself" ("Review" 29). In my view, although Whitman inspires and haunts Strand throughout the text, there is nothing gentle about the relationship between *The Monument* and "Song of Myself." Although *The Monument* fulfills the etymological root of the word "parody" by singing alongside or parallel to Whitman, Strand's range of reactions against Whitman varies from parody to elegy to specific antithesis (*OED*). In *The Monument*, as nowhere else in his poetry, the Strand persona directly addresses and challenges Whitman's egotistical sublime with a solipsistic, nihilistic sublime of his own.

One can spend all of one's energy in reading *The Monument* trying to discern just what The Monument is. It is first reported as something momentary, made by a voice (2). It is a phenomenon reported in either hemisphere (13) or "affirmed in heaven" as clouds drawn on the page, fluffy and cartoonish (20). It may be counterfeited: "Do not be taken in," the author warns, "by structures that call themselves The Monument" (15). The Monument is scourged by "an army of angry poets" in #27. They return to chip away pieces of The Monument to study it, like grave-robbers plundering the riches of the pyramids. But none of these descriptions, finally, will suffice. As the Strand persona tells us, "Only this luminous moment has life, this instant in which we both write, this flash of voice (3). As with Descartes' *cogito*, which proves one's existence only as one thinks it, *The Monument* exists only as the author and the translator write.

"Let me introduce myself," the author begins. "I am . . . and so on and so forth. Now you know more about me than I know about you" (1). In these ellipses Strand's existentialist and Vaudevillian impulses meet; he offers an introduction that introduces nothing. Of course, this is exactly the point. The author, especially as he reaches across the abyss between past and present, is nothing more than ellipses, something so irrelevant as to be nothing. At the same time, he also affirms his existence by declaring nothing more than I AM, like the voice from the burning bush or as in the Cartesian *cogito* (*Exod.* 3:14, "Meditations on First Philosophy" 24). The affirmation of existence—whether it be past,

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present, future, or purely theoretical—is the only essential of introducing the self. In fact the word *essential*, with its roots in the Latin infinitive *to be* (*esse*), reminds us that existence itself constitutes essence, as the voice from the burning bush or the speaker of this section both affirm (*OED*). Everything else can be dismissed as "and so on and so forth." *To be* is the essence of the Monument, and the essence is impossible.

In the second section, the author complicates the already-tricky assumptions of who he may or may not be by introducing the first of many quotations from other writers. The quotations appear in italics but are unattributed until the end of the book. As such, to call these snippets of language "quotations" is to understate their role in this text. These lines appear as epigraphs to the various sections of *The Monument*, but since no attribution appears in the text itself, the lines lack the originating identity suggested by the word "quotation;" instead, they exist purely as language. Their status between their original text and the texts they introduce here parallels the "between" status of both the speaker and translator of *The Monument*, and of the writers he (they) quote(s) as well. These quotations appear as examples of Borges's dictum that "what is good belongs to no one, not even to [Borges], but rather to the language and to tradition" ("Borges and I" 246). And these ideas are reflected in the "quotation" itself, lines from Octavio Paz: "*I am setting out from the meeting with what I am, with what I now begin to be, my descendant and my ancestor, my father and my son, my unlike likeness* ("Old Poem" 106-7). If the language of the past survives into the future, it also survives its speaker. Language is the "unlike likeness" of the self.

"I might have had my likeness carved in stone," the author writes in the subsequent section, "but it is not my image that I want you to have, nor my life, nor the life around me, only this document. What I include of myself is unreal and distracting. Only this luminous moment has life, this instant in which we both write, this flash of voice" (3). The section begins with a somewhat Shakespearean refutation of statuary monuments.[8] In

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[8] "Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme [. . .]" (Shakespeare 1-2).

Shakespeare's 55th sonnet, however, the survival of the "powerful rhyme" is sufficient to confirm that the addressee, and the poet, existed. In *The Monument*, "to have existed" is insufficient. As the translator of *The Monument* writes, s/he perpetuates the words of the original author, recovering him in the present tense. To write—or to have written—and to translate (and to be translated) collapse the abyss between the dead and the living, uniting them in "this luminous moment" in which both exist as one writer, a congruence as brief and tenuous as the binding of any metaphor.

It is, of course, nothing new for a writer to claim that his work will stand as his memorial for time immemorial. *The Monument* diverges from a Shakespearean claim for literary transcendence in order to wrestle with Whitmanesque bodily transcendence. *The Monument* is, like "Song of Myself," remarkable because of the particular intimacy Strand proposes between writer and reader, and remarkable in its own right for the explicitness and humor "with which its speaker exposes the will-to-immortality as a death grip" (Gregerson, Message). Both *The Monument* and "Song of Myself" require their addressees to interact with the speakers themselves, to go beyond the reader's basic engagement with the text. The translator of *The Monument* must do more, as much as The Monument has done for the translator: "This work has allowed you to exist, yet this work exists because you are translating it" (4).

> Or let me put it this way. You must imagine that you are the author of this work, that the wind is blowing from the northeast, bringing rain that slaps and spatters against your windows. You must imagine the ocean's swash and backwash sounding hushed and muffled. Imagine a long room with a light at one end, illuminating a desk, a chair, papers. Imagine someone is in the chair. Imagine he is you: it is long ago and you are dressed in the absurd clothes of the time. You must imagine yourself asking the question: which of us has sought the other? (5)

The translator is one with the author as author of the work, as the work "is a thing made which makes its maker," as "every atom belonging to [Whitman] as good belongs to you" ("Summa Lyrica" 260, "Song of Myself" 3).

It is not enough that the luminous flash of voice should preserve only the Strand persona's work. In that convergence the author seeks his own individual survival as well; like Woody Allen, he is less interested in living on in his work than in living on in his apartment. The immortality of one's work offers little to the creator of the work (or, despite Shakespeare, to its addressee) unless it prevents him or her from disappearing from the work and, eventually, from the world. The author's disappearance is necessary in Derrida's criteria for "a writing" to become a writing, but Derrida's interest is in the status of the writing. Strand's author is concerned with the status of his individual being as writing would perpetuate it. When, in the hilarious arrogance of section 4, he claims that his "work has allowed [his translator] to exist, yet this work exists because [s/he is] translating it," he neglects to mention the matter of existence that concerns him most: his own. An excerpt from Miguel de Unamuno's essay "The Secret of Life," quoted in the fourth section of *The Monument*, articulates this need, if more earnestly, on the speaker's behalf:

> *And the secret of human life, the universal secret, the root secret from which all other secrets spring, is the longing for more life, the furious and insatiable desire to be everything else without ever ceasing to be ourselves, to take possession of the entire universe without letting the universe take possession of us and absorb us; it is the desire to be someone else without ceasing to be myself, and continue being myself at the same time I am someone else. . . .* (qtd. in *The Monument* 4)

In the original passage, Unamuno continues: "it is, in a word, the appetite for divinity, the hunger for God" (200). In other words, Strand does not say all that Unamuno claims: that the hunger to be others is the same as the hunger for God, even the hunger to be God.

This particular yearning for the divine resembles the difference Graham Greene articulates in *The End of the Affair* between unhappiness and happiness, pain and joy: "In misery we seem aware of our own existence, even though it may be in the form of a monstrous egotism: this pain of mine is individual, this nerve that winces belongs to me and

to no other. But happiness annihilates us: we lose our identity" (36). Again, the word "monstrous" suggests both the grotesque and the admonitory: too much attention to one's individual existence can divert one from the absolute existence of the divine. But Greene's lines also suppose that misery makes us aware of our individual existence and not, as Strand's work suggests, that our individual existence makes us laughably miserable. The hunger for God that Unamuno and Greene describe is the hunger for the divine anonymity of pure being ("I AM"), the wish to cure the sickness of the individual self by dissolving it into a universal, infinite self. (We shall see a similar desire for divinity at work in the poetry of Charles Wright.) *The Monument* strives toward a similar status as both personal and impersonal, a work that is "neither/nor," appearing to strive toward infinite nullity rather than infinite being. In Strand's formulation, a work of art is only perfect—is only The Monument—when it is nothing, "the nothing that I am, the nothing that is this work," yet such a work of art also betrays the egotism of its creator (9).

It is, of course, a logical absurdity to be perpetuated in the name of nothing. Nothing is nothing; everything else is *something*. Strand's author nods in this direction when he says:

> The objects you see from where you sit may be "anything." "Anything" may be "nothing," depending on what your feeling is. If "nothing" conveys the wrong idea, use "something." By all means, use "something" if you agree with the poet who shrieks, "There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing." (14)

The poet who "shrieks" as much is Wallace Stevens, perhaps the most pervasive influence on Strand's aesthetic. Stevens cries out—to "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds, / O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon"—that "there is not nothing, no, no, never nothing" ("Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" 1-2, 3). But he is the same poet who supposes that "one must have a mind of winter" to "[listen] in the snow, / And, nothing himself, [behold] / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" ("The Snow Man" 1, 13-15). Only in poetry or in the mind can the nothing that is there also be something. Here then is the crucial paradox of *The Monument*: one can aspire to nothingness, but one can never be at once one and

nothing, or one and everything, as in Unamuno's "hunger for God." One divides by two and two and two, approaching nothing but never reaching it.

The author then must wallow in the same "sickness of the self" that earlier Strand poems have portrayed with varying degrees of directness. Even aspiring to the "monumental" anonymity of nothingness makes a particular demand for the self. As William Gass has observed, "Anonymity can be chosen by the poet because it is a humbling or self-mortifying condition. One wishes to give up the selfish self and become a selfless self. Selflessness is the highest form of selfishness there is because of the demands 'it' makes upon others" (footnote to 273). In order to remain "anonymous" and in order to attain immortality, the speaker of *The Monument*—or even The Monument itself—demands the attention, demands the very being of his translator. Gass's use of "humbling" and "self-mortifying" suggest the *humus* of burial earth, the posthumous existence of the work of art by which the poet, to modify W. H. Auden's phrase about W. B. Yeats, becomes his admirers ("In Memory" 17).

Not his admirers, for Strand, but his translator. "Through you," the Strand persona says,

> I shall be born again; myself again and again; myself without others; myself with a tomb; myself beyond death. I imagine you taking my name; I imagine you saying "myself myself" again and again. And suddenly there will be no blue sky or sun or shape of anything without that simple utterance. (8)

Here again is the impulse toward divinity, the impulse that there can be nothing—"no blue sky or sun or shape of anything without that simple utterance." Here language becomes not only prior to the self, as in Lacan's formulation, but prior to all creation, as in Genesis and the Gospel of John. The God of Genesis creates through speech, through successions of "Let there be," a hortatory phrase that, as spoken by the creator himself, is purely self-reflexive, an essential instance of what speech act theorists have called illocutionary declaration (Gen 1:3, Searle and Vanderveken 57). Or, in the Gospel of John:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word
> was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by
> him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life;
> and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the
> darkness comprehended it not.   (John 1:1-5)

Strand's creation, by contrast, is a darkness that comprehends and envelops, but which the light of creation itself cannot comprehend. The hermeneutical connotation of "comprehend"—the world as a text written and read—is especially germane to Strand's Monument. As Stanley Rosen writes in "The Limits of Interpretation":

> The initial purpose of hermeneutics was to explain the word of God. This
> purpose was eventually expanded into the attempt to regulate the process of
> explaining the word of man. In the nineteenth century, we learned, first from
> Hegel and then, more effectively, from Nietzsche, that God is dead. In the
> twentieth century, Foucault informed us that man is dead, thereby opening
> the gates into the abyss of postanthropological deconstruction. As the scope
> of hermeneutics has expanded, then, the two original sources of
> hermeneutical meaning, God and man, have vanished, taking with them the
> cosmos or world, and leaving us with nothing but our own garrulity, which we
> choose to call the philosophy of language, linguistic philosophy, or one of
> their synonyms. If nothing is real, the real is nothing; there is no difference
> between the written lines of a text and the blank spaces between them. (228)

Putting aside Rosen's tendency here to caricature Foucault's work in destabilizing anthropocentric philosophy, his sense of the equivalence of "the written lines of a text and the blank spaces between them" is of particular value in considering Strand's aesthetic. Indeed, for Strand the lack of difference between speech and silence the written lines of a text and the blank spaces between them" is a paradox necessary to create The Monument:

> The Monument is a void, artless and everlasting. What I was I am no longer. I speak for nothing, the nothing that I am, the nothing that is this work. And you shall perpetuate me not in the name of what I was, but in the name of what I am.   (9)

Grossman's conception of the poem as "a thing made which makes its maker" here meets the Strandian view of all creation—the thing made, the maker, the making itself—as destined for nothingness, as already nothing. They must be "perpetuated"—literally, "to cause or continue to endure indefinitely"—not as the makings that they were, but as the nothing that they are (*OED*).

Not that this should by any means be easy. As a reading of Strand's early books demonstrates, the self—for all its elusiveness, for even its theoretical non-existence—is a difficult thing to be rid of. And though the act of writing, for Strand, has become an act of "untelling"—or, as he articulates here, "the text already written, unwriting itself into the text of promise"—the act reaffirms the self it would evacuate (38). "In speaking the poem," Grossman writes, "the speaker of the poem reacquires selfhood by serious reciprocity with another self. He or she reenters the situation of humanity, becoming conscious of it once again as if for the first time and without dismay" (258). Grossman's qualifying "as if" is important in this context, for only a self would need to acquire (or to reacquire, with its sense of having suffered a loss) selfhood. Similarly, although *The Monument* "dwells on the absence of a self," it still requires a self to do the dwelling (22). The Strand persona seeks both to preserve his selfhood indefinitely and to be perpetuated by his translator in the name of nothing.

Utterly aware of having asked the impossible of a translator he only imagines, the speaker invents a speech for his translator to deliver to himself/herself. Appropriately, it is to "be delivered into the mirror":

> The author is the opposite of a good author, allowing no people in his work, allowing no plot to carry it forward. Where are the good phrases? They're borrowed! It all adds up to greed—his words in my mouth, his time in my time. He longs to be alive, to continue, yet he says he is nobody. Does he

have nothing to say? Probably not. Anonymous, his eyes are fixed upon himself. I grow tired of his jabbering, the freight of his words. My greatest hope is his continued anonymity, which is why I bother to finish The Monument.   (31)

Despite the translator's suspicion to the contrary, the author indeed has "'nothing' to say," and says it again and again, metamorphosing the nothing into something. It is perfectly appropriate to this Monument that the only words "spoken" by the translator are in fact the author's. It is just as appropriate that the translator chooses to "bother to finish The Monument" in order to perpetuate its original author's "continued anonymity." "The honor of creation," Grossman writes, "is not with one or the other, but among them." The honor of negation, of decreating, is among them as well.

Strand's author needs to be translated in order to have written (and thus to have existed) in the first place. His existence precedes him, however: "I imagine you taking my name," the speaker says, as if the translator were to be the bride to his bridegroom, giving up his/her identity and assuming his own. "And what I assume you shall assume," as Whitman writes (2). Strand's speaker would see the Whitmanesque "Me myself" become the substance of others as well: he writes "myself myself" in order to imagine his translator "saying 'myself myself' again and again." When the speaker in section 39 feels "a surge of power," he worries—if only for a moment—that his identity will be too strong to allow The Monument to come to be. He identifies (betrays) himself as "a single strand, upright, making translation less and less possible" (39). If the self exists at all for Strand, it may exist only in the slippery second connotation of a pun, of "a single strand." The work of a pun, like the work of metaphor, takes place in the space between strata of signification. For Strand, such space is where the most important poetic work occurs; this is the space that defines the self in relation to the world, or for that matter, that defines the self against itself. The pun amplifies the signifying power of language even as it is created through the power of language to conflate significances. In a pun—as in the named anonymity of The Monument, or in the spaces between words and lines that become equivalent to the text

itself—the Strand speaker can at once be and not be. This pun on his name notwithstanding, Strand's insistence on the omission of personal detail differs substantially from Whitman, who identifies himself from the beginning by age ("now thirty-seven years old" [8]) and by name ("Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" [497]). Always seeking to re-ravel his own fraying paradoxes, Strand emphasizes his omission of personal detail by including the personal detail he had decided not to include, using "paragraphs from an abandoned autobiography" (21) to show such a project's futility. We can assume that this work was abandoned because autobiography will not do. Personal detail will not do. Only The Monument will do.

In this section the Strand persona imagines a personal, familial history of tragicomic proportions. He recalls having invented, as a child, the story that his grandfather had fallen into a vat of molten metal and was "now part of a Cleveland skyscraper" (21). This eerie detail is still more than the speaker claims to know of his paternal grandmother, who died giving birth to the speaker's father. If we read these "autobiographical details" as we read the Strand persona's own desire for survival through translation, then the grandfather has been translated—carried over—as part of a different monument, of steel and concrete. The grandmother dies as the father begins to live; what she was lives in him. The author, for his part, claims to remember almost nothing about either, yet he perpetuates them in the language that constitutes the monument of this work. But what business has any of this in a document that is supposed "to dwell on the absence of a self"? The author mentions his grandmother, for instance, only to say that he knows nothing of her. Perhaps this knowledge itself, or the lack thereof, is the perfect Strandian Monument, and any living self is sufficient memorial to those who have come before. Recall Section #44 of "Song of Myself":

> Immense have been the preparations for me,
> Faithful and friendly the arms that have help'd me.
>
> [. . .]

They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,

[. . .]

All forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.   (1157-1169)

Whitman's autobiography is the biography of the universe. He speaks of the cosmos as a family that has nurtured him since long before his conception; he embodies traces of their cosmic genetics: "I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots, / And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over" (670-671). The singular self of Whitman is large enough to incorporate—literally, to take into his body— this miscellany of the natural world. Strand's response is his most direct and defiant rejoinder to "Song of Myself":

<div style="text-align:center">

SONG OF MYSELF

</div>

First silence, then some humming,
then more silence, then nothing,
then more nothing, then silence,
then more silence, then nothing.

Song of My Other Self: There is no other self.

The Wind's Song: Get out of my way.

The Sky's Song: You're less than a cloud.

The Tree's Song: You're less than a leaf.

The Sea's Song: You're a wave, less than a wave.

The Sun's Song: You're the moon's child.

The Moon's Song: You're no child of mine.   (35)

Here Strand's author—nihilistic and orphaned—sounds like the addressee of Whitman's question (1144), "Were mankind murderous or jealous upon you, my brother, my sister?"

How startlingly Strand's words depart from and defy the optimism of "Song of Myself," in which the universe seems to have conspired on behalf of the speaker. The sprawl of Whitman—across the page, across the continent and thousands of other selves—is met by "less than." The reductive, laughable self of Strand's song exists only to be told that its existence does not matter. Such alienation seems irreconcilable with "For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings" or "All forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight me" (1160, 1168).

The self that persists in *The Monument*—"single, upright"—cannot be completely jettisoned or translated. Whitman, as if echoing Strand as his own future translator, had reported: "I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable" (1332). But where Whitman invites ("Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems" [33]), equating the Self with the Other ("every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" [3]), Strand commands the reader, who is in fact the translator: "Say I predicted it. Write it here" (26). "Translate. Translate faster" (39). Whitman mitigates his egoism with supreme selflessness, as if the body were a permeable membrane across which the self and others flow. Strand mitigates his absence and anonymity with the egotistical desire—not for a monument, but for The Monument—and a relationship with his translator that ultimately negates them both. "Some will think I wrote this," he says, "and some will think you wrote this. The fact is neither of us did. There is a ghostly third who has taken up residence in this pen, this pen we hold" (38). The ghostly third is The Monument, which has given us *The Monument*.

Strand's ghostly third haunts the locus of its onetime presence. Whitman's soul pervades everything, like its own holy ghost, expressing (here both "to press out" and "to portray, represent") an expansive self that is "not contain'd between my hat and boots" (*OED*, "Song of Myself" 133). Whitman betrays no anxiety about personal extinction, for "to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (130). It's Whitman, remember, who "bequeath[s] himself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again

look for me under your boot-soles" ("Song of Myself" 1339-1340). Extinction is inevitable, and in Whitman it is triumphant, but in *The Monument* it becomes an event that must be circumvented, and paradoxically can be circumvented only in submission to nothingness. Whitman's reach across the void of time seems a gesture of goodwill, but Strand's persona acts from a sardonic arrogance. He commands the reader because he requires the reader in order to exist; he must be translated to flame again among the living. And as Whitman bequeaths himself to the dirt, Strand quite literally dedicates his work, which is himself, to "the Translator of THE MONUMENT in the future." This is egotism confessed and satirized; even those writers whose names "were writ in water" dream of being written in stone or, better yet, written in other writers.

The ultimate destiny of Strand's author is in other writers, both future and past. As he adds sections to *The Monument*, approaching its conclusion (but not necessarily its completion), he "subtract[s himself] from [his] words." "My blank prose travels into the future," he writes, "its freight the fullness of zero, the circumference of absence. And it misses something, something I remember I wanted. Soon I shall disappear into the well of want, the *lux* of lack (47). He anticipates the extinction that will complete him, that will allow him, in Borges's words, "to know who I am" ("In Praise of Darkness" 46, qtd. in *The Monument* 18). Once having imagined his translator taking his name, he now muses:

> If I were to die now, I would change my name so it might appear that the author of my works were still alive. No I wouldn't. If I were to die now, it would be only a joke, a cruel joke played on fortune. If I were to die now, your greatest work would remain forever undone. My last words would be, "Don't finish it."   (51)

And they are. With these words the speaker will say no more. The rest is left both to the future and the past. The speaker leaves The Monument unfinished, and it is completed not by his translator but by Walt Whitman, as if the great poet had indeed stopped somewhere waiting for him:

> *O living always, always dying!*
> *O the burials of me past and present,*

O me while I stride ahead, material, visible, imperious as ever;
O me, what I was for years, now dead, (I lament not, I am content;)
O to disengage myself from the corpses of me, which I turn and look at where I cast
     them,
To pass on, (I living! always living!) and leave the corpses behind.

                                            (1-6, qtd. in *The Monument* 52)

If my reading of *The Monument* is correct, Strand sets out to challenge "Song of Myself," only to be undone by Walt Whitman himself. Perhaps the Strand persona would not have it any other way. Whitman disperses himself as if to fulfill Unamuno's secret of life, to become everything else while still remaining himself:

> I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
> I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jabs.
>
> I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
> If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
>
> You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
> But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
> And filter and fibre your blood.
>
> Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
> Missing me one place search another,
> I stop somewhere waiting for you.   (1337-1346)

Whitman's dispersals are nothing for the poet to lament. In "Song of Myself," the self is immortal, and so it does not matter if it is human, or grass, or air. But extinction in *The Monument* is inevitable, an event that paradoxically must be circumvented and yet can be circumvented only by submission to nothingness. Even the titles enforce these paradigms: Whitman sings of and celebrates the self, fluid and inclusive. A song acts on and modulates the air through which it moves. Strand's experiments in self-negation bring us to stone. A monument is solid, inexplicable, but in Strand's case, as evasive as the self.

Whatever monument *The Monument* creates, it stands for Strand, for his imaginary future translator, and for the Whitman whom Strand translates into *The Monument*.[9] If what an author creates belongs to language or to the tradition, as Borges argues, then, as Borges argues, "[. . .] every writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" ("Kafka and His Precursors" 201). The same is true of the individual author's past and future. In my own view, *The Monument* is nothing less than the lens through which to consider all of Strand's work. Better yet, it is a mirror reflecting the first half of his career in the second. "If it is a mirror to anything," Strand's speaker says, "it is to the gap between the nothing that was and the nothing that will be." For the poet and for us that gap is filled by the self, no matter our feelings about it. *The Monument* is a mirror that reflects earnestness as satire, egomania as self-effacement. It reveals the necessary absurdity of any work beginning with "I," and the impossibility of any that would not.

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[9] This is an idea Strand will adopt and explore in "Translation," in which he imagines a conversation with Borges himself: "'Say,' I said. 'If translation is a kind of reading, the assumption or transformation of one personal idiom into another, then shouldn't it be possible to translate work done in one's own language? Shouldn't it be possible to translate Wordsworth or Shelley into Strand?' Borges responds, as the author of *The Monument* might have, that "it is *you* who must be translated" (54, my emphasis).

If the self could not be unified, jettisoned, or translated, it could, at least, be mocked. The latter phase of Strand's career turns upon the commodified poetic self the first phase had created. The self that appears or absconds ominously in early Strand poems now returns anticlimactically as the Strand speaker's deadpan existential angst becomes further tempered with absurdist humor. From *The Continuous Life* onward, Strand's relationship with the self becomes more similar to the relationship Jorge Luis Borges describes in "Borges and I": "I know of Borges from the mail," he writes, "and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor" (246). Borges's metaphor of the actor is apt in considering this phase of Strand's career: the self remains on stage—the "bare stage, first stage" of *The Monument*—but the drama has become a farce (42).

Where in *The Monument* and other poems the Strand speaker wrestled with the dramatized figure "Mark Strand," whose name marks the texts he speaks, Strand's speaker now satirizes that figure, portrays him in his new poems as a subject to be parodied. The divested, commodified self of Strand's early poems represents one strategy for baring the mechanism of the lyric speaker. In the second half of his career, Strand's treatment of the idea of the lyric speaker—and of himself as that speaker—is more explicitly parodic, even clownish. This is the means by which, as Nicosia writes, Strand becomes a poet who can "confront the anxiety of his own influence [. . .]," whose "anxiety of creation originates in himself, in his own success" (6, 15). The notion of a poet confronting his or her own influence is a wonderfully Strandian revision of Harold Bloom's theory of influence, and although I would resist Nicosia's Bloomian terms, I think he is correct that Strand comes to

write against his own career and the public self created by that career.[10] Moreover, Strand

chooses this conflict as a specific alternative to the conflicts of the apparently

autobiographical poems he had published toward the end of the first phase of his career. At

the time of their publication, however, these poems suggested a new direction for the poet,

who seemed to be turning from cold, ironic solipsism toward a warmer, more "humane"

aesthetic. Critics welcomed the turn, but like the personal detail considered and discarded

in *The Monument*, autobiography still would not do.

Critics tend to agree that Strand's turn toward domestic themes in *The Story of Our*

Lives and, further, in *The Late Hour* and *Selected Poems*, signaled a profound change in his

aesthetic. Strand seemed to have arrived at a warmer, more personal aesthetic, the narrative

went, and his critics thoroughly approved.[11] The narrative caught on except, apparently,

with Strand, who in the second half of his career rejects these experiments with

autobiographical themes. Jonathan Aaron describes the crisis in Strand's aesthetic: "After

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[10] Nicosia considers Strand's confrontation with the anxiety of his own influence to be the central
tension of *Blizzard of One*, while I read this tension as exemplary of the entire second half of Strand's
career.

[11] Kirby writes, for instance, that for all the similarities between Strand's early work and a new poem
such as "Leopardi," the new work differs "from those [early] poems in that it is cast in these new,
midcareer terms of childhood memory. It is as though that old troublesome business of the self has
reemerged only to be attacked with a different strategy. What makes these poems different is that
the problem of self is considered in the context of younger and older speaker as well as younger
speaker and parent" (66-7). Kirby is correct that this quality differentiates these poems from
Strand's earlier work; indeed this same quality will lead Strand to abandon poetry for nearly a decade
(Aaron).

Stitt, too, compares such poems favorably to Strand's earlier work, contending that Strand's "retreat
into a world of the mind" was "accompanied by such extreme reductiveness" that "the method does
not so much liberate the imagination as confine it." "It is this fact," Stitt continues, "that accounts
for the feeling of sterility one has when reading the early Strand [. . .]. Conversely, this fact also
helps to explain why the later poems in [*Selected Poems*] are so especially satisfying—they please not
just intellectually, as the early poems do in abundance, but emotionally, humanly, and warmly as
well" (205). Gregerson is most circumspect of these three readers: "In his earliest poems, the
memory Strand was interested in was the memory he could engineer, the memory he come become.
In poems written since the late 1970s, he grants some affection to the merely historical, some
credence to the merely found, and he diversifies the methods of provoking recognition" (26).

Selected Poems came out in 1980, Strand hit something of a wall. "I gave up [writing poems] that year," he says, looking back. "I didn't like what I was writing, I didn't believe in my autobiographical poems" (Aaron). As the poems of *The Continuous Life* and later collections demonstrate, Strand breaks through the limitation of potential self-parody by engaging in a deliberate parody of the idea the self, and especially of himself. These later poems still demonstrate the wry apprehensiveness that had become Strand's trademark, but he had honed and expanded his gallows humor to lend the work a richer emotional range. If Strand's poetry has always considered Hamlet's great question, then the later poems manage to marry the Prince's conundrum with the dark humor of *Macbeth's* Porter.

Although this phase of Strand's career begins in force with *The Continuous Life*, traces of self-parody (as opposed to self-effacement or –negation) are evident in earlier poems, particularly in "The Story," from *The Late Hour* (1978), a book that also contains several of the autobiographical poems that critics praised and Strand abandoned. "The Story" reads like a parody of an early Strand poem or a sarcastic answer to Yeats's late question "What can I but enumerate old themes" (9). Here is Strand's poem in full:

> It is the old story: complaints about the moon
> sinking into the sea, about stars in the first light fading,
> about the lawn wet with dew, the lawn silver, the lawn cold.
>
> It goes on and on: a man stares at his shadow
> and says it's the ash of himself falling away, says his days
> are the real black holes in space. But none of it's true.
>
> You know the one I mean: it's the one about the minutes dying,
> and the hours, and the years; it's the story I tell
> about myself, about you, about everyone.   (1-9)

In typical Strandian fashion, "The Story" negates the story of Strand's work while at the same time affirming it, retelling "the story I tell / about myself, about you, about everyone." Here Strand dramatizes his own sense of poetic belatedness, and especially his belatedness in relation to himself and his own poems. In a 1998 interview with Wallace Shawn for *The Paris Review*, Strand returns to the fear of repetition and self-parody:

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> [F]inally—despite experimentation and all the self-righteousness attendant
> on experimentation—it's more of our own poems that we want to write, more
> of *our own poems*, poems that sound like they were written by us. [. . . A] poet
> whose vocabulary is very reduced—say, limited to words like *glass*, *dark*,
> *stone*—those were my words for years— [. . .] would conjure up the same bleak
> landscape again and again. I felt I had to sort of break through that
> limitation.   ("The Art of Poetry" 171)

His solution is typically Strandian: as "The Story" and later poems demonstrate, Strand
breaks through the limitation of potential self-parody by engaging in a deliberate parody of
the idea and the legacy of the poetic self.

It is no surprise, then, to find in *The Continuous Life* a poem entitled "To Himself."
What surprises, instead, is the calm of the visit, the relative ease of the interaction between
self and self. "So you've come to me now without knowing why," the speaker begins, as if
astonished that after all this time—after all these poems—the self should finally come
unbidden to him (1). And the speaker's response to the self's arrival, rather than revulsion or
terror, seems to be a mellowing sympathy: "Nor why you have chosen this moment to set
the writing of years / Against the writing of nothing [. . .]" (4-5). Anyone who would write
must always "set the writing of years / Against the writing of nothing." In a Strand poem,
however, the two have often enough turned out to be roughly equivalent, although the
momentary act of writing also turns out to be the only viable protest—if not defense—
against encroaching nothingness. In "To Himself," instead of becoming the "Someone Else"
writing the poem, as in "My Life By Somebody Else," the other self speaks to the speaker:

> You were mine, all mine; who begged me to write, but always
> Of course to you, without ever saying what it was for;
> Who used to whisper in my ear only the things
> You wanted to hear; who come to me now and say
> That it's late, that the trees are bending under the wind,
> That night will fall . . .   (7-12)

This visiting self says many of the same things Strand speakers have said over the years, but tenses seem to have shifted. Instead of losing sleep over the dreadful that may happen, the Strand speaker seems resigned to the nothing that has happened, and resigned as well to himself. Whether his attitude is resignation or sympathy, the Strand speaker can laugh at himself more openly than ever, and his laughter allows for a more complex engagement with his intimations of his—and others'—mortality.

The question of how to live with others, with oneself, pervades *The Continuous Life* from its title onward. Despite its deliberate engagement with literary history and culture (including riffs on Virgil, Kafka, Chekhov, and Borges), the book's concerns are more domestic than those of any work since *The Story of Our Lives*. Instead of attempting versions of poetic autobiography, Strand concerns himself with the nature of the story itself. Consider "Fiction," which itself seems a revision of "The Story of Our Lives," now written from outside rather than from within the story:

> I think of the innocent lives
> Of people in novels who know they'll die
> But not that the novel will end. How different they are
> From us. Here, the moon stares dumbly down,
> [. . .]
> And somebody—namely me—deep in his chair,
> Riffles the pages, knowing there's not
> Much time left [. . .].   (1-4, 6-8)

Strand's speaker reminds that one can know only one's own world and not the place of that world in the context of others. When the speaker says "How different they are from us," neither he nor we should believe it. The story of our own lives frames the story of the lives we read about in fiction, and in "Fiction," but what frames our lives? In whose story do we exist? Strand's generalities here—"the soldiers," "the trees that line / The river," "the cities of the interior"—suggest the minutiae of these (or our own) individual lives (12-13, 14).

One cannot be outside one's own life, but here, for a moment, it is as if the Strand speaker has finally found a fixed point from which to consider the entirety of reality, no longer encumbered by the difficult relativity of living the story he is trying to write.

In "Fiction," the Strand speaker becomes the visitor in someone else's story, the potentially ominous observer of other characters or, in later poems, even their interlocutor in the mode of earlier Strand poems. This new strategy for interlocutor poems persists through *The Continuous Life*, *Dark Harbor* (1993), *Blizzard of One* (1998), and *Man and Camel* (2006). Often, as in "To Himself," the Strand speaker will encounter someone who speaks in a suspiciously Strandian idiom. In "I Will Love the Twenty-first Century," from *Blizzard of One*, a man at a boring party turns to the speaker and says:

> "Although I love the past, the dark of it,
> The weight of it teaching us nothing, the loss of it, the all
> Of it asking for nothing, I will love the twenty-first century more,
> For in it I see someone in bathrobe and slippers, brown-eyed and poor,
> Walking through snow without leaving so much as a footprint behind."[12]
>
> <div align="right">(6-11)</div>

Here is the Rimbaudian moment Howard has described and Strand has so often portrayed, become wickedly comical, the *Grand Guignol* doppelgänger poems of his early career revised as Vaudeville. Instead of meeting this situation with horror or revulsion, or even old-

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[12] For more evidence of the interlocutor's Strandian idiom, compare the speech of the man in "I Will Love the Twenty-first Century" with that of the speaker of the first section of "What It Was," also from *Blizzard of One*:

> It was impossible to imagine, impossible
> Not to imagine; the blueness of it, the shadow it cast,
> Falling downward, filling the dark with the chill of itself,
> The cold of it falling out of itself, out of whatever idea
> Of itself it described as it fell; a something, a smallness,
> A dot, a speck, a speck within a speck, an endless depth
> Of smallness; a song, but less than a song, something drowning
> Into itself, something going, a flood of sound, but less
> Than a sound; the last of it, the blank of it,
> The tender small blank of it filling its echo, and falling,
> And rising unnoticed, and falling again, and always thus,
> And always because, and only because, once having been, it was . . .   (1-12)

fashioned existential angst, the Strand speaker's response is: "'Oh,' I said, putting my hat on, 'Oh'" (12). In the twenty-first century, it seems, one will respond to meeting oneself with a shrug, with the donning of a hat. In these new visions of old Strandian situations, the speaker uses such chance meetings as occasions to mock his own ego as well as the increasingly prominent status of the poet Mark Strand.[13] These new interlocutor poems, in which the Strand speaker himself becomes an unexpected or unwelcome visitor (or even becomes an animal), parody the notion and taunt the ego of the "great poet." In and after *The Continuous Life*, the Strand speaker finds mirrors conveniently set up in the woods so that he may admire himself ("Old Man Leaves Party") or finds himself the obsessive subject of others' admiration and affection, as in "Translation," in which the speaker is repeatedly seduced in the midst of theoretical conversations about the nature of poetic translation.

"Translation" reads like an epitaph to the epitaph that is *The Monument*, a satire of that self-satire. Again Strand's speaker questions what it means to translate and to be translated, the role of language in both distinguishing and extinguishing identity. In this poem, however, most of the questioning comes from other characters—a son, a son's teacher, a teacher's husband, a language professor. In these characters' voices Strand ventriloquizes various straw man theories about the nature of translation. At the same time, each character wants something of the Strand speaker—attention, seduction, affirmation. In the voices of his speaker and these characters, Strand can inhabit and satirize the theories and the archetypical characters who speak them; more importantly, he can inhabit and satirize the figure of "the poet" whom these characters seek. From the poem's second section:

> My son's nursery school teacher came over to see me. "I don't know
> German," she said, as she unbuttoned her blouse and unsnapped her bra,

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[13] Although already a significant figure in contemporary poetry when his *Selected Poems* was published, Strand's reputation grew remarkably in the Eighties and Nineties, during which he received a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship (1987), the Bollingen Prize (1993) the Pulitzer Prize (for *Blizzard of One*, 1999), and served as Poet Laureate of the United States (1990-91).

letting them fall to the floor. "But I feel that I must translate Rilke. None of the translations I've read seem very good. If I pooled them, I'm sure I could come up with something better." She dropped her skirt. "I've heard that Rilke is the German Gerard Manley Hopkins, so I'll keep 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' on my desk as I work. [. . .]" She took off her panties. "Well, what do you think?" she asked as she stood naked before me.   (49)

This encounter might seem merely exercise for the ego were it not for the swelling absurdity of the next section, in which the teacher's husband arrives for a similar conversation with similar, if more surprising, acts of affection and seduction. First "he [dabs] his sweaty upper lip with a crumpled hankie," then, after some more talk of translation, dabs the speaker's upper lip with the hankie "and brush[es his] cheek with the back of his hand" (50, 51). The ridiculous series of conversational seductions and the theoretical nature of the conversations they interrupt act as the poem's *yin* and *yang*, the lowbrow absurdity of one allowing the conceptual absurdity of the other.

The various absurdities of these encounters likewise allow the imaginative grandiosity of the poem's final visitation, from Jorge Luis Borges, with whom the Strand speaker engages in the longest debate of the poem. Translation, they speculate, has less to do with choosing particular words as substitutes for other words, and everything to do with becoming somebody else entirely. The Strand speaker, for instance, suggests that "if translation is a kind of reading, the assumption or transformation of one personal idiom into another, then shouldn't it be possible to translate work done in one's own language? Shouldn't it be possible to translate Wordsworth or Shelley into Strand?" In the midst of this conversation with an imagined Borges, the Strand speaker returns to the essential assumption of the translation project at the heart of *The Monument*, and a question essential to Strand's entire oeuvre: is it possible to translate more than one's language?—to translate oneself? To what extent is the self constituted through language, and might it be possible for that language (and thus, that self) truly to be translated? The imagined conversation with Borges allows Strand to translate himself into Borges and Borges into Strand, which

exactly what the envisioned Borges claims is necessary. "You will discover," Strand's Borges

says to Strand's speaker,

> that Wordsworth refuses to be translated. It is you who must be translated,
> who must become, for however long, the author of *The Prelude*. That is what
> happened to Pierre Menard when he translated Cervantes. He did not want
> to compose another *Don Quixote*—which would be easy—but *the Don Quixote*.
> His admirable ambition was to produce pages which would coincide—word
> for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes. The initial
> method he conceived was relatively simple: to know Spanish well, to re-
> embrace the Catholic faith, to fight against the Moors and Turks, to forget
> European history between 1602 and 1918, and to *be* Miguel de Cervantes. To
> compose *Don Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a
> reasonable, necessary, and perhaps inevitable undertaking; at the beginning of
> the twentieth century it was almost impossible.   (54)

Borges the character's lines in Strand's "Translation"—about Menard's work coinciding

"word for word and line for line"—happen to coincide nearly word for word and line for line

with Borges the author's words in his own short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the

Quixote."[14] Earlier in the poem, the Strand speaker ventriloquizes various theories about

translation, inevitably discarding each as insufficient. In the poem's final section he

ventriloquizes Borges by quoting Borges, and specifically a Borges story about a character

"translating" *Don Quixote* by quoting it verbatim. The moment affirms poet and translator at

least inasmuch as it affirms language itself. The speaker of the text has come to an end, but

the text itself—to return to Derrida's notion of what qualifies as "a writing"—abides. It is

only the ego of the writer that considers the text equivalent with its originator; likewise it is

the ego of the writer that wishes for the text to survive its originator. No one in

"Translation" escapes the satire of Strand's speaker, least of all Strand himself.

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[14] In James E. Irby's translation:

> He did not want to compose another *Quixote*—which is easy—but *the Quixote itself*.
> Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he
> did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages
> which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de
> Cervantes.   (39)

Several sections of the book-length poem *Dark Harbor* continue the trend toward self-aggrandizement for the purpose of self-effacement. Loosely rooted in the myth of Orpheus, *Dark Harbor* is a quasi-allegorical pseudo-narrative of an ersatz pilgrimage, in which the poet becomes (if briefly) the poet of myth. Several of the poem's 46 sections take place in a nameless, static milieu, a "night without end" where "[i]t has been / Years since the stores in town were open, / [. . .] Since the cloud behind the nearby mountain moved" (I.1, XIV.21-2, 24). Such a condition of stasis amplifies the importance of the poet's task to create song out of the events of the past and out of the possibilities of the imagination. The few events that do take place in the poem tend to occur in the speaker's imagination, or in his memory, in the "place that is not a place" (IX.4). As in in "Translation," some of these events are sexual escapades which begin in boasting and end in self-mocking or mere absurdity:

> Madame X begged to be relieved
> Of a sexual pain that had my name
>
> Written all over it. Those were the days
> When so many things of a sexual nature seemed to happen,
> And my name—I believed—was written on all of them.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Did I suffer,
> Knowing that I was wanted for the wrong reasons?
> Of course, and it has taken me years to recover.   (XXII.2-6, 10-12)

Such a lover—a human, remembered lover—is insufficient to the speaker. In the poem's eighth section, then, the speaker imagines an encounter with the only lover who could possibly satisfy him. Here is Strand at his most grandiose and most self-effacingly comedic:

> The harmonies of wholesomeness have reached their apogee,
>
> And I am aquiver with satisfaction, and you look
> Good, too.
> [. . .]

> O my partner, my beautiful death,
> My black paradise, my fusty intoxicant,
>
> My symbolist muse, give me your breast
> Or your hand or your tongue that sleeps all day
> Behind its walls of reddish gums.
>
> Lay yourself down on the restaurant floor
> And recite all that's been kept from my happiness.
> Tell me I have not lived in vain, that the stars
>
> Will not die, that things will stay as they are,
> That what I have seen will last, that I was not born
> Into change, that what I have said has not been said for me.   (VIII.9-24)

The speaker's "you look / Good, too" at first seems to refer to a woman, a Madame Y who attracts the speaker as much as he, "aquiver with satisfaction," attracts himself. But women and men, like autobiography, cannot do. Instead, the speaker describes the lover in the surreal imagery of an early Strand poem—a female personification of Death who goes on dates, who shares her lover's soup. The section shifts drastically from the exhibitionistic "lay yourself down on the restaurant floor" to the more plaintive "recite all that's been kept from my happiness." Alone with Death, the speaker asks his impossible requests, as Orpheus might have done, but as in "I Will Love the Twenty-first Century" or even in "My Life," the speaker appears to surrender the most charged lines to another voice. His imperative "Tell me" tells us all we need to know about what he wants and what he knows cannot be without him taking responsibility for the conjecture. Nothing can be assured: the stars will die, and the speaker as well, having been "born / Into change." What he has seen may not last, but what he has said—more accurately, the act of saying—may.

Strand continues his speaker's love affair with Death in *Man and Camel*, and especially in "2002." In this poem, a personified Death appears as a fan of Strand's poetry, pining for the poet as the Strand persona once pined for himself. Death, it turns out—like the interlocutor of "I Will Love the Twenty-first Century"—speaks in the mode of the Strand speaker, and longs for his arrival in "the city of souls" (7). Like so many poems from

Strand's latter phase, "2002" pushes the egotism of the "great poet" so far into absurdity that the egotism dissolves in laughter; in that laughter the egotism can be forgiven. In "2002" the Strand speaker goes one step beyond Orpheus: instead of the poet singing to move Death to pity, Death himself now sings of his longing for the company of "Strand." I quote in full:

> I am not thinking of Death, but Death is thinking of me.
> He leans back in his chair, rubs his hands, strokes
> His beard and says, "I'm thinking of Strand, I'm thinking
> That one of these days I'll be out back, swinging my scythe
> Or holding up my hourglass to the moon, and Strand will appear
> In a jacket and tie, and together under the boulevards'
> Leafless trees we'll stroll into the city of souls. And when
> We get to the Great Piazza with its marble mansions, the crowd
> That had been waiting there will welcome us with delirious cries,
> And their tears, turned hard and cold as glass from having been
> Held back so long, will fall, and clatter on the stones below.
>   O let it be soon. Let it be soon." (1-12)

It seems entirely appropriate that Death should sing his love song to Strand in a Strandian idiom. The exaggerated importance of this "Strand" suggests that Death desires the author rather than the historical person, but it is the figure of the author who will survive the death of the historical person. In fact, as the prose poems of *Almost Invisible* demonstrate, the death of the person can be envisioned as the final triumph of the author, the ultimate solution to the problem of the self. As in "2002," the Strand speaker turns his imminent extinction into an imagined apotheosis. But the apotheosis is reserved for "Mark Strand," the author figure who emerges as the person begins to disappear.

The speakers of *Almost Invisible* wish for impossible journeys, to be "[led] away from all [they] had known" ("The Students of the Ineffable," 11). These journeys would not distance the travelers from any particular place but, perhaps inevitably, from themselves. In "Once Upon a Cold November Morning," such a journey leads the speaker away from his "daily life" to a place where he discovers,

in all its chilly glory, the glass castle of my other life. I could see right through it, and beyond, but what could I do with it? It was perfect, irreducible, and worthless except for the fact that it existed.   (27)

I read this "other life' as roughly equivalent with the textual "life" of the author. In this way "Once Upon a Cold November Morning" sets the "sunlit fields of my daily life" against the "glass castle of my other life," recalling Borges's distinction between the "I" who likes "hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson" and the "he" who "shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor." Borges's speaker finds that "Borges" "has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me [. . .] I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him" (246). That instant is nothing more than the name from which Borges's—or Strand's—speaker will soon disappear. Strand's speaker finds that the other life is both perfect and worthless: worthless in that it cannot save the speaker, but perfect in the fact of its existence, which may persist even after the speaker (and the person) has died. In fact the status of that other life's writing, to return again to Derrida, becomes "a writing" only when the person who created it has disappeared from it.

        If indeed *Almost Invisible* proves to be Strand's last book, then his poetic career concludes as it began—with his speaker in bed, pondering the divisions within himself, imagining what may happen. In "Sleeping with One Eye Open," the sense of fugue brought on by such divisions finds its formal enactment in the poem's echoing rhymes. In "The Minister of Culture Gets His Wish" and "When I Turned a Hundred"—indeed, throughout *Almost Invisible*—the fugue of the self is enacted in the troubled genre of the prose poem. Like The Monument created in the author's and translator's simultaneous act of writing, like the poet who both exaggerates and satirizes his own significance, and like the self that both is and is not, these texts enact the paradoxes they pose: "[s]ometimes appearing as pure prose, sometimes as impure poetry [. . .]" (Jacket copy). The genre itself is another instance of the Strandian "neither/nor." The speaker who lay in bed hoping that nothing will happen has become a speaker who gets his wish:

He lies on his bed and tries to think of nothing, but nothing happens or, more precisely, does not happen. Nothing is elsewhere doing what nothing does, which is to expand the dark. But the minister is patient, and slowly things slip away—the walls of his house, the park across the street, his friends in the next town. He believes that nothing has finally come to him and, in its absent way, is saying, "Darling, you know how much I have always wanted to please you, and now I have come. And what is more, I have come to stay." (8)

Nothing comes to the minister lovingly, as Death moons over the Strand speaker in "2002," and in the end of the poem the Minister of Culture and Nothing are brought together in the matrimony of invisibility. Similarly, the speaker of "When I Turned a Hundred" wants "to go on an immense journey [. . .] until, forgetting my old self, I came into possession of a new self." The self here is something to be possessed, something that can be changed and exchanged. It is something less than Whitman's more essential "Me myself," yet it persists as something that the Strand speaker cannot be rid of: only a new self can forget the old self.

Nevertheless, in these last lines, Strand once more enacts the paradox inherent in the statement "I am not." "I was gone," the speaker says in the past tense, implying his continuing existence in some other state. If the speaker is to be believed, then he has traversed the gap between "almost invisible" and "invisible." He speaks from nothingness; he speaks as nothing, and as such he speaks from the center of the Strandian paradox. The Möbius strip continues its endless turning, the ouroboros swallows its tail, and he remains, more or less, where he began. It is impossible, as Strand has demonstrated, both to be and not to be. Very well then, Strand's poems contradict themselves; they dwell in the possibility of this impossibility, as if one could be nothing and still be, as if nothing could have another name.

Chapter Two

This This: Charles Wright

"The love of God is the loneliest thing I know of," Charles Wright has said ("Halflife" 31). Phrased differently, nothing makes one more painfully aware of one's own human solitude than an attempt to communicate with—or merely to contemplate—the divine. Throughout his career Wright has addressed that solitude and articulated the longing to transcend it. He has also expressed his conviction that to transcend solitude in pursuit of the infinite divine would require transcending the finite, limited self. Wright's desire to transcend the self, however, concurs paradoxically with a religious penitentiary need to "confess" and extricate the self. As we shall see, even his attempts at such transcendence result in telling the story of—thus, in creating—the self, and in reinforcing the distance between that self and the longed-for divine. Wright doubts the possibility of these varieties of transcendence even as he attempts them in his poems. In Wright's apophatic theology, one can perceive the absence of or the ache for God, but one cannot conceive of the God for whom one aches. Any human conception of God is insufficient to the nature of the absolute, since the absolute is necessarily inconceivable. Since the limited self cannot be transcended and the infinite cannot even be contemplated, Wright's poetry instead "work[s] in the synapse" between them ("Halflife" 35).

The unspeakable absolute remains the implicit subject behind and beyond Wright's stated subject matter—"landscape, language, and the idea of God" ("Bytes and Pieces" 81). These subjects, Bonnie Costello writes, "form, of course, one trinitarian subject. Language, especially metaphoric language, introduces the negative principle into landscape because it

creates a difference from the seen world, which allows us to view it in a symbolic aspect, and

it is in this difference that 'the idea of God' takes shape" (329)[1] The idea takes shape not

only in the difference between the seen world and the figured world, but in the difference

between the intelligence that describes the world and the world itself, as in the difference

between "the idea of God" and God. The spaces between idea and word, word and flesh,

between the desire to transcend and the (in)ability to do so are the loci of Wright's poetry.

As Costello suggests, Wright's poetry represents a *via negativa*, an attempt to describe in

terms of negation, given the understanding that one cannot speak directly of the

unspeakable. The fallible, fungible medium of human language cannot adequately speak of

the absolute, but it can acknowledge its own failures; it can be used to enact the inadequacy

of our own fallible, fungible condition and the desire to transcend it. One can read Wright's

career—as a number of commentators have done—as "an effort to construct a spiritual

autobiography." In this sense, Andrew Mulvania describes Wright's work as a form of

"confession," both as "a practice of scrutinizing one's life for spiritual meaning and for the

more secular purpose of the artful construction of some version of the self" ("Confessions").[2]

Such a binocular view of "confession" places Wright's work in the theological tradition of

Augustine of Hippo as much as in the poetic tradition of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and

others. I would align Wright more closely with Augustine in that Wright's poetry confesses

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[1] Costello also points out—and I emphasize this in my own discussion of Wright's subject matter(s)—that "[t]he ultimate unit of 'something infinite behind everything' is Wright's only subject, endlessly renewed as his capacious mind confronts the landscape" (326). To this I would add that the subject is renewed as he confronts his stated subject matter, "landscape, language, and the idea of God," all of which represent the speakable manifestations of the unspeakable "infinite behind everything" which, to complete the lines from which Costello quotes, "appears, / and then disappears" ("The Other Side of the River" 32).

[2] For other readings of Wright's project as spiritual autobiography, see Bonnie Costello, "Charles Wright's *Via Negativa*: Language, Landscape, and the Idea of God;" Kevin Hart, "*La Poesia è Scala a Dio*: On Reading Charles Wright;" James McCorckle, "'Things That Lock Our Wrists to the Past': Self-Portraiture and Autobiography in Charles Wright's Poetry;" Andrew Mulvania, "Confessions of St. Charles: Confession as Spiritual Autobiography in the Work of Charles Wright;" Lee Upton, "The Doubting Penitent: Charles Wright's Epiphanies of Abandonment."

the self—"to acknowledge, own, avow"—as a theological apologia, in an attempt to get beyond it (*OED*). If Wright's career represents a spiritual autobiography, the autobiography is not the story of the self, but the story of "[u]ndoing the self," a task that Wright says "is a hard road" ("Ostinato and Drone" 1). Wright's poems do not so much seek to express or absolve the self as they seek to dissolve it into the absolute. As such he is not necessarily interested—as both Augustine and the Confessional poets are—with narrating significant events in his own life for the purpose of attributing to them some spiritual or secular significance. To the extent that Wright's poems narrate anything, they narrate a conversion experience figured in his depictions of landscape and meditations on language, time and memory. By "conversion" I intend the more obvious spiritual connotations of the word as well as the sense of an alchemical conversion, a transformation (or even transubstantiation) of the evanescent self into language, landscape, and time, all of which become Wright's finite suggestions of the infinite. As he writes in "April":

> I count off the grace and stays
> My life has come to, and know I want less—
>
> Divested of everything,
> A downfall of light in the pine woods, motes in the rush,
> Gold leaf through the undergrowth, and come back
> As another name, water
> Pooled in the black leaves and holding me there, to be
> Released as a glint, as a flash, as a spark . . . .   (5-12)

The speaker of these lines supposes that to be less than oneself is somehow to be more; one's self must be dissolved, transformed, in order to become something more essential. As we shall see, Wright's alchemical tools are not the crucible and alembic of the hermetic tradition, but poetic form as he perceives it, form as structural principle, form as ritual.

For Wright, the unnegotiable distance between the finite and infinite is also the distance between the self and the divine, between the present and the past, and between the visible world and the invisible. "The invisible," Costello writes, "is not a vague presence or a ghostly absence, but a quality formed by our desire for absolutes, which in turn gives

contour to the finite world we see and recall" (325). I want to emphasize the word *recall* here, as Wright's poems themselves linger on the idea of memory as the fallible but necessary record of a coherent self and of the various landscapes through which the self is understood. As Wright attempts to recall his past into his poems, he finds that just as the divine remains beyond the reach of human temporal and linguistic limitations, so do the various human experiences through which he would constitute himself. These experiences include the various landscapes he describes, both observed and remembered, especially Appalachian Tennessee and North Carolina, Italy, California, Montana, and Virginia. As Costello writes, "landscape is not a home [. . .] but a mediation of self and void" (326-7). Such mediation, however, would depend upon our own power to mediate landscape within the limits of human language. Moreover, in Wright's poems, memory itself is a type of landscape, and landscape a medium for attempting to remember where—and what—one has been. Ultimately, landscape, memory, and language all fail: he cannot employ them to constitute, confess, or transcend the self, but these failures instead become Wright's method of silhouetting the unimaginable divine.

Wright's poetic method also includes the rigorous if idiosyncratic formal structure that his poems have demonstrated for about the last thirty years. "Each line should be a station of the cross," Wright has written, and as such he has established the "stations" of his own poetic line by adhering to odd numbers of syllables ("Improvisations" 5). Wright has remarked in conversation, for instance, that a line of an odd number of syllables is less likely to fall into a simple tetrameter or pentameter ("Conversation"). Thus, Wright suggests that an odd number of syllables in a line maintains the tension of his free verse lines against what T. S. Eliot called "the ghost of some simple meter [lurking] behind the arras" (187). I want especially to emphasize the ritualistic aspect of these syllable counts: for Wright, the enumerative ritual becomes a temporary stay against time itself. Similarly, his evolving sense of the page as its own landscape becomes a method for approximating the nonverbal

structures of the natural world in the words and lines on the page, and in the spaces between them. The borders between subject and technique blur; Wright works within their margins.

These uses of formal organization are most functionally apparent in *The Southern Cross* (1981), which represents a pivotal point in Wright's career as a poet. As concerned with memory as Wright is, his early poems treat specific memories in a private, almost encoded language. The poems of *The Southern Cross*, Wright's fifth collection, mark a shift from the imagistic, airtight lyrics of his early career to a longer, more meditative (and more consistently syllabic) line. They also mark the beginning of his consistent use of the dropdown hemistich (the "low rider," as he calls it) that extends Wright's free verse line across the page, expanding the shape of the printed poem and allowing more blank space within it ("Halflife" 33). Wright's elliptical version of poetic autobiography relaxes as he elongates his poetic line. Where an earlier Wright poem may have offered an image without a specific referent, resulting in an almost inscrutable, hermetic language, the poems of and after *The Southern Cross* often include dates and references to proper names of people and places. Wright comes to treat these specific references according to his observation that "all tactile things are doors to the infinite" ("Halflife" 28). The various nouns of the visible world, he finds, are ways to approach the divine rather than distractions from it. At the same time, as Wright's language of landscape and memory becomes more specific, he finds the possibilities of language, landscape, and memory more suspect themselves. Along Wright's *via negativa*, he finds the failure of language to describe the absolute as well as its inability ultimately to depict landscape or even the self. Nevertheless, Wright's laments for the inadequacy of language are composed in language of lush descriptiveness, emphasizing the beauty as well as the inadequacy of language. If the attempt to transcend the self and approach the divine must necessarily fail, then Wright will make his poetry out of the failure instead.

My claims about Charles Wright's poetry draw on readings of his work as *via negativa* (Costello), as a form of Augustinian confession (Mulvania), as an "abandoning [of]

the limited confines of the self" (Upton 24), as an attempt to "access [. . .] spiritual wholeness" through devotion to landscape (Spiegelman 83), and as an enactment of negative capability through formal organization (Cushman). Each of these critics offers compelling readings of a facet of Wright's poetry, but none of these accounts represents a comprehensive whole. My own treatment of Wright's work synthesizes and expands these readings to demonstrate how Wright's poetry links the apophatic theologians' vocabularies of doubt about the knowability of God with the language of poststructuralist doubts about the stability of language and knowledge. If Wright's poetry represents in part a spiritual autobiography in the Augustinian tradition, his use of landscape to figure that elliptical narrative is indebted to the self-fashioning impulse and natural theology of William Wordsworth. At the same time, Wright's collagist technique, the associative logic of his images, and the ritualistic aspect of his formal method represent debts to the Modernist aesthetic of his acknowledged master, Ezra Pound. Wright's revision of Pound's dictum— "make it new" remade as "make it old"—represents one example of Wright's assimilation, his "transubstantiation" of these influences into a poetics distinctly his own (*The Cantos* 53.67-9, "Looking Around" 18). Wright's poetry is Romantic in subject matter, Modernist in method, and both medieval apophatic and poststructuralist in its doubting approach to language and knowledge. As Wright has said:

> The battleground is always Language. It is not forms, or narrative, or the image (although these are constant individual skirmishes). The Language Poets, to their credit, understand this dogma. Their problem is that they can't, or refuse, to see the battleground for the war. The war is never won, and is eternal. It is the battleground that must be ordered and set to rights every so often. Language has reference to a larger whole. The battleground has reference to a larger war.   ("Halflife" 39)

Doubt—regarding the reliability of language and the knowability of the divine—lies at the heart of Wright's poetics. Wright is not merely a religious poet in a supposedly secular age;

he is a poet whose work illuminates the indebtedness of poststructuralist linguistic, epistemological doubt to the medieval vocabularies of apophatic doubt regarding the nature of the divine and the foundations of human knowledge. In this chapter, then, I seek to understand Wright's poetry as a multi-faceted attempt—despite his doubts about the possibility of doing so—to approach the divine through language, landscape, memory, and by attempting and failing to transcend the individual, finite self.

For all Wright's emphasis on the unspeakable, he is remarkably forthcoming about the goals of his own work. These claims may not constitute a coherent system, but the themes of articulating and of extricating the self resound among them: "What do I want my poems to do? I want them to sing and to tell the story of my life" ("Halflife" 23). "I write poems to untie myself, to do penance and disappear / Through the upper right-hand corner of things, to say grace" ("Reunion" 4-5). "The poem is a self-portrait \ always, no matter what mask / You take off and put back on" ("Roma II" 8-9).[3]

> I write, as I said before, to untie myself, to stand clear,
> To extricate an absence.
> The ultimate hush of language,
>   (fricative, verb, and phoneme),
> The silence that turns the silence off.
>   ("There Is a Balm in Gilead" 13-16)

Implicit in these excerpts is the sense that, for Wright, to portray the self—to attempt to fix the self even temporarily in the language of a poem—is to work toward "undoing the self," toward "untying" or "extricating" the self from its own limits. In Andrew Mulvania's reading of Wright's "autobiographical project," these simultaneous treatments of the self identify Wright's work as not merely autobiographical but as confessional:

> If Wright's autobiographical project is confessional, it is so in this
> Augustinian sense of the evolution of a self. Though Wright questions the
> very notion of a unified self that could undergo such an evolution [. . .] and
> eschews the possibility of fixing that self in time or language [. . .], he must
> nevertheless perform a ritualistic gesture, however artificial, of supplication to
> those objects whose function it is to shore up a notion of an authentic self.

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[3] Here and throughout, I indicate Wright's use of the dropdown hemistich, the "low rider," with a forward slash ("\"), although I count the material on either side of this forward slash as a single line.

(“Confessions”)

Mulvania’s phrase “ritualistic gesture” emphasizes the Augustinian sense of confession, the quality that renders the act of confession in symbolic terms. Indeed, as Garry Wills argues, Augustine’s own *Confessions* must be understood in such symbolic terms rather than as mere autobiography, as even “the first autobiography”:

> [*Confessions*] does not fit into that genre [autobiography]. God does not need to learn anything about Augustine’s life. Augustine is trying to acknowledge the sacred graces that make his life part of sacred history—whence the constant use of Scripture. [. . . *Confessions*] stands closer to *Pilgrims Progress*, or even to *The Divine Comedy*, than to Rousseau’s *Confessions*. It is a theological construct of a highly symbolic sort. [. . .] We are not in the realm of autobiography but of spiritual psychodrama.   (22-3, 25)

Augustine’s “constant use of Scripture” and his frequent quotations from other thinkers represent both an attempt to “make his life part of sacred history,” but also to use the words of others in crafting a coherent self. “[B]y a paradox,” Wills writes, “Augustine’s use of other people’s words (the sacred authors’) helps him speak most authentically as himself” (9). Wright employs a similar method, especially in and after *The Southern Cross*, quoting from or replying to Chinese philosophers and poets, Christian mystics and doubters, blues and bluegrass musicians. In both Augustine and Wright we find that, whatever else the self is, it is a composite of others, and a composite less narrated than performed.

The notion of performativity—specifically the role of ritual performativity in articulating or extricating the self—returns us to Wright’s idea of the poetic line as a “station of the cross,” the symbolic reenactment of Christ’s progress to crucifixion at Golgotha. The segmenting of Christ’s original experience into reproducible “stations” orders the physical and meditative experience of the penitent pilgrim, who would commemorate Christ’s Passion as well as atone for his own symbolic role in the Passion. Moreover, the symbolic transference of one physical place into another (Christ’s steps in

Jerusalem "transferred" to the nave of a cathedral, for instance) allows the pilgrim metaphorically to transcend space and time. Wright's use of the phrase to describe his sense of the poetic line suggests specific forms and structures become sanctified, as well as a process through which individual parts become significant in themselves and in relationship to a larger whole. In the words on a page, a reader of Augustine's *Confessions* can occupy the roles of both penitent and confessor, reading Augustine's words as Augustine's, but also as if they were one's own. The reader of a poem, similarly, "travels" the landscape of the poem from line to line: the Italian word *stanza*, meaning *stopping place* or *room*, preserves this spatiotemporal metaphor, and derives from the same Latin root—*stare*, or *to stand*—in which "station" originates (*OED*). If each line is a station of the cross, then each line contributes to a structure that allows a commemorative, reiterative experience for the reading audience.

The performative qualities of Augustine and Wright's works notwithstanding, I find that Wills's reading of the symbolic quality of the *Confessions* underestimates the life of the book among its mortal audiences. Augustine explicitly addresses his *Confessions* to his God, but he also asks: "Why, then, do I tell you all these stories of mine? Surely not that you should learn them from me. Rather I raise up towards you my mind and the minds of those who read all this, so that together we may say: *Great is the Lord and worthy of high praise* [. . .]" (11.1.1). So of course Augustine is aware that human readers form a secondary but necessary audience, and the "spiritual psychodrama" that results between the book's author and its primary audience plays out as we secondary readers read. As such we "overhear" Augustine's address to the omniscient in much the same way John Stuart Mill suggests that an audience "overhears" the speaker of a lyric poem. As Mill distinguishes between "eloquence" and "poetry":

> eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible

representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the

poet's mind. (11-12)

Mill imagines poetry as a self-reflexive confession: the statement for the statement's sake, or even, I would suggest, as a form of ritual. Of course, Mill's understanding of "moments of solitude" must be modified to "apparent solitude" if we listeners are to overhear anything. Thus we are privy to the address of the lyric poem—"feeling confessing itself to itself"—as we are privy to the "spiritual psychodrama" of Augustine's *Confessions* and of Wright's "confessional" project.

My formulation of Wright's "confessional" method, then, synthesizes these versions of overhearing, in both of which the ritual or performance of saying is of equal or greater precedence than the content of what is said. Narrative is incidental but also inevitable. We readers impose a narrative on what we read just as the autobiographer imposes an artificial narrative—even if only for the sake of the clarity of repeatability—out of a life of lived moments. Or, as Wright has said in similar terms: "Form is nothing more than a transubstantiation of content" ("Improvisations" 3). Indeed, the mystery at the heart of the notion of transubstantiation—the bread and wine of the Eucharist become the body and blood of Christ—resembles the mystery of transformation at the heart of the poem, as the visible world becomes the verbalized world, the lived life the inscribed life.[4] The metamorphic process allows Wright to downplay the importance of his specific biography in favor of the autobiographical act: "My biography is pretty much the biography of everyone here," he remarks ("At Oberlin College" 60). "Everyone's life is the same life \ if you live long enough" ("The Southern Cross" 130). If Wright's claim about autobiography is true, then the autobiographical project must be justified not only in terms of

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[4] Stephen Cushman understands the process as vectored in the opposite direction: "[I]f I follow [Wright's] formulations about content, subject matter, and form, the real 'content' of any poem, or at least any poem by Charles Wright, is the mystery of how the bread and wine of lines of verse become the body and blood of the universe" (207). Ultimately, I think, the fact of changeability matters more than the direction of the change.

transforming—"transubstantiating"—the content of lived life into a literary life, but lived

life as form into literary form.[5] Wright's version of Augustinian confession takes on just this

task, but where Augustine affirms his faith, Wright affirms only the forms of faith. "All my

poems seem to be an ongoing argument with myself about the unlikelihood of salvation," he

writes, and out of this quarrel with himself—to paraphrase William Butler Yeats—Wright

makes his poetry ("Halflife" 37, Yeats 331). Wright's autobiographical, confessional project

also represents an apophatic poetics, as Wright dramatizes the "ongoing argument" with

himself as one that can yield no answers, but only suggestions.

Although the terms apophaticism and *via negativa* are borrowed from theology, they

are particularly germane to a consideration of Charles Wright's poetry, not only because of

Wright's spiritual concerns but especially because of their suggestions regarding the limits

of language and the limits of knowledge. Denys Turner offers a succinct explanation and

summary of apophaticism:

> 'Apophaticism' is the name of that theology which is done against the
>
> background of human ignorance of the nature of God. It is the doing of
>
> theology in the light of the statement of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth

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[5] Wright has been emphatic about his own view of the separation of "form" and "content." In a 1986
interview with Carol Ellis, Wright says:

> [Philip] Larkin's comment was 'Form means nothing to me. Content is everything.'
> My comment would be that content means nothing to me. Form is everything.
> Which is to say, to me that most vital question in poetry is the question of form.
> Form lies at the heart of all poetical problems. I don't mean 'forms'—I don't mean
> sonnets, sestinas, rondeaus, quatrains, triplets. I mean Form. UFO—Ultimate
> Formal Organization, if you wish. That may be extrapoetical in some sense. But I'm
> concerned with form and structures, the architecture of form.
>
> ("With Carol Ellis" 153-4)

Wright clarifies the point in another 1986 interview, with Stan Sanvel Rubin and William Heyen:
"Form means everything to me, content is nothing. I don't believe that, of course, but it's a
provocative thing to say, because people say, 'What do you mean?' My point is that once you know
your content, the way Larkin knew his forms, then it's not something you have to think about
anymore" ("'Metaphysics of the Quotidian'" 32).

century, that 'we do not know what kind of being God is'. It is the conception of theology not as a naive *pre*-critical ignorance of God, but as a kind of acquired ignorance, a *docta ignorantia* as Nicholas of Cues called it in the fifteenth century. It is the conception of theology as a strategy and practice of unknowing, as the fourteenth-century English mystic [the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, hereafter "*Cloud* Author"] called it, who, we might say, invented the transitive verb-form 'to unknow' in order to describe theological knowledge, in this its deconstructive mode. Finally, 'apophaticism' is the same as what the Latin tradition of Christianity called the *via negativa*, 'the negative way'.   (19)

"Unknowing," as Turner has described it in the terms of the *Cloud* Author, has to do with "unsaying," the limits of one's language, which—as we have seen in our consideration of Strand and Wittgenstein—describe the limits of one's world. One can speak of God only insofar as one can say what God is not; whatever one might name "God" cannot, by virtue of being named, be God. Our ability to transcend is limited by our (in)ability to name. Or, as Wright observes, "We who would see beyond seeing \ see only language, that burning field" ("Looking Outside the Cabin Window" 17).

It is significant, too, that Wright should call language "that burning field," that he should imagine language as landscape. In Wright's poetry landscape becomes an obsessive subject for the descriptive powers of language that fail to describe the Absolute. Landscape (as opposed to "nature"), in being described (literally, *written down* or *written off*) by language, becomes with language a stand-in for the absolute (*OED*).[6] Landscape represents the limits

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[6] In the commonplace journal published as "Bytes and Pieces," Wright distinguishes "landscape" from "nature" metaphorically:

> —The heart of nature is nature, the heart of landscape is God. Which is to say, the heart of nature is disease (and disease), and the heart of landscape is design (*dasein*).

of what one can see; language represents the limits of what one can say or know. Moreover, speaking of landscapes—both those perceived and those remembered—becomes a way of speaking about the self. "Landscape was never a subject matter," the Wright speaker says in the recent poem "The Minor Art of Self-Defense," "it was a technique, / A method of measure, \ a scaffold for structuring" (1-2). The subject matter is and "was always" language, "the idea of God / The ghost that over my little world / Hovered [. . .]" (4-6). But this distinction complicates matters rather than clarifying them. For Wright, landscape is both technique and subject matter, just as language is both technique and subject matter. Landscape and language are methods for picturing the invisible "ghost," "the idea of God," the self's relationship to God and to the idea of God. As perceivable changes in landscape seem to point outward, to the unperceivable, they can also point inward, to the perceiver himself, and to his understanding of himself as within the landscape or separate from it. Here it is worth repeating Costello's formulations that "landscape [mediates] self and void," and that "[l]anguage, especially metaphoric language, introduces the negative principle into

> —Landscape is something you determine and dominate; nature is something that dominates you.
>
> —Nature is inherently sentimental, landscape is not.
>
> —Landscape is a "distancing" factor (description of same, identification of self in same) as regards the "self," the "I" in poetry. Nature, on the other hand, is quicksand.   (85)

Wright returns to the subject in section 14 of *Littlefoot*: "—The language of nature, we know, is mathematics. / The language of landscape is language, / Metaphor, metaphor, metaphor, \ all down the line" (29-31). Wright's distinctions, for all their figurative vividness, are more poetic than specific. A sense of the history of these words in English may help illuminate Wright's own distinctions. Although the earliest definition (ca. 1275) for "nature" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* concerns "senses related to physical or bodily power, strength, or substance," the word derives from its French cognate, *nature*, meaning the "active force that establishes and maintains the order of the universe" (*OED*). "Landscape" is a more recent addition to the language (1598), derived from the Dutch *landschap*, meaning "landship," but having in English a specific connotation of artistry: "A picture representing natural inland scenery, as distinguished from a sea picture, a portrait, etc" (*OED*). The history of "landscape" in English, then, supports Wright's sense of it as "something you determine and dominate" and as an artistic "'distancing' factor."

landscape because it creates a difference from the seen world, which allows us to view it in a symbolic aspect, and it is in this difference that 'the idea of God' takes shape" (326-7, 329).

The idea may take shape, but the shape is never sufficient to the phenomenon it would describe. Although I borrow the terms "apophaticism" and "*via negativa*" from theology in order to characterize Wright's poetry, Wright's sense of his own condition is distinct from the Christian mystics' thought, in which these terms take on their present valence. Turner points to an "apophatic anthropology" in the thought of the fourteenth-century mystics Meister Eckhart, the *Cloud* Author, and St. John of the Cross, calling this sense of anthropology

> as radical as their apophatic theology, the one intimately connected with the other. All three in *some* sense deny that I am 'a self;' or at least, they appear to say that whatever may be the proper description of the fullest union of the human self with God, there is no distinction which we are able to make *between* that 'self' and the God it is one with. Nor are they alone in this, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Genoa, and Teresa of Avila being three others who say the same.   (5-6)

In Wright's poetry, such thinkers and their notions of unity become both ideal and foil for the doubting, "Christ-haunted" speaker, and apparently strange bedfellows for poststructuralist thinkers whose own doubts about language and knowledge become another context for Wright's concerns (Smith). Wright's poems, however, make apparent the linkages between the Christian mystics' sense of the unknowability of God and the poststructuralists' sense of the instability of language and knowledge. In the recent poem "The Ghost of Walter Benjamin Walks at Midnight," Wright says:

> The world's an untranslatable language
> > without words or parts of speech.
> It's a language of objects
> Our tongues can't master,
> > but which we are the ardent subjects of.

> If *tree* is *tree* in English,
> > > and *albero* in Italian,
> That's as close as we can come
> To divinity, the language that circles the earth
> > > > and which we'll never speak.   (1-6)

The poem's title and its references to translatability allude to Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," in which Benjamin writes:

> The relationship between life and purposefulness, seemingly obvious yet almost beyond the grasp of the intellect, reveals itself only if the ultimate purpose toward which all single functions tend is sought *not in its own sphere but in a higher one* [my emphasis]. All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance. Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages.   (72)

Benjamin's phrase "not in its own sphere but in a higher one" is an apophatic gesture: the "purpose toward which all single functions tend" is ultimately, and necessarily, beyond their reach. If "[a]ll poems are translations," as Wright says, then all poems express the ultimately unspeakable relationships between languages and between poems ("Halflife" 33). As Wright "translates" Benjamin into this poem, translation is as close as the human can come to the unspeakable language of divinity, but translation, being a function of fallible human language, necessarily fails the world and fails the divine. "As close as we can come" is not especially close after all, but the resulting gap between the one and the other remains the space in which Wright's work abides. Benjamin identifies translation as issuing from the afterlife of the original—an appropriate metaphor here, given that Wright's poem introduces Benjamin as a walking ghost, and acts in its own right as a kind of translation, a kind of afterlife both for the original author (cf. Derrida's axiom regarding "writing") and of

the original work.[7] Not only the ghost of Benjamin, but the ghost of language walks in Wright's poem, because "[i]n all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated [. . .]" (Benjamin 79).

Wright wants what the Christian mystics want, but his "ongoing argument with [him]self" is "about the *unlikelihood* of salvation" (my emphasis). Despite his hostility toward the idea of deconstructionist criticism, his doubts are poststructuralist doubts.[8] As Costello has suggested, however, desire for absolutes—not realization of them—gives contour to our finite world and, for Wright, lends shape and tension to his poems. As he writes in "Clear Night":

> I want to be bruised by God.
> I want to be strung up in a strong light and singled out.
> I want to be stretched, like music wrung from a dropped seed.
> I want to be entered and picked clean.   (5-8)

As vivid and violent as these images are, I locate the animating force of these lines in the anaphora of "I want," the articulation of the speaker's desire that also speaks to his lack, especially given that each "I want" is followed by the infinitive "to be." And yet I cannot read "Clear Night" without recalling the similarly erotic violence of John Donne's "[Batter my heart, three-personed God"]:

> Batter my heart, three personed God; for, you
> As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
> That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
> Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

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[7] Derrida articulates this criterion in "Signature Event Context":

> For a writing to be a writing, it must continue to "act" and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, be it because of a temporary absence, because he is dead or, more generally, because he has not employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his desire to say what he means, in order to sustain what seems to be written "in his name."   (8)

[8] In "Bytes and Pieces," for instance, Wright notes: "A deconstructionist critic writing about Language Poetry is like a dog eating its own vomit" (80).

> [. . .]
> Take me to you, imprison me, for I
> Except you enthral me, never shall be free,
> Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.   (1-4, 12-14)

As much as the two poems can speak to one another, I present Donne's poem alongside Wright's with the specific caveat that the Donne speaker asserts himself toward his God in imperatives, petitioning these responses from the divine, speaking of them as if the petition had already been answered in the affirmative. Wright's speaker, by contrast, wants an interaction with his God but cannot establish real dialogue with him or his creation:

> And the wind says "What?" to me.
> And the castor beans, with their little earrings of death, say "What?" to me.
> And the stars start out on their cold slide through the dark.
> And the gears notch and the engines wheel.   (9-12)

The stars, the gears, the engines say nothing back to the speaker, but simply go through their own motions. The wind and the castor beans do speak, but what they say—"What?"—indicates only mishearing or misapprehension.

To be bruised, to be strung up, to be stretched, to be entered—the speaker seems to desire these experiences because they are violent, as if such violence offered an opportunity to feel the presence of the divine in an undeniable way. But, as the second stanza of "Clear Night" demonstrates, the speaker cannot close the gap between himself and the divine. He can, however, describe that separation as a kind of communicative lacuna, a gap across which he or the divine might reach, but cannot or does not. I would correlate these unbridged metaphysical chasms with the liminal spaces Wright describes as "synapses." Although "synapse" refers anatomically to "the junction, or structure at the junction, between two neurons or nerve-cells," Wright uses the figure of the synapse as a metaphor for the completion of an aesthetic circuit (*OED*). "Art tends toward the condition of circularity and completion," he writes. "The artist's job is to keep the circle from joining—to work in the synapse" ("Halflife" 35). In Wright's sense, the unbridged separation or the unsparked synapse connotes the tension of the unfulfilled, which Wright understands as a

tension crucial to his artistic project, and which, as I argue here, is the central tension of his theology as well. In Wright's notion of the artist's task, to present the circuit as joined is not only aesthetically deficient but theologically dishonest as well. Who would follow the *via negativa* follows because he or she understands that the infinite cannot be described in the finite. For Wright, then, the *via negativa* is both, and inseparably, a theological and a poetic method.

Wright's "The New Poem" establishes, more than any other early poem, his *via negativa* as a poetic analogue to his vision of apophatic theology. In "The New Poem" we find negative affirmation: the title implies that the new poem exists, or will exist, but the poem itself offers only negation, defining "the new poem" by saying what it will not be. As T. R. Hummer has remarked, "What will The New Poem be? X, it would seem" (34).

> It will not resemble the sea.
> It will not have dirt on its thick hands
> It will not be part of the weather.
>
> It will not reveal its name.
> It will not have dreams you can count on.
> It will not be photogenic.
>
> It will not attend our sorrow.
> It will not console our children.
> It will not be able to help us.   (1-9)

Robert Pinsky writes of "The New Poem" in *The Situation of Poetry*: "This is the trite style and doctrine of nominalism unexamined and self-satisfied [. . .]. The poem, new or old, should be able to help us, if only to help us by delivering the relief that something has been understood, or even seen, well" (118). But Pinsky's reading of "The New Poem" seems insufficient to me because he treats the poem purely in terms of its apparent argument, as straightforward rhetoric, and not as the conflicted text it is, in which the argument of the poem wrestles with the poem-as-argument.

The speaker of "The New Poem" argues for what the new poem cannot do, but his use of poetic language simultaneously, paradoxically demonstrates what the poetic art can

accomplish. The poetry of the new poem is located in the gap between what the speaker

says The New Poem will not do and what "The New Poem" does. This is the method by

which "The New Poem" enacts in poetic terms the theological *via negativa*. In and out of

the poem, what is seen may limn the unseen. Kevin Hart identifies the image itself as

"otherworldly and ultimately apophatic," referring to Wright's middle period poem

"Chinese Journal," the speaker of which refers to Giorgio Morandi, who "[p]enciled these

bottles in by leaving them out, letting / The presence of what surrounds them increase the

pressure / Of what is missing, \ keeping its distance and measure" (K. Hart 189, "Chinese

Journal" 2-4).[9] Costello articulates a similar sentiment in terms that will recall Strand's

poetic privileging of the unwritten silence against the written word: "In the practice of the

via negativa, of course, poetry is the negative of writing: 'Poetry's what's left between the

lines— / It's all in the unwritten, it's all in the unsaid' (*Negative Blue* 94). We come full

circle, then, and the cause (the unsaid, the supernatural) is identified with the effect (the

unsaid, poetry) that arises out of written lines" (337). Costello quotes from the late "Poem

Almost Wholly in My Own Manner," in which Wright's speaker goes on to claim an

existential significance to the unwritten and the unsaid: "And that's a comfort, I think, \ for

our lack and inarticulation. / For our scalded flesh and our singed hair. // [. . .] a comfort,

perhaps, but too cold [. . .]" (29-30, 35). The accomplishment of Wright's poetry, if cold

comfort, is often its enactment of the poet's doubts about what poetry can accomplish.

     To keep the circle from joining, to work in the synapse may, as Wright argues, be the

task of the artist, but the Wright speaker is also a pilgrim, as Kevin Hart and others have

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[9] Hart here quotes from Wright's "Narrative of the Image: A Correspondence with Charles Simic,"
in which Wright says: "The true image rises out of the darkness—sometimes it stays there and only
its luminous outline is traceable, a pentimento against the seen world. The true image belongs to
neither Imagism nor Surrealism. It belongs to the Emptiness. Which is to say its power is
otherworldly and ultimately apophatic, a luminous outline above the tongue" (59).

written, and the task of a pilgrim is to journey (180).[10] The idea of the negative way implies

a path; journeys and paths imply both the space (landscape) and the time through which the

pilgrim-poet travels. So far I have sketched a general hypothesis of the role of time and

space in Wright's apophatic poetics, and I will return to these subjects in an extended

reading of "The Southern Cross," which seems to me a fulcrum point in Wright's evolving

treatment of both memory and landscape. Such a reading, however, may be informed by an

understanding of Wright's autobiographical method as influenced by and distinct from

those of two other autobiographers, Augustine of Hippo and William Wordsworth. Both

of these writers attempt to characterize the role of time and memory in creating the self,

with Augustine attempting to understand the self especially in terms of its relationship to

the divine, and Wordsworth attempting to understand the self especially in terms of its

relationship to nature and landscape. Wright's obsessive concerns with memory and

landscape are concerns with articulating the self; here I intend "articulate" both as a speaker

articulates his or her thoughts in speech and as a scientist or taxidermist articulates various

bones into a recognizable skeleton, a part that suggests the whole (*OED*). Wright delves

into memory to confess the self, but he also needs memory in order to constitute the self.

As we shall see, spatiotemporal existence allows the creation of memory, and the creation of

the self from memory, but spatiotemporal existence separates the self irreconcilably from

the divine.

Wright's apophatic poetics, and the theology from which it emerges, derive in part

from Augustine's notion of our existence in time. Being in time separates us from the

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[10] Kevin Hart writes: "This is not the poetry of an angel or prophet but of a pilgrim" (180). Costello
argues that "the pilgrim in Wright pursues disappearances, not presences [. . .]" (345). The Wright
speaker has referred to himself as "Pilgrim" as well, as in these lines from "Skins":

> And what does it come to, Pilgrim,
> This walking to and fro on the earth, knowing
> That nothing changes, or everything;
> [. . .]
> It comes to a point. It comes and goes.   (20.9-11, 14)

eternal; in fact, our being in time contributes to our inability even to consider the divine. As Linda Gregerson writes, this "temporal embeddedness [. . .] makes human beings particularly unqualified to comprehend eternity. Time is motion: the human mind cannot comprehend eternity directly because, says Augustine, it cannot *hold still* (*Confessions* 11.11). So the mystery of eternity, and He who dwells in it, can only be imagined in opposition to that which it is not: to temporality" ("Telling Time" 1). I would emphasize Gregerson's phrase "can only be imagined": the issue of temporality is, for Augustine and for Wright, not only that the eternal can be imagined only in opposition to temporality, but also that the eternal cannot even be imagined. When Augustine imagines being asked, "'What was God doing before he made heaven and earth,'" he imagines responding: "'What I don't know, I don't know,'" although "What I *cannot* know, I don't know" might be the more appropriately apophatic response (11.12.14, p. 269). Wright, similarly, tries to imagine a time outside of time, but he cannot untangle such a vision from its own temporal embeddedness. As he writes in "January":

> In some other life
> I'll stand where I'm standing now, and will look down, and will see
> My own face, and not know what I'm looking at.
>
> These are the nights
> When the oyster begins her pearl, when the spider slips
> Through his wired rooms, and the barns cough, and the grass quails.   (1-6)

The poem attempts to reach beyond time by locating itself in time, in an unspecific "January," among the human measurements of the months. Its primary concern, however, is the even more nebulous "some other life" the speaker introduces in the first line, and in which he imagines himself so alienated or extricated from himself that he could look—more specifically, "look down"—at his "own face, and not know what [he's] looking at." In the next stanza the speaker shifts from the somewhat Strandian doppelgänger encounter to more physical statements about the visible world, specific images of the act of creation among them. "These are the nights," the speaker says, though the antecedent of "these" is

unclear. Which nights: of this January, of this life? or of the other life about which the speaker can only speculate? I read this "other life" as the life of the poet looking at the life of the self through images of the oyster and spider—mysterious, worldly makers in their own right. Both creatures create from their bodies, an act which, as we shall see, becomes for Wright an ideal for organic form and structure. This seems to be too tidy an equivalence for Wright, however; his speaker imagines not only oyster and spider in the act of creation, but also barns and grass in the process of decline. The simultaneous sense of accretion and decay will also prove a useful analogue for the structures Wright develops as his poems evolve. To the more immediate point, however, creation and destruction are temporal, if mysterious, phenomena. Divine creation—creation outside of time—remains inconceivable except in terms of earthly processes. Likewise the speaker of "January" cannot imagine "some other life" in any form other than other, earthly lives.

Even the illusory timelessness of writing is insufficient. To return to Derrida, a writing must survive the disappearance of its originator, but even that which survives the disappearance of a consciousness from its temporal existence remains itself a temporal phenomenon. The words inscribed on the page survive long after the voice that would sound them aloud has fallen silent, but the meanings of the words themselves may change so significantly that what survives cannot be understood as the writer had understood them—a fact that Benjamin acknowledges in his meditation on translation, in which he writes: "Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. [. . .] To seek the essence of such changes, as well as the equally constant changes in meaning, in the subjectivity of posterity rather than in the very life of language and its works, would mean [. . .] to confuse the root cause of a thing with its essence" (73). It is not simply time, then, that thwarts the transcendence Wright seeks, but language too, and the fact that language is not fixed but living (and dying) in time. His doubts about human language—"that burning field"— echo Augustine's comparison of human words to the divine, generative *logos*: "But how did you speak?" Augustine asks, and considers:

Surely not in the way that the voice came from the cloud saying, '*This is my well-beloved Son*' (Matt. 3.17, 17.5, Lk. 9.35)? That speech was uttered and passed away; it began, and ended. The syllables rang out and passed on, the second after the first, the third after the second and so on in sequence, until the last succeeded the rest, and silence the last. Hence it is clear and apparent that this speech was uttered by some movement of your creation, obedient to your eternal will, yet temporal. These words, made in time, were reported by the outward ear to the mind that foresaw them, whose inward ear is inclined to hear your eternal Word.   (11.6.8, p.265)

The voice from the cloud speaks in temporal words that temporal beings can hear. Its speech is the divine word become fleshly words, and as such it is not the *logos* of creation, which was "spoken" by the creator unto the creator. That "speech" did not create; it *is* creation. So limiting is our human, temporal finitude, however, that we are unable to imagine the *logos*, the divine, the eternity in which it abides as anything other than the words we would speak or write ourselves.

We are not suited to comprehend eternity, nor are we particularly well suited to comprehend the temporality in which we exist. Here too the concept of the *via negativa* is of particular importance, as Augustine suggests that time itself is something we can sense, can "know" by impression, but cannot articulate in language: "What, then, is time? As long as no one asks me, I know; but if someone asks me and I try to explain, I do not know" (11.14.17, p. 271).[11] Moreover, even those temporal, spoken words of ours cannot be truly measured in the time in which they occur. "What is it, then, that I measure?" Augustine asks. "Where is the short syllable by which I measure? Where is the long syllable that I

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[11] Wright's explanations are more poetic if no more clarifying: "Time is your mother in a blue dress" (*Littlefoot* 7.19). Or, in the titles of three poems from *Sestets*: "Time Is a Graceless Enemy, but Purls as It Comes and Goes;" "Time Is a Dark Clock, but It Still Strikes from Time to Time;" and "Time Is a Child-Biting Dog."

measure? Both have sounded, flown away, past on, no longer exist. Yet measure I do. [. . .] It is in you, my mind, that I measure time" (11.27.35-11.27.36, p. 282). For the human in the finite, passing present, the past and future can only be remembered or imagined. "The present has no duration," Gregerson continues, [. . .] no dimensions proper to itself. It is thinner than the razor's edge. And yet it is full, is indeed the only fullness we shall ever in this life have" ("Telling Time" 1-2). When we remember, we create an illusion of the past as the experienced present. This illusion, for Augustine and for Wright, creates the self that would attempt to understand eternity beyond the limits of human illusion. As each writer writes of the past, he creates himself in the present. As Turner writes:

> any autobiography which offers more than a mere sequence of isolated events at once *tells* of a self and *constructs* the self it tells of. Unless I am a self, there is no story to be told. [. . .] And the mechanism of this retrieval of my selfhood is memory, the power, as we might put it, of selective, meaningful personal continuity. It is in memory that I am what I am, for it is there that this continuous "I" who writes the autobiography is also constructed by the autobiography it writes.   (56, 60-1)

This fact creates the paradox Wright's poetry enacts even as it tries to escape it: the self is necessary to tell the story of itself, even to tell the story of an attempt to dissolve or transcend the self. In the process of constructing the story, the story constructs the self, and in doing so it also deepens the self's separation from God.

In Wright's poetry, the separation between self and God is mediated in part by landscape, the "tactile things [which] are doors to the infinite." These tactile things are also the doors to the self. "Landscape is," Wright says, "a 'distancing' factor [. . .] as regards the 'self,' the 'I' in poetry," and this distancing factor allows one to use landscape to speak of oneself ("Bytes and Pieces" 85). If indeed "it is in memory that I am what I am," then the "what" of "what I am" must also be considered in terms of the physical settings in which one is what one is. In other words, *where* one is or has been must be understood in order to

understand *what* one is or has been. Along this path the guide is William Wordsworth, specifically the autobiographical speaker of *The Prelude* who "thought nature itself led him beyond nature," as Geoffrey Hartman writes. "[S]ince this movement of transcendence, related to what mystics have called the negative way, is inherent in life and achieved without violence or ascetic discipline, one can think of it as the progress of a soul which is *naturaliter negativa*" (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 33). Hartman's sense of the *via negativa* as *naturaliter*— "natural"—differs from the sort of "acquired ignorance" Turner observes in the thought of the medieval mystics, but more important here is Hartman's use of the language of apophaticism, his sense that for Wordsworth (as for Wright), landscape points beyond landscape. If, as Hartman argues, nature leads Wordsworth "beyond nature," it does so only to the extent that nature can be gotten beyond at all.

In Wright's poems (as in *The Prelude*), nature supplements the language of the imagination and activates the imagination into memory. The speakers of these poems explore memory to find the origins of the imagination, and to locate the emergence of the self from those origins. To search for the source of the self is to understand again what Wordsworth means when he writes that the "child is father to the man" ("[My heart leaps up]" 7). In finding—or constructing—continuity between the past and present, however, the poetic autobiographer also feels the separation implied in the distance between "child" and "man":

> [. . .] so wide appears
> The vacancy between me and those days
> Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
> That musing on them, often do I Seem
> Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
> And of some other Being [. . .]   (*The Prelude* II.28-33)

The sense of having fallen into self-consciousness blesses and curses us with two instances of knowledge, of what the self is and of what the self once had been. "I can't remember the colors I said I'd never forget / On Via Giulia at sundown," Wright acknowledges in "The Southern Cross" (193-4). "I can't remember enough" (233). One can read *The Prelude*, and

much of Wright's poetry as well, as attempts to understand how what the self was forms what the self is, if it can be said to do so at all. In this sense the poem is an *apologia pro vita sua*, in fact requiring an investigation of what the self was in order to justify what the self is.[12] One way for Wordsworth—and for Wright—to begin the work of doing so is to reanchor himself through these otherwise unremarkable "spots of time." "The metaphysics of the quotidian was what he was after," Wright remarks in "Tomorrow" (1). Wright envisions these visible things as doors at which to knock, if not to pass through. As Henry Hart argues, "Working against Wright's Buddhist acceptance of things-as-they-are is an unquenchable desire for a Dantesque paradise or mystical sublime beyond landscape, beyond language, beyond thought, and even beyond God" (327). In his own words, Wright has striven to see "the secret landscape behind the landscape we look at here" ("Thinking about the Poet Larry Levis" 14). For Wordsworth the grandness that transforms a trite or private happening into a subject worthy of poetry—and epic poetry at that—is the power of imagination. In fact Wordsworth offers a kind of riposte to such a critique of his "moods of exaltation":

> —These feelings, in themselves
> Trite, do yet scarcely seem so when I think
> On those ingenuous moments of our youth
> Ere we have learnt by use to slight the crimes
> And sorrows of the world.   (VII.329-33)

The power these "ingenuous moments" supply for Wordsworth is not in what they were but in how they feel. Or, perhaps more precisely, how they feel is now what they were and are. The feeling itself confirms for him, however dubiously and however temporarily, the continuity of the self. Here we return to the confluence of imagination and nature. As Hartman reads this convergence, "the child does not know that what he sees and feels is an

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[12] Although the phrase *apologia pro vita sua* is primarily associated with Cardinal Newman, I use it here with Wright in mind. Wright has used the phrase as the title of the opening poem of *Black Zodiac*, in which he considers time as "the source of all good, \ time the engenderer / Of entropy and decay, / Time the destroyer, our only-begetter and advocate" (I.73-5).

effect of the power of his imagination. The impact of the scenes on him is inseparable from overwhelming sense-impressions. For the retrospective poet, however, the power that belonged to the external world is now seen to have belonged to the mind" (*WP* 215). Imagination as we see it act in the poem is born in the co-incidence of a former self and those spots of time—that is, particular times and places—that are now available to the speaker exclusively through the imaginative act of remembering. Wright, unsurprisingly, phrases the matter in the terms of a religious contemplative:

> The past is a stained glass window. We see through the door of our monk's cell, so brilliant, so out of reach on the church wall. Beyond it, in the dark, when the light comes through at the proper angles, the colors are unimaginably luminous, the scenes of our various selves unspeakably clear, evocative and unbroken.   ("Bytes and Pieces" 80)

Even here, in his imaginings of the brilliance of the remembered past, Wright speaks in terms of the *via negativa*: the colors are luminous beyond imagination, the scenes clear beyond the reach of language. Language remains the elegy to imagination and memory, to landscape as well; it remains the imperfect record of a self whose existence nature—and its extension, the divine—both endows and disregards. So language and landscape continue to point beyond themselves, toward the form and structure that may prove all one can grasp of the absolute: "Everything flows toward structure, \ last ache in the ache for God" ("As Our Bodies Rise" 12).

Whatever else this doubting mystic cannot trust, Charles Wright's faith in his conceptions of form and structure is absolute, and similarly so his sense that the essence of form and structure lies beyond our ability to comprehend. Wright imagines poetic form to be as organic as the spider spinning her web, the structure of her existence, from her own body: "I think one's poems should come out of one's body—and life—the way webbing comes out of a spider" ("With Sherod Santos" 178).[13] But form is also a temporary stay against those same organic processes; form and structure—especially in poetry—mark time against the entropic vicissitudes of time. Form, for Wright, is ritual, and authentic ritual must arise organically:

> Time and light are the same thing somewhere behind our backs.
> And form is measure.
>   Without measure there is no form:
> Form and measure become one.
> Time and light become one somewhere beyond our future.
> Father darkness, mother night,
>   one and one become one again.
>   ("Meditation on Form and Measure" 21-5)

The ritual of counting, for instance—syllables, feet, lines, stanzas—becomes an example of Wright's Augustinian concern with time. Who would count would measure, and by measuring would seem to master the counted quantity, but Augustine and Wright both give the lie to this attempt at mastery even as they engage in it. In attempting to measure, to "tell time," as Gregerson writes, Augustine "invokes, repeatedly, what he takes to be the foundational units of language: syllables long and short, the metrical foot, the poetic line. We do not measure a poem by pages, says Augustine, for that would be to measure in terms

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[13] The image of the spider's web is one of Wright's favorite figures for poetic form and structure, and a frequent image in his poems, as well. Wright has remarked: "Like the spider's web that is tight in its individual parts, but expandable in its larger structure, the entire poem trembles when any area is touched" ("The Art of Poetry" 201).

of space (*Confessions* 11.26). Poetry, it seems, is language acutely, perhaps uniquely, wedded to time" ("Telling Time" 2-3). Allan Grossman claims a similar force for poetry in the *Summa Lyrica*, arguing not only that poetry is wedded to time but that it becomes, if briefly, a measure against time: "Prosodic utterance insofar as it is 'numerous' is an imitation of time. Incorporating time, it triumphs over time" (240). But Wright doubts that time—and the death that stops an individual's time even as time itself continues on its endless way—can be overcome. "In the work of Charles Wright," Stephen Cushman argues:

> the paradox is that the insistence on uncertainty or mystery situates itself in
> structures which are anything but uncertain or mysterious. In order to
> approach Negative Capability, Wright structures his poems according to an
> extreme form of Negative Incapability. Every element in a poem must be
> counted, ordered, and planned in order to reveal the limits of counting,
> ordering, and planning.[14]   (212)

One's provisional victories over time (specifically, through "telling time" and through imaginative memory) and time's ultimate victory over us are subjects in all of Wright's poetry, although in "The Southern Cross" these tensions become explicit rather than implied: "Time is the villain in most tales, / and here, too," Wright says (52). Not only the villain of the tale, I would add, but the medium, and the phenomenon that makes possible the telling.

    Moreover, the evolution of Wright's formal poetics includes the emergence of his understanding of the page as a landscape just as significant as the observed fields near the Yaak River or the remembered piazzas of Venice. Here Wright even enacts Augustine's notion that to measure a poem in pages would mean to measure it in terms of space. The outlines of the written/printed poem come to define the limits of the page's blankness and to emphasize the spaces between, just as the visible world of landscape comes to suggest the

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[14] Cushman seems to intend "Negative Capability" here both as John Keats intended the term and as I have adopted the terms "apophaticism" and "*via negativa*," as ways of knowing by unknowing.

invisible "landscape behind the landscape we look at here." Wright has suggested that this sense of landscape arises as a poetic analogue to the formal, painterly concerns of Paul Cézanne. As Wright records in his commonplace notebook, "'I have my motif,' Cézanne said, speaking of Mt. S. Victoire. And I have mine—the architecture of the poem, the landscape of the word" ("Halflife" 33-4). In the same notebook, he writes: "My poems are put together in tonal blocks, in tonal units that work off one another. Vide Cézanne's use of color and form. I try to do that in sound patterns within the line, in the line within the stanza, and in the stanza within the poem. Tonal units of measure, tonal rhythms in time" (20).[15] These "tonal units" are apparent in lines from "Lonesome Pine Special," in which Wright uses the "low rider" as a device to bring certain phrasal units into both visual and thematic tension with surrounding words:

> It's true, I think, as Kenkō says in his *Idleness*,
> That all beauty depends upon disappearance,
> The bitten edges of things,
>   the gradual sliding away
> Into tissue and memory,
>   the uncertainty
> And dazzling impermanence of days we beg our meanings from,
> And their frayed loveliness.   (93-8)

"Lonesome Pine Special" is one of the most overt examples of Wright's use of landscape as a catalyst for memory and meditation: the poem is in part a litany of Wright's favorite specific landscapes, "curve[s] in the road," "[p]asture on both sides of the road and woods on the easy slopes" (1, 47). Wright uses the "low rider" throughout the poem to various effects, but I want to highlight its function in these six lines to distance "the gradual sliding away" and "the uncertainty" from the rest of the stanza to which they belong. The appearance of these phrases on the page, separated slightly from the rest of the left-justified lines, suggest

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[15] In another commonplace notebook, Wright uses Cézanne as an example of his own sense of the difference between poetic forms (especially received forms such as the sonnet or sestina) and poetic "Form": "Cézanne became a great painter when he deserted forms and discovered structure—when he stopped paintings figures from his imagination and discovered his motif, the landscape. He needed to abandon forms to find Form" ("Bytes and Pieces" 79).

lacunae that their semantic content makes explicit. Wright is by no means the first poet to use his poetic structures to enact the experience of being in time, nor is he original in using lineation and pagination to extend the visual experience of the poem across the whole page. Wright's distinctive place among such poets derives from his use of "time-telling" to suggest an unimaginable eternal, his use of the landscape of the visible world to suggest the irreconcilable invisible.

Although Wright has been concerned with memory and landscape throughout his career, the formal characteristics I identify as parallels to his thematic concerns come into clear relief in and after *The Southern Cross*. As I have suggested, the changes in Wright's formal method (notably, the regularizing of odd syllable counts, the elongation of his poetic line and the introduction of the dropdown hemistich) accompany changes in his thematic method, an opening of his work to specific references to people and places from both past and present. As Wright has remarked: "Since the poem, 'The Southern Cross,' I've been doing a kind of ghost graft: splicing real situations and incidents (language, even) onto an imaginary 'tree' until the 'tree,' by virtue of its appendages, has materialized into a whole, a recognizable thing. A sort of grafting onto the invisible until one gets an outline or two from its invisible garden. A gardener of the infinite . . . ." ("Halflife" 32). To continue Wright's metaphor, I want to suggest that Wright's later work allows the "outline or two from [the] invisible garden" he mentions, where his early work's lack of "real situations and incidents" prevents even the illusion of envisioning the invisible. I want to look at two poems, from early and later in Wright's career, as exemplars of the difference in his method, and in anticipation of an extended reading of "The Southern Cross," which I consider to be the poem that best exemplifies the formal concerns of Wright's maturity and, more broadly, the apophatic theological concerns under discussion here.

The twentieth and final section of "Skins," collected in *Bloodlines* (1975), demonstrates what I have called the "airtightness" of Wright's early work. Quoting in full:

> You've talked to the sun and moon,

> Those idols of stitched skin, bunch grass and twigs
> Stuck on their poles in the fall rain;
> You've prayed to Sweet Medicine;
> You've looked at the Hanging Road, its stars
> The stepstones and river bed where you hope to cross;
> You've followed the cricket's horn
> To sidestep the Lake of Pain . . .
> And what does it come to, Pilgrim,
> This walking to and fro on the earth, knowing
> That nothing changes, or everything;
> And only, to tell is, these sad marks,
> Phrases half-parsed, ellipses and scratches across the dirt?
> It comes to a point. It comes and it goes.   (1-14)

The poem is an address to the self, couched in the second person except in the ninth line, when the speaker addresses himself as "Pilgrim." As such, the poem charts a pilgrim's progress, but through a landscape that remains inscrutable. Nor is this inscrutability entirely countered by reading the poem in the context of the nineteen preceding sections of "Skins." "#20" acts as a summation of the series and represents a cyclical return to its beginnings, but one does not gain sufficient context to illuminate some of the more obscure references in the poem. "Skins #20" exhibits some characteristics of Wright's early work, including what I would call a certain imagistic hermeticism. Later in his career, Wright will often refer to specific names and places, as in the poems "Thinking about the Poet Larry Levis One Afternoon in Late May" and "The Southern Cross," readings of which I will offer below. Much of Wright's early work, however, demonstrates an inscrutability exemplified by the three capitalized phrases in "Skins #20": "Sweet Medicine," "the Hanging Road," and "the Lake of Pain" (4, 5, 8). It is unclear why these are proper nouns while other, similar phrases—"the cricket's horn," for instance—are not (7). Their roles in the poem, however, are as landmarks in the private geography of this pilgrim's travels. They serve to mark the speaker's pilgrimage through a landscape the reader is not privy to; whatever significance these images hold for the speaker is sealed off from our own perception.

Other lines suggest their points of reference more clearly: "And what does it come to, Pilgrim, / This walking to and fro on the earth" recalls Satan's reply to the Almighty in

the Book of Job: "And the LORD said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it" (1:7). What end this echo serves is unclear, though the allusion suggests that the speaker understands the Pilgrim's road as something that may be as vulgar as it is sacred. The sense of the poem, and of such "going to and fro," is that one arrives where one began, or that the progress that this pilgrim has imagined proves to be either cyclical or illusory. "And what does it come to," he asks himself, and answers: "It comes to a point. It comes and goes" (9, 14). This reading of the poem partially echoes Wright's claim that "'Skins' is about such things as truth, beauty, the eventual destruction of the universe, metamorphosis, that kind of thing. [. . .] The structure of the poem is a ladder. Ten up, ten down. It starts at point A, and comes back to point A. Number 1 is the Situation: what you are is what you will be. [. . .] Number 20 is the Situation again, point A" ("At Oberlin College" 67, 75). Although I read "Skins" as too hermetic, too airtight, to allow enough narrative purchase for readers to collaborate in or even follow along with the speaker's meditation, I concur with Wright's claim for the cyclicality of the series. The poem's penultimate line seems to acknowledge the obscurity of these images: "And only, to tell is, these sad marks, / Phrases half-parsed, ellipses and scratches across the dirt [. . .]" (12-13).

Unlike the organization of later poems, the structural elements of "Skins #20" do not necessarily parallel the thematic content of the poem. As of the publication of *Bloodlines*, in 1975, Wright was not yet working in nearly exclusively odd-syllabled lines, as we can see from a count of each line here:

1.	7
2.	10
3.	8
4.	7
5.	9
6.	12
7.	7
8.	7
9.	8
10.	11

11.	9
12.	9
13.	14
14.	9

Indeed, the majority of these lines do consist of odd numbers of syllables but, given that five of the poem's fourteen lines consist of an even number, one cannot read the method as the definite form that emerges in Wright's later work. Moreover, the range of syllables per line (seven to fourteen) and the number of even-numbered lines result in a more metrically regular prosody. Several lines fall into a near-iambic meter ("You've LOOKED | at the HANG | ing ROAD, | its STARS").[16] As a result, the iambic ghost lurks more obviously behind this particular Eliotic arras than in Wright's later poems, where his more varied linear and syllabic forms produce a more idiosyncratic prosody and appearance on the page. Similarly, the poem's fourteen left-justified lines, as well as a recognizable *volta* at line 9 ("And what does it come to, Pilgrim") identify it even more strongly with the sonnet form than with the spider web of Wright's formal ambition.

The entire sequence of "Skins" can be read as an ingenious variation on the sonnet sequence, much as the fifteen-line poems of "Tattoos," the companion sequence to "Skins," vary on John Berryman's own variation of the sonnet sequence. My interest here is not in evaluating the poems as aesthetic objects (although such evaluation is inevitable in discussing the relative achievements of their formal organization) but in understanding Wright's process of discovering "organic" form and structure, a sense of organization that offers a (potentially illusory) glimpse of order in the midst of apophatic chaos. Wright has

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[16] Other lines read as similarly near-iambic:

"You've FOL | lowed the CRIC | ket's HORN
To SIDE | step the LAKE | of PAIN . . .
And WHAT | does it COME | to, PIL | grim [. . .]"   (7-9)

"PHRA ses | half-PARSED, | el LIP | ses and SCRA | tches a CROSS | the DIRT?
It COMES | to a POINT. | It COMES | and GOES."   (13-14)

said that he hopes to "make structures, poetic structures, that haven't been made before," and that "I would like to be able—if you put ten poems on the wall as they do paintings in a museum—you'd be able to say, 'Oh, that's the one by Charles Wright'" ("Halflife" 29, "'Metaphysics of the Quotidian'" 34). When Wright begins to make a ritual of his own form, his syllable counts stabilize—to borrow a phrase from another early poem—"like beads from a broken rosary" ("Childhood" 12). The structures that Wright makes his own are those he develops in *The Southern Cross* and after, as ritualized as the rosary and as organic as the spider web.

The poem "Thinking about the Poet Larry Levis One Afternoon in Late May," collected in *Appalachia* (1998), exemplifies the metrical-temporal and linear-spatial concerns of Wright's mature style. An elegy for Larry Levis, who died from a heart attack on May 8, 1996 at the age of 49, the poem follows the example of many Anglophone elegies in becoming an elegy for the self ("Larry Levis, 49"). The poem marks the time since Levis's death—"three weeks now"—but is otherwise more interested in time beyond time (1). Similarly, the descriptions of the day's rain become the premise for considering rain as both literal and figurative event. The fact of Levis's death appears in the title and in the first line, and then nowhere else in the poem. The speaker offers neither details of Levis's life nor the circumstances of his death. Rather, in the majority of the poem, the speaker considers the weather outside his window and within himself—rain outside, confusion within—as part of a meditation on mortality. In the last line of the poem, elegy and self-elegy, outer and inner weather converge: "Part of the rain has now fallen, the rest still to fall" (18). In this last line the image of the rain becomes a measure of time (between "fallen" and "still to fall") as well as an instance of physical and figurative landscape. One death allows the speaker an illusory glimpse of Death; one day's observable landscape and weather silhouette the invisible, the unknowable.

The poem opens with an example of Wright's characteristic elision of a main verb from a descriptive sentence, in this case divided among the opening two-and-a-half lines:

"Rainy Saturday, Larry dead \ almost three weeks now, / Rain starting to pool in the low spots / And creases along the drive" (1-3). Moments of description in Wright's poetry often arrive without a main verb; I count at least three such instances in "Thinking about the Poet Larry Levis." Among the several effects of this technique is the emphasis of the line (and of the image) over the sentence (and the phrase): the language of the poem builds image by image rather than idea by idea or clause by clause, as in Ezra Pound's foundational Imagist text "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough" (1-2). At the same time he emphasizes the line, however, Wright also complicates the function of the line with the introduction of the poem's first dropdown hemistich. In its first instance here, the "low rider" functions as a provisional line break, "pausing" the line without breaking it completely:

> Rainy Saturday, Larry dead
>   almost three weeks now,
> Rain starting to pool in the low spots
> And creases along the drive.
>   Between showers, the saying goes [. . .]

In using the half-lines in such ways, Wright allows himself a wider range of punctuative possibilities than line and stanza breaks traditionally provide. The second "low rider," within line three, functions more as a minor stanza break, allowing a thematic shift from the place-setting of the opening lines to a more intense meditation on rain as meteorological fact and rain as metaphor: "Between showers, the saying goes, / Roses and rhododendron wax glint / Through dogwood and locust leaves, / Flesh-colored, flesh-destined, spring in false flower, goodbye" (3-6).

The next stanza offers an excellent example of Wright's use of the "low rider" to modulate tone. The stanza opens with the declarative, almost melodramatic "The world was born when the devil yawned," but the speaker immediately tempers the assertion with the dropdown line, "the legend goes," foregrounding the legend itself but distancing himself from the assertion (7). The half-endorsement of the legend allows the speaker to ask, in the following line, "And who's to say it's not true" (8). In a single breath (and in two lines) the

speaker can repeat the legend, doubt it, then discredit the certainty of the skepticism. The structure of Wright's lines here supports the sense of what his speaker asserts in the closing stanza: "We haven't a clue as to what counts / In the secret landscape behind the landscape we look at here" (13-14). As if to emphasize the point, the subsequent "low rider" separates the half-line "May dull and death-distanced," the outer landscape "distanced" by the speaker's preoccupation, the half-line distanced—dropped and indented—from the remainder of the left-justified stanza. The poem concludes with two declarative sentences, notable for the fact that, unlike Wright's descriptive fragments, both contain main verbs: "It's all the same dark, it's all the same absence of dark. / Part of the rain has now fallen, the rest still to fall" (17-18). One of Wright's self-admonitions dictates that "[i]f you end a poem with a statement, it should come as though forced naturally through the funnel of the poem, and not as though it had been stuck at the end to cover up a hole" ("Halflife" 35). Although Wright is speaking here of rhetoric rather than of form, I would extend his point to suggest that the artifice of form must succeed such that it belies the form's artificiality. Here, the rain must function as literal rain, as figurative, apocalyptic rain, and at a tertiary level, as rain again.[17] The language that contains the metaphor must use metaphor to point beyond the limits of language.

At the levels of stanzaic, linear, and syllabic structure, the poem is divided into three sestets, and demonstrates the later Wright's strict adherence to lines of odd numbers of syllables. Some of these lines sound more metrically regular than others—"It's all the same

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[17] Here I allude to a commonplace of Zen Buddhism Wright records in one of his own commonplace notebooks, a parable that suggests the simultaneous multiplicity of meanings at work in figurative language:

> —"Before I began studying Zen, I saw mountains as mountains, rivers as rivers.
> When I learned some Zen, mountains ceased to be mountains, rivers ceased to be
> rivers. But now, when I have understood Zen, I am in accord with myself and again I
> see mountains as mountains, rivers as rivers."
> —Saisho, as quoted in Milosz [*sic*], *Unattainable Earth*
> ("Bytes and Pieces" 78)

dark, it's all the same absence of dark" falls into a roughly anapestic line with an opening iamb—but none of them fall into a definitive accentual-syllabic meter.[18] Even the ghost of anapestic structure in the penultimate line does not betray the usual triple-meter bounce, due in part to its placement among seventeen other lines of "unmetrical" free verse. A count of the syllables in each line gives us the following structure:

1. $8\backslash5 = 13$
2. 9
3. $7\backslash8 = 15$
4. 9
5. 7
6. 13
7. $9\backslash4 = 13$
8. 7
9. 13
10. 7
11. 13
12. 9
13. 9
14. 9
15. $7\backslash6 = 13$
16. 7
17. 13
18. 13

The lines range in length from seven to fifteen syllables, with eight of the poem's eighteen lines consisting of thirteen syllables. As such, "Thinking about the Poet Larry Levis" demonstrates what Cushman has called Wright's "triskaidekaphilia." Cushman notes that a 13-syllable line "gives a free verse poet the same number of stresses as the iambic pentameter, which often wavers between four and five prominent stresses, at the same time that it loosens the pentameter up with three extra syllables. But it is hard to escape all suspicion that Wright's triskaidekaphilia reflects some numerological significance the number 13 holds for him" (209). One can speculate about the exact significance of the
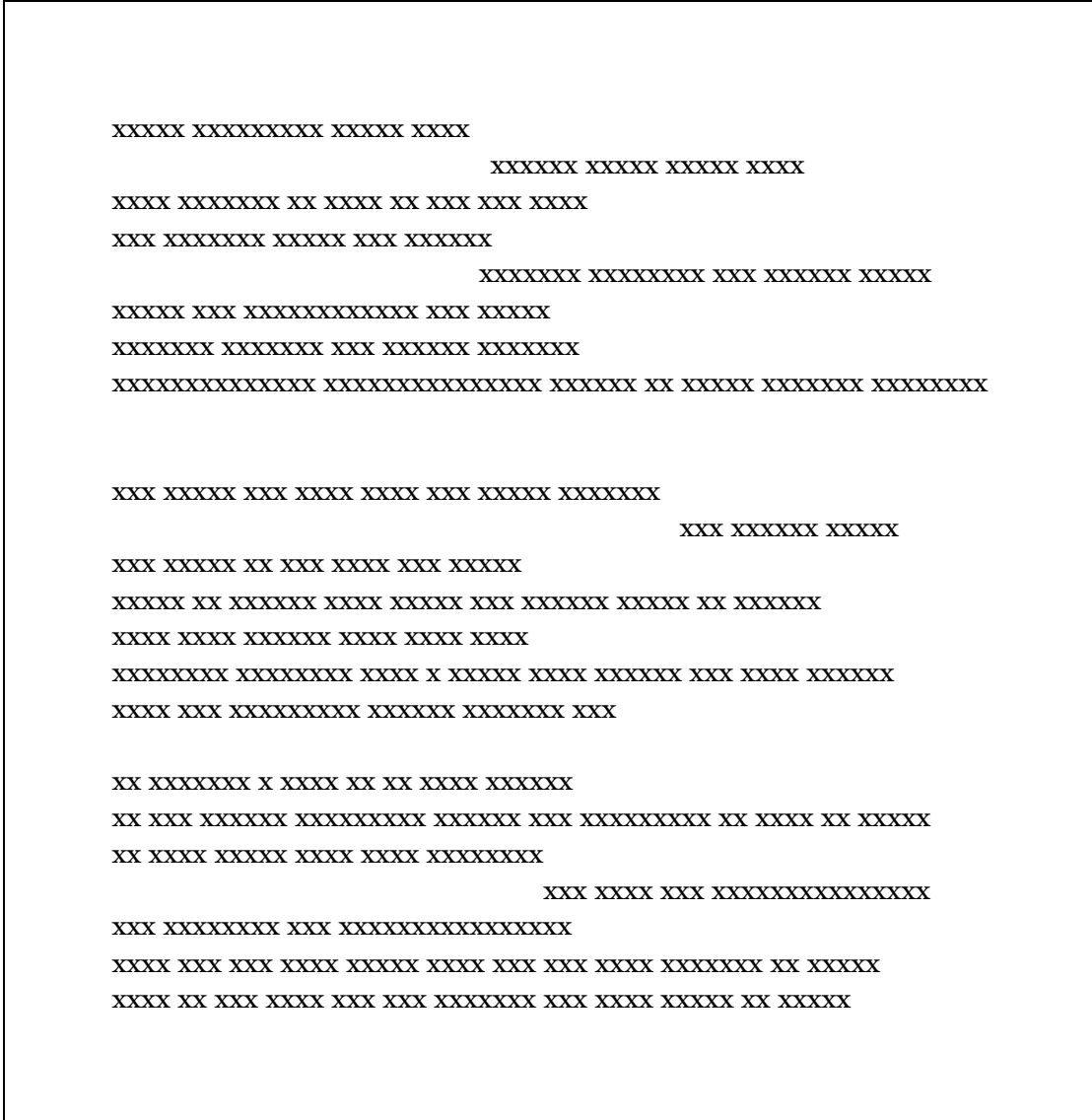
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[18] I read the line as having the following stress pattern: "It's ALL | the same DARK, | it's ALL | the same AB | sence of DARK."

number 13 here, but again, I would point to the fact of the ritual as more important than its content. The trained ear hears the iambic pulse of, say, a pentameter line, but Wright's conception of poetic form is idiosyncratic and almost private. Wright's form acts neither as mnemonic nor homage. "There is an organization to the universe," Wright has said, "but it's not personal" ("Improvisations on Form and Measure" 5). Nevertheless, the syllabic forms and structures of his own lines are as personal as a confession. Only the concluding lines of the poem show consecutive numbers of syllables—again, thirteen and thirteen—as if Wright were writing a sort of couplet invisible to the reader's eye, like the spider web that appears invisible until one walks into it.

"Thinking about the Poet Larry Levis" also exhibits Wright's mature management of the poem's visual aspects, the appearance of the lines and of blank space on the page. Wright's employment of four "low rider" hemistiches spreads the poem across the page in a way that both uses and allows more space than the poem would if each line were left-justified. Costello argues that such employment of negative space demonstrates

> that the negative principle can have content. Double negatives, of course, produce positives, in math and in language—hence Wright's many variations on absence within an absence: the inside of the inside, metaphor of metaphor [and, I would add, 'the form inside the form inside.']. And negative space in painting (black in chiaroscuro, or light areas behind foregrounded outlines, the sculpted space of Chinese painting), like white space in writing, is a force in the composition [. . .].   (334)

If we consider the poem as paginated landscape, we can consider its appearance—its use of negative and positive space—as well as its sound. For my purposes here I want to present the poem as lines on a page devoid of semantic meaning:

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xxxxx xxxxxxxxx xxxxx xxxx
                          xxxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxx
xxxx xxxxxxx xx xxxx xx xxx xxx xxxx
xxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxx xxxxxx
                           xxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxx xxxxxx xxxxx
xxxxx xxx xxxxxxxxxxxx xxx xxxxx
xxxxxx xxxxxxx xxx xxxxxx xxxxxxx
xxxxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxx xx xxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxxxxx


xxx xxxxx xxx xxxx xxxx xxx xxxxx xxxxxxx
                                  xxx xxxxxx xxxxx
xxx xxxxx xx xxx xxxx xxx xxxxx
xxxxx xx xxxxxx xxxx xxxxx xxx xxxxxx xxxxx xx xxxxxx
xxxx xxxx xxxxx xxxx xxxx xxxx
xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxx x xxxxx xxxx xxxxx xxx xxxx xxxxxx
xxxx xxx xxxxxxxxx xxxxxx xxxxxxx xxx


xx xxxxxxx x xxxx xx xx xxxx xxxxxx
xx xxx xxxxxx xxxxxxxxx xxxxxx xxx xxxxxxxxx xx xxxx xx xxxxx
xx xxxx xxxxx xxxx xxxx xxxxxxxx
                             xxx xxxx xxx xxxxxxxxxxxxxx
xxx xxxxxxxx xxx xxxxxxxxxxxxxx
xxxx xxx xxx xxxx xxxxx xxxx xxx xxx xxxx xxxxxxx xx xxxxx
xxxx xx xxx xxxx xxx xxx xxxxxxx xxx xxxx xxxxx xx xxxxx
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With the four dropdown hemistiches, one becomes more aware of the poem as a spatial entity than one is with a poem such as "Skins," each section of which appears as a solid block of left-justified text. Here the horizontal "axis" of the poem becomes emphasized along with its vertical correspondent. The spaces created by dropping half-lines create the illusion of additional stanza breaks; the stanzaic structure of the poem becomes "hidden" within its own linear structure.

Wright also varies his use of the dropped line throughout the lines themselves, so that although, for instance, three low rider lines contain thirteen syllables, these lines are

divided 8/5, 9/4, 7/6. As such, the long/short pattern of these lines exemplifies one of Wright's stated uses for the dropdown hemistich:

> One of the purposes (one of several) of writing the two-step line I have used on and off since 1978, the low-rider, whatever you want to call it, was to be able to keep the line from breaking under its own weight. In other words, my line began to get longer and more 'conversational' as I tried to push it as far toward prose as I thought I could and still maintain it as a verse line. So I began to break the line, in order to keep it whole. It is always one line, not two, and broken in a particular place to keep the integrity of the single line musically.   ("Bytes and Pieces" 79)

None of these subtle prosodic devices may matter much to the reader who does not stop to count the syllables, and even the reader who does stop to count the syllables per line in "Thinking of the Poet Larry Levis" may think the odd count a trivial, chance fact. The structure's near-invisibility is also its ultimate strength: one cannot hear the meter here the way one hears the famous "tee TUM tee TUM" of an iambic line. Wright's notion of breaking the line "in order to keep it whole" echoes and revises Pound's declaration that "to break the pentameter [. . .] was the first heave" ("Canto LXXXI" 54). Wright's rhetorical paradox here mirrors his form's paradoxical effects: the verse appears "free," ungoverned by form and structure, but such an appearance is made possible only by Wright's rigorous, idiosyncratic principles of ordering.

Ultimately for Wright, form and structure, like language and landscape, become stand-ins for the absolute, ways for the mortal human to glimpse the "landscape behind the landscape we look at here." But form and structure lie beyond—even as they give shape to—language and landscape; they are perhaps the only attributes of the absolute that, via the apophatic path of language and landscape, the Wright pilgrim may access. Wright's ongoing argument with himself may concern the unlikelihood of the possibility of personal salvation, but he is more confident in a godlike order and structure to the universe: "I still

think of [God] as a profound notion. Although I don't think he exists other than in a harmony, the geometry and physics of whatever it is that holds the universe together" ("With Sherod Santos" [1981] 109). The organization of the universe is not personal, Wright claims, but his own sense of formal organization governs the intensely personal spiritual, autobiographical, and confessional concerns of his poetry. As I hope to have shown, those concerns grow into the mature method demonstrated in "Thinking about the Poet Larry Levis," a method that we may first recognize in a few poems (or sections thereof) from *Bloodlines* and *China Trace*, and especially in Wright's transformative volume, *The Southern Cross*. The "organization to the universe," as Wright sees it, may not be personal, but Wright reaches his poetic maturity when he manages to recast the organizing principles of his poetry in such a way that he opens the universe of the self to the universe itself, and *vice versa*. The poetry of Wright's maturity simultaneously demonstrates the impossibility of knowing—or escaping—the infinite divine or even the finite self. As Henry Hart has written:

> Wright can no more shed concepts and language than he can shed his skin. The paradox, which is at the core of Eastern and Western mystical literature, is also at the core of Wright's [poetry]. In his poems about language, landscape, and God, he bemoans the futility of poetry, the deceptions of language, the fleeting beauties of landscape, and the obsolescence of God. He knows that he will never be able to fly from his linguistic and conceptual labyrinth—at least not for long—without plunging back into it. Language and concepts"—and, I would add, form and structure—"are the ineradicable stuff of his poetic imagination.   (328)

 The poems of *The Southern Cross* reveal that poetic imagination at its most powerful, which, as Wright acknowledges, is never powerful enough.

If Wright's hypothetical museumgoer can in fact identify *this* structure, *this* style as uniquely that of Charles Wright, he or she is likely reading a poem from or after *The Southern Cross*. Not only do the stylistic changes Wright establishes in *The Southern Cross* pervade the rest of his career to date, one can also observe these changes taking place over the course of *The Southern Cross* itself. Turning through the first sections of the book, one finds a dropped-line hemistich here or there, hanging like a typesetter's widow or orphan. As one reads through a section of self-portraits and turns to a section of more abstract landscapes, one finds that the landscape of the poems shifts from left-justified cinquains reminiscent of "Tattoos" to the airier "step-down" lines I have described in my reading of "Thinking of the Poet Larry Levis." One notes throughout the volume a linguistic pattern perhaps reminiscent of the blocks of color in a painting by Cézanne, to whom Wright pays homage in the book's opening poem. These poems build by accretion: the blocking of description atop diaristic notation, followed sometimes by quotation, sometimes by aphorism, other times by negation of what's come before. Like Cézanne's paintings, Wright's poems suggest parts of landscapes—both physical exterior and emotional interior—without depicting a unified whole. Like Cézanne and like Giorgio Morandi, who "[p]enciled these bottles in by leaving them out," Wright's work in *The Southern Cross* emerges as a poetry of the presences suggested by absence, an apophatic poetics that abides in the synapse between the self and the divine.

Wright has remarked that his poems changed around the time of *The Southern Cross* in part because his method of composing them changed: "I do drafts of stanzas now," he says in a 1981 interview, "I don't do drafts of poems. I'll get a stanza the way I want it, and by the time I've got that stanza I pretty much have an idea of what I want the poem to be [. . .]" ("With Sherod Santos," 1981, 107). "As the stanzas got larger and looser," he says elsewhere, there still maintained the idea of a stanzaic or patterned organization"

("Metaphysics of the Quotidian" 32).[19] What Wright omits in these statements is that the stanzas get "larger and looser" because he elongates his poetic line and maintains its suppleness by incorporating frequent dropped lines. Willard Spiegelman observes, similarly, that "the stanza itself (a staple of Wright's poetry in *Country Music*: *Selected Early Poems*) has begun an inexorable breakdown and expansion. From *The Southern Cross* on, the line and the paragraph will replace the pretty stanzaic rooms that have started to crumble. Like the series of self-portraits by Francis Bacon on which this sequence [the series of five poems in *The Southern Cross* entitled "Self-Portrait"] is based, Wright's collection dramatizes the loss of the self as a means of building it up" (87). I hesitate to endorse Spiegelman's emphasis of "paragraph" over "stanza;" it is not simply that the "pretty stanzaic rooms" of Wright's early poetry "have started to crumble," but that he has begun to build them differently, allowing simultaneously what Spiegelman calls "inexorable breakdown and expansion."

The breakdown and expansion Spiegelman describes is not limited to Wright's stanzas, but extends as well to his treatment of self, language, landscape, and the divine. Spiegelman argues that Wright "enacts a pilgrimage toward self-portraiture (which means self-understanding) by painting himself *into* the landscape. In *The Southern Cross*, [the self-

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[19] Wright elaborates on this change in his compositional method in another interview:

> When my son was born, the first several years were very hectic and there wasn't a lot of free time to do things. I would start a poem and I'd get the idea, and maybe a stanza, and then I'd have to rush off to do something else. The next day I'd come back to it and write another stanza. After a period of time, I started to realize that the stanzas were all cohering to the title, but they weren't necessarily following each other.
>   This was a great discovery for me, because it went back to my original idea of how things worked in my mind, which was synaptically, and I'd been trying to force myself into a logic of narrative, just because I thought I should learn how to do it. Unbeknownst to myself, I was breaking back out into where I should have been in the first place. *But* with the great exception that I had learned that the organization was very important as well, so I was leading from organization instead of leading from chaos. As the stanzas got larger and looser, there still maintained the idea of a stanzaic or patterned organization.
>
> <div align="right">("Metaphysics of the Quotidian" 31-2)</div>

portrait series], along with "Portrait of the Artist with Hart Crane" and "Portrait of the Artist with Li Po," impart a vision of Wright, the man and the poet, just at the moment before he transforms his style from the stanzaic poems of the earlier volumes to the jagged, long-lined meditations of the journals. We observe, in other words, the poet on the verge of breakup, *sparagmos*, and poetic reconstitution" (84-5). I am particularly drawn to Spiegelman's use of the Greek word *sparagmos*, which refers to the ritual dismemberment and reconstitution of a god (such as the Ancient Egyptian Osiris, the Ancient Greek Orpheus, or the Eucharistic Christ). In the myths of *sparagmos*, the god must be dismembered before the veneration of the mutilated god "re-members" him. If Spiegelman is correct that *The Southern Cross* depicts the "poet on the verge of breakup, *sparagmos*, and poetic reconstitution," as I believe he is, then it is necessary to add that that the attempt at reconstitution—reassembly, "rememberment"—cannot allow complete return to the original, perhaps illusory, whole. Wright has said: "To me, the sum of parts is always more interesting than the whole. It's how you keep the parts together and how you keep them from becoming a whole that fascinates me" ("With Carol Ellis" 157). This preference makes sense for a pilgrim along a poetic *via negativa*: the whole is unknowable, but the attempt to sum its parts is the proper apophatic method of "knowing" the whole by "unknowing" it.

Before turning to the title poem, the exemplar of Wright's apophatic poetics, I want to look briefly at "Homage to Paul Cézanne" and the series of self-portraits as indications of the shift from Wright's early work to his mature work, a shift that we can observe as we read through this single volume of poems. "Homage to Paul Cézanne" is a poem of 131 lines divided among eight unnumbered sections, each of which is allotted its own page. Except for three dropped lines, the poem adheres to the left-justified, clearly delineated stanzaic format of Wright's early poems. The speaker of the poem articulates with apparent certainty what would certainly lie beyond his capacity to know: the "lives" of the dead. "At night, in the fish-light of the moon, the dead wear our white shirts [. . .]" (1). "Each year the dead grow less dead [. . .]" (17). "The dead fall around us like rain" (99). As the speaker

speculates about what the dead do, he also seems to suggest that these lines are mere projection, or wishful thinking—the wish of the living never to be dead. "*Remember me, speak my name*" is the wish of the living; the wishes of the dead are beyond our knowledge (45). In the final section, then, the speaker turns to the first person plural of the living: "We're out here, our feet in the soil, our heads craned up at the sky" (116). "A more normal mode of discourse would have posited the dead as objects," says David Young, "imagined by us as subjects. Wright's move is to start with the dead as subjects who are different from ourselves and then generally subtract the differences" (43). This method of "blur[ring] and merg[ing] irreconcilable points of view," as Bruce Bond writes, "[. . .] testifies to his negative capability: how poem after poem, the dead see as the living, the living as the dead, the skeptic sees as the metaphysician, and so on—all in an effort to enlarge our range of feeling, to contain and be vitalized by contradiction" (225).

The primary method Wright uses to blur these subject/object distinctions in "Homage to Paul Cézanne" is to project the wishes and worries of the living onto the *tabula rasa* of the dead. In fact this indirect treatment of his own emotions, which Wright employs throughout *The Southern Cross*, becomes in poems to come a way to treat more directly the events of his own life. By applying poetic imagination and figurative language to an indifferent landscape, Wright integrates his attempt toward spiritual autobiography with a biography of the visible world. This apparently simple method of emotional projection becomes, in other poems in *The Southern Cross*, one of the staples of the new Wright poem. Wright's speakers in these poems project their own intellectual and emotional states on bodies of water, on stretches of byways, on different shades of sunlight. Poems throughout *The Southern Cross* demonstrate Wright's treatment of landscape as a counterpoint to the depiction of specific events in his own life, as we shall see most clearly in "The Southern Cross." Wright's method here may resemble the meditative, associative deep image mode of Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell, and James Wright. Although Charles Wright has been identified both as working with and against the deep image mode, I want to distinguish his

method from that of the deep image poets by emphasizing the explicitly theological—Christian and natural theological—character of its meditations.[20] The pseudo-surrealist apparitions of deep image poems seem to aspire to the dissociative quality of a dream, often giving the impression of dissolving the self into a collective (non)identity. Even when Wright's images are similarly surreal, they aspire to the reconstructive quality of memory. As I have argued, Wright too wishes to "undo" the self, but even as he projects the self onto landscape, he doubts the possibility of doing so.

We may also see him developing the method in the series of self-portraits that comprise the second section of *The Southern Cross*. One of these self-portraits, for instance, depicts only "[p]laces and things that caught my eye," including "Marostica, Val di Ser. Bassano del Grappa. / Madonna del Ortolo. San Giorgio, arc and stone. / The foothills above the Piave" (4, 1-3). In such a poem, Wright develops a poetic analogue to his theory of Morandi's drawing: what's left out (here, himself) "appears" indirectly through what's included. The presence of what is not-self allows him to glimpse the self, but as he finds in "The Southern Cross," more than a glimpse of the self is difficult to attain. McCorckle reads this method as an extension of Wright's extended line: "The long lines [in the five self-portraits] quite literally explore the edge, the frame, and the boundary of self, language, and page; this active form tests and pushes against the margins of the page and against form itself [. . .]" (159). As McCorckle observes, the sequence of self-portraits display the same stanzaic form as the earlier "Tattoos" (and of other poems in *The Southern Cross* too), yet they also demonstrate the evolution of Wright's longer line, his attempt to expand the scope of his vision while still maintaining a tight focus, a Poundian emphasis on the image. Moreover, in places they demonstrate Wright's willingness to undercut his own statements and conclusions, a strategy that becomes Wright's method of marrying his skeptic's

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[20] Perkins, for instance, includes Wright among a group of "deep image" poets in describing the period style of the 1970's (562). Contrarily, Gary L. McDowell goes so far as to call Wright's "The New Poem" "a stance-taking moment in his rally against the prescriptive poetries of deep-imagists and American Surrealists [. . .]" (McDowell).

dubiousness to his metaphysical concerns. The speaker of "Portrait of the Artist with Li Po" says, for instance: "The distance between the dead and the living \ is more than a heartbeat and a breath," as if conceding that the blurred distinctions of "Homage to Paul Cezanne" must themselves be interrogated (15). The exemplar of these emerging techniques is the title poem, which concludes the volume, and most definitively establishes the style that has characterized Wright's work ever since. The title of "The Southern Cross" echoes Wright's structural and spiritual axiom that "each line should be a station of the cross." The stations in themselves are parts of a whole, but Wright demonstrates consistently that he is more interested in the parts, and the spaces between parts, than in any whole they may comprise.

Although Wright identifies Cézanne as the presiding spirit of the entire volume, I want to reintroduce Wordsworth here, and in particular Geoffrey Hartman's reading of the "mazy motion of Wordsworth's *Prelude* ("Halflife" 33-4, Hartman 54). "The Southern Cross" exemplifies my claim that Wright's poetry transubstantiates Wordsworth's subject matter and Pound's Modernist collagist method into an apophatic, poststructuralist poetry of doubt. When Wright remarks that he uses "the architecture of the poem, the landscape of the word" as Cézanne uses blocks of color, to "reassembl[e] Mt. S. Victoire," he is only half-joking ("Halflife" 33-4). Wright is attempting to use language to reconstruct memories of landscape, landscapes of memory, and though them the self, in an ultimate attempt to dissolve the world of language, landscape and self into the divine. "The Southern Cross" and subsequent poems of Wright's accrete image by image, memory by memory, and (especially in his recent work) quotation by quotation. As in *The Prelude*, we find spots of time in Wright's poem that occur and recur, transfigured on one side of a description of landscape from what they had been on the other.[21] "Things that divine us we never touch," the poem begins, emphasizing the passivity or inefficacy of human ability by delaying the subject of

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[21] Wright has remarked that "all [his] long poems are short poems in disguise" ("Halflife" 29.)

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the sentence until its second clause. We are being divined—with all the verb's connotative history of "supernatural or magical insight [. . .] unintelligible to ordinary faculties"—but we cannot touch what "make[s] out or interpret[s]" us (*OED*). In other words, we cannot divine the things that divine us. But in the episteme of the poem, those things can at least be named, an act that brings them almost within our reach:

> Things that divine us we never touch:
>
> The black sounds of the night music,
> The Southern Cross, like a kite at the end of its string,
>
> And now this sunrise, and empty sleeve of a day,
> The rain just starting to fall, and then not fall,
>
> No trace of a story line.   (1-6)

To append "no trace of a story line" to the preceding description of the rain is somewhat disingenuous: the trace of a story line is present, but the trace is ours (much as we have seen in Wright's uses of intermittent rain in "Thinking about the Poet Larry Levis"). The imagination—and the imaginative act of remembering—creates a story out of the facts of the world or the facts of one's own life. This idea is emphasized in the next line, which begins a new section of the poem: "All day I've remembered a lake and a sudsy shoreline, / Gauze curtains blowing in and out of open windows all over the South" (7-8). The memory is at once specific and vague, moving from the singular "lake" and "shoreline" to the plural "curtains blowing [. . .] all over the South," as if the memory were simultaneously personal and collective.

When the speaker says, in the next line, "It's 1936, in Tennessee. I'm one," wrenching the autobiographical past into the present tense, the memory itself—however specific or vague—becomes suspect (9). Whether the speaker can reliably remember anything from the first year of his life is less the point, though, than the feeling of memory that takes precedence here, as memories become interchangeable. As the speaker continues:

Or it's 1941 in a brown suit, or '53 in its white shoes,
Overlay after overlay tumbled and brought back,
As meaningless as the sea would be
if the sea could remember its waves . . .   (13-15)

Here the simultaneous importance and interchangeability of memories lead the speaker to refuse any possible Wordsworthian sublimity, instead undercutting the memory's importance. He almost scolds himself over the nostalgia that generates these images: "How sweet the past is, no matter how wrong, or how sad. / How sweet is yesterday's noise" (21-2). The sweetness of these memories seems a sickness or affliction, as the Ancient Greek root of *nostalgia* (*nostos*, meaning *home*; *algos*, "denoting [a type] of pain") suggests, but also an indulgence for which the speaker requires confession (*OED*). Wordsworth conveys the same sense of indulgence, but without the same reproach, in his description of childhood in Book Fifth of *The Prelude*: "Our childhood sits, / Our simple childhood, sits upon a throne / That hath more power than all the elements" (V.507-9). In Wordsworth's sense of things, as in Wright's, landscape activates the power of memory, and the memory itself becomes an act of devotion—to landscape and to the past self, whose presence in the current self is questionable in Wordsworth and more dubious yet in Wright. Wordsworth considers the memory of childhood more powerful "than all the elements," while Wright will admit: "I can't remember enough" (233). The power to remember occupies a mysterious, almost magical status in both Wordsworth's astonishment at his own capability to remember and in Wright's obsessive concern about his incapability to remember enough. If Wordsworth discovers himself through "spots of time," Wright discovers himself only partially, and through the silhouettes of half-remembered spots.

The Wright speaker's complicated attitude toward memory and landscape is especially apparent in the subsequent section, in which he uses the figurative force of language to conflate time and space:

All day the ocean was like regret,
clearing its throat, brooding and self-absorbed.

Now the wisteria tendrils extend themselves like swan's necks under Orion.

Now the small stars in the orange trees.   (23-5)

It is not the ocean, of course, but the speaker who is "brooding and self-absorbed." The speaker's projection of his own state of mind onto a personified sea which "clear[s] its throat" demonstrates the depth of the speaker's integration of what he sees before him with what he feels within him. For Wright's brooding mind, the waters are Heraclitean: they are universal only in their inconstancy. In the first thirty lines of "The Southern Cross," the sea cannot remember its waves, but the ocean can be "like regret, \ clearing its throat, brooding and self-absorbed" (23). At once, then, landscape reflects and deflects him, resembling ourselves just as it reminds us of its utter difference from us, its indifference to us. If an ocean can be brooding and self-absorbed, would it not also be able to remember its waves? The question is a fair one, but a logical answer may not be available. It makes perfect poetic sense that the sea should be so protean, remembering itself at one moment and unable to do so at another, because its inconstancy reflects the speaker's (and, by extension, our own) uncertain relationship with landscape.[22] As it reflects and deflects us, we can feel—almost in a single moment—both at one with nature and, as Woody Allen apocryphally said, "at two with nature." We may observe, similarly, the feeling of the speaker as he contemplates the infinite divine or the seemingly infinite past: he may believe that he belongs to the divinity, yet may simultaneously feel utterly separated from the divine. He may believe that he is now the same self he was then, despite the feeling that, in Wordsworth's phrasing,

                              so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days
[. . . that]   often do I Seem
Two consciousnesses [. . .]   (*The Prelude* II.28-9, 32-3)

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[22] One can imagine Wright's personified, inconstant sea quoting Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (51.6-8).

The next lines of Wright's poem emphasize the mystery of his speaker's relationship with landscape and the animating power of his imagination, as "the wisteria tendrils extend themselves like swan's necks under Orion. / Now the small stars in the orange trees." Wright's speaker can observe wisteria tendrils in the act of extending themselves no more than Wordsworth's can observe the active decay of a growth of woods. The imagination allows the observation as assertion but not as observable phenomenon. The processes of vegetal growth and decay occur so slowly that we are incapable of seeing them as they happen. We can only reconstruct, through memory of what was set against observation of what is and imagination of what will be, the processes the poets would depict. So the imagination also allows the movement (the "mazy motion") from the now of the present to the landscapes of the past, as the scene of the poem shifts from the seaside California of the here and now to a remembered scene of Italy:

> At Garda, on Punto San Vigilio, the lake,
> In springtime, is like the sea,
> Wind fishtailing the olive leaves like slash minnows beneath the vineyards,
> Ebb and flow of the sunset past Sirmio,
>   flat voice of the waters
> Retelling their story, again and again, as though to unburden itself
>
> Of an unforgotten guilt [. . .]   (26-31)

The absolutely specificity of time and place in these lines, as compared to the "Lake of Pain" in "Skins #20," illuminates the dramatic shift in Wright's method. The personification of the waters here, their "flat voice" "[r]etelling their story," continues Wright's complicated treatment of landscape in "The Southern Cross." Where earlier waters could not remember their waves or brooded in self-absorption, now Lake Garda seeks "to unburden itself // Of an unforgotten guilt." The sea, needless to say, does not brood or remember, forget or regret. These are human acts, and in our own inability to grasp the vastness of landscape (or seascape), all we can do is attempt to translate the incomprehensible into our own terms, as Augustine tries to understand eternity in terms of human temporality. The poet may turn to figurative language to try to touch, like the

Apostle Thomas, the intangible, but a poet as probing as Wright cannot but call his own language into question too.

Here I would return to Spiegelman's notion that Wright "enacts a pilgrimage toward self-portraiture [. . .] by painting himself *into* the landscape" in order to argue that Wright's method of self-portraiture also requires painting the landscape into himself, or as a reconstruction of himself. As Wright has said, "Poetry is not a reflection, of course, the famous mirror held up to Nature. It is a reconstruction, which is why style is so important: as you rebuild, you rebuild in your own way. And which is why nothing is ever 'this' or 'that' but is 'toward this' or 'in the direction of that.' Rearrangement and reassembly" ("Halflife" 36). Or, as Spiegelman puts it, *sparagmos* and revivification. The remembered scene of Punto San Vigilio, in this case, allows Wright to reconstruct, at least partially, landscape and self through memory. As such the image maintains the same resonance for Wright that Wordsworth's spots of time provide for him. Such moments allow Wordsworth an "exaltation" in the power of imagination. For Wright, though, "[t]he landscape was always the best part" (156).[23] When Wordsworth's imagination colors the natural world he observes, the emphasis is unifying: "nature remains in Wordsworth's view the best and gentlest guide in the development surpassing her" (*WP* 54). Wright cannot surpass nature; as the poem continues, language and memory become the tools that fail him in his attempt to do so:

> River of sighs and forgetfulness
> > (and the secret light Campana saw),
> River of bloom-bursts from the moon,
> > of slivers and broken blades from the moon
> In an always-going-away of glints . . .   (39-41)

Whether sea, lake, or river, the speaker of "The Southern Cross" seems unable to dissociate waters from memory or the failures of memory. What light the speaker finds here arrives in

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[23] Wright echoes this idea in his notebook "Halflife": "There is nothing so beautiful as the country is, when the country is good" (25).

"bursts" or "broken blades;" this light is, like memory, "an always-going-away of glints." The parts allow the semblance of the whole, but nothing more.

The speaker's references to other poets further complicate his sense of his own inability to remember or to describe, and his sense of belatedness as compared to the great dead. When he mentions the Italian poet Dino Campana (whose *Orphic Songs* Wright has translated), he refers to "the secret light" that Campana saw—and which, we might assume, Wright does not see. "Dante and Can Grande [Cangrande della Scala, patron of Dante Alighieri] once stood here," his speaker considers (40), and

> Before that, in his marble tier,
> Catullus once sat through the afternoons.
> Before that, God spoke in the rocks . . .
>
> And now it's my turn to stand
> Watching a different light do the same things on a different water,
> The Adige bearing its gifts
> through the April twilight of 1961.   (43-8)

The speaker ends the series of predecessor poets with God; moreover, this God is the only figure mentioned in the series who acts the poet's role, who speaks. Campana sees, Dante stands, Catullus sits, and the speaker watches, but "God [speaks] in the rocks." Such a line of comparison would make any poetic speaker feel belated and inadequate, but of course the speaker has invented this line for himself and placed himself at its most recent end. The thought of his great (or even divine) predecessors worries the speaker, but it also inspires him: "Thinking of Dante, I start to feel / What I think are wings beginning to push out from my shoulder blades," he writes (55-6). This is a moment of apparent poetic grandiosity, but the speaker undercuts this angelic metamorphosis with the qualifying phrase "I think." He feels, he thinks, but is not and cannot be sure; to be sure is mistakenly to arrogate the otherworldly ("the things that are God's") to the finite world ("the things which are Caesar's") (Matt. 22:21). The moments of ambitious fancy are wrenched back to earth in an intercalary section concerning the speaker's parents:

They're both ghosts now, haunting the chairs and the sugar chest.

> From time to time I hear their voices drifting like smoke through the living
> room,
> Touching the various things they owned once.
> Now they own nothing
> and drift like smoke through the living room.   (51-4)

These beloved, specific dead resemble the anonymous, vague dead of "Homage to Paul Cézanne" who, in the speaker's imagination at least, "grow less dead every year." Throughout these cuts between now and then, here and there, the worldly points the speaker toward the otherworldly, but it cannot get him there or return the lost to him. "Thinking of Dante," the speaker says—implying by synecdoche thinking of Campana and Catullus, his mother and father—"is thinking about the other side, / And the other side of the other side. / It's thinking about the noon noise and the daily light" (61-3). One cannot know the other side, much less the other side's other side, but the speaker acknowledges that thinking about it means meditating on this side. The quotidian "noon noise" allows him to consider "yesterday's noise."

Wright muses on "how sweet is yesterday's noise," but the word *noise* makes the sweetness of the musing rather bitter. The sound the past makes is not music but noise, a static that prevents the poet from hearing just what he listens for. We can see this tension in the poet's vacillation between remembering a specific event or incident and then lamenting his inability to remember more, or remember others, and sometimes in the same line. "After twelve years," he says, "it's hard to recall / That defining sound the canal made at sundown, slap / Of tide swill on the church steps [. . .]" (79-81). Difficult though it may be, the poet has at least accomplished the onomatopoeic task of making those sibilant and plosive sounds—"slap" of "tide swill" on "steps"—available to us if not completely to himself. Here we may observe again an instance of the principle of the *via negativa*: one can remember *a* sound, but whatever is remembered is not heard, and cannot be *the* sound which, as Augustine observes, has sounded and is gone. Wright amplifies the Wordsworthian anxiety about the continuity of the self in a different form: "the vacancy

between me and those days," the latter writes, makes himself seem "[t]wo consciousnesses, conscious of myself / And of some other Being." In Wright's case, we have at most one-and-a-half consciousnesses, because "[p]laces swim up and sink back, and days do, / The edges around what really happened \ we'll never remember / No matter how hard we stare back at the past [. . .]" (157-9. As the poem continues and the speaker recites a litany of memories, his sense of the failures of memory simultaneously increase, becoming in his failure to remember a past self a betrayal of both that and the present self. Not only does he betray the past and present selves, but he doubts the idea of the individual self: "As always, silence will have the last word [. . .] // Everyone's life is the same life \ if you live long enough" (130). At its core, the speaker suggests, the self is somehow not-self:

> There is an otherness inside us
> We never touch,
>   no matter how far down our hands reach.
> It is the past,
>   with its good looks and *Anytime*, *Anywhere* . . .
> Our prayers go out to it, our arms go out to it
> Year after year,
> But who can ever remember enough?   (137-42)

This is the fear against which Wordsworth composes *The Prelude*—that in seeking to understand his growth into what he is he may find himself alien—and which, through violent but unifying power of nature, he finds unfounded.

The "otherness" of the self as Wright portrays it in "The Southern Cross," and through his career afterward, is the self lost in the ungraspable past, a time we can neither inhabit nor accurately remember, but which is nevertheless the source of the self one has become. "I can't remember," he writes, "the colors I said I'd never forget / On Via Giulia at sundown" (183-4). At the same time, the otherness of the self reminds him of the otherness of the divine, which "'is neither imaginable nor conceivable, but is the ground and condition

of all existence and knowledge" (Mink xvi, qtd. in "Halflife" 37).[24] The failures of Wright's stated subjects become their own litany: the power of landscape to generate memory, the power of memory to recollect the scenes of landscape and the self who experienced it, the failure of language reliably to communicate any of it:

> Time is the villain in most tales,
> > and here too,
> Lowering its stiff body into the water.
> Its landscape is the resurrection of the word,
> No end of it,
> > the petals of wreckage in everything.   (212-15)

As I have said above, time is the villain in this tale, but time also makes the tale possible. Its personification here allows the poet to bring together his vital concerns in a single image, "[time's] landscape [as] the resurrection of the word." Physical landscape is already time's landscape, changing as time changes it, but time's landscape is also memory and the half-remembered landscapes the speaker has been trying, and failing, to recollect. The landscape of memory resurrects the word—the word of the poem, of course, but with the inevitable echoes of the word of God made flesh, crucified and buried, and resurrected. But these various parts cannot cohere; the speaker offers no unifying logic for them. All he can wrench from this dense image is another image: "the petals of wreckage in everything," after which he shifts again from hazily remembered scenes of Italy to more specific (and thus, for the speaker, less trustworthy) scenes of a Tennessee childhood:

> I can't remember enough.
>
> [. . .]
> The hard pull of a semi making the grade up U.S. 11W,
> The cold with its metal teeth ticking against the window,
> The long sigh of the screen door stop,
> My headlights starting to disappear
> > in the day's new turning . . .

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[24] In his notebook, Wright cites "St. Augustine" as the source of this quotation, but the original source, as far as I can tell, is Louis Mink's introduction to the Gateway Edition of Augustine's *Of True Religion* (1959).

I'll never be able to.   (233, 242-6)

If one does not entirely trust the line "I'll never be able to" (emphasized in being allotted a stanza of its own) as a moment of epiphany, perhaps this is because the speaker has been arguing for the failures of memory with every memory he dredges up. Near the end of the poem, he confesses: "All we remember is wind," a line that resonates in two grammatical senses (264). We seem to remember nothing but the wind, but all that we are capable of remembering at all is wind. When he writes: "It's what we forget that defines us, and stays in the same place, / And waits to be discovered," he utters in fungible language what the equally fraught glimpses of memory have been demonstrating throughout the poem (266-7).

In "The Southern Cross" and in Wright's poems that follow, we stare back at the past as we stare at nature, as "the small stars [appear] in the orange trees," but neither can tell us enough about who we are or what the world is. Neither confirms "this this," as Wright has called it in another poem ("Tom Strand" 15). Instead, as he concludes "The Southern Cross":

> Somewhere in all that network of rivers and roads and silt hills,
> A city I'll never remember,
>   its walls the color of pure light,
> Lies in the August heat of 1935,
> In Tennessee, the bottomland slowly becoming a lake.
> It lies in a landscape that keeps my imprint
>
> Forever,
>   and stays unchanged, and waits to be filled back in.
> Someday I'll find out
> And enter my old outline as though for the first time,
>
> And lie down, and tell no one.   (266-76)

The end to which Wright aspires here is less Wordsworthian transcendence than a silence that, in keeping with Wright's apophatic poetics, "will have the last word" (117).

The great irony of reading Charles Wright's poems as "an ongoing argument with [him]self about the unlikelihood of salvation" is that, despite the poet's doubts about the

possibility of his own immortality, the poems in which he expresses those doubts constitute a likely vehicle for some kind—if not personal—survival. They cannot apprehend the divine any more than the Creator's *logos* can be understood in terms of human language. As David Young writes, "where other mystics finally find God, Wright more often finds just himself or his sense of his own limits or his rueful acknowledgment that he is somehow terribly separate from the world he loves" (44-5). Wright's poems will not free the person from himself so that he might approach the divine, nor can they return him to unity with a lost, whole version of the self or of the world. They abide instead as sparks in the synapse— lonely though it is—between what is and what cannot be imagined.

Chapter Three

In Which Our Names Do Not Appear: Adrienne Rich

In my opening opposition of Walt Whitman's and Emily Dickinson's senses of

selfhood, I wrote: "The self is oceanic; the self is a prison." The poetry of Adrienne Rich

has demonstrated that before the self can be either or neither of these, it first is a condition

of privilege. Rich understands the self to be inextricably political, not by choice or

predilection, but by the inheritance of being born male or female into a patriarchal society.

For Rich, for women, and subsequently for the woman poet living in patriarchy, there is no

self without politics and struggle. Similarly, there can be no person or poetry outside of

history, which has meant a history of patriarchy.[1] Rich sees the self as it has been

formulated under patriarchy as an individual pursuit, a corollary of bourgeois capitalism and

of what Roland Barthes calls "the prestige of the individual." Moreover, this prestige—and

the privilege to seek it—has been reserved exclusively for men, especially men born white

and wealthy. Rich believes that the capitalist society that nourishes and is nourished by

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[1] Here and throughout, I shall defer to Rich's definition of patriarchy as articulated in *Of Woman Born*:

> Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (57)

Rich offers a more detailed analysis of the "characteristics of male power" in her "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience" (1980); I use her definition from *Of Woman Born* for its succinctness ("Compulsory" 36-9).

such a model of selfhood has proven destructive to women, to persons of color, to persons living in poverty, and to the earth itself. Rich's poetry attempts to articulate a new conception of self, not only in the lines of the lyric poem but in the day-to-day lives of women and men. What the self might be, whom it might include or exclude, and how it might be achieved remain in question. These questions, as I shall argue in this chapter, animate Rich's poetry and destabilize traditional conceptions of individual and community, tradition and innovation, self and world.

In both her poetry and prose, Rich attempts to question—even to overturn—the abiding politics and poetics of the self and its correlative ignorance or denial of history. The problem Rich addresses is not simply poetic or political. In order to reconceive (of) the self, Rich proposes nothing less than a reevaluation of language and thought themselves:

> Masculine intellectual systems are inadequate because they lack the
> wholeness that female consciousness, excluded from contributing to them,
> could provide. [. . .] Truly to liberate women, then, means to change thinking
> itself: to reintegrate what has been named the unconscious, the subjective, the
> emotional with the structural, the rational, the intellectual [. . .] and finally to
> annihilate those dichotomies.[2]

Rich and other radical feminists are "speaking in terms of 'feminist revolution,'" she continues, "of a 'post-androgynous' society, of creating a new kind of human being" (*Of Woman Born* 81). Poetry can prove to be a mode of such creation, Rich insists, because language is fundamental to all varieties of making: "Only where there is language is there world," she writes in "The Demon Lover" (92). Joanne Feit Diehl understands Rich's project as "merging Whitmanian power with the legacy of Dickinson's alternative Sublime." Diehl surveys what she calls "Rich's attempt to construct a single-sex, feminist poetics and

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[2] In her "Sorties," Hélène Cixous too identifies some of the oppositions by which, she says, "thought has always worked," though she is careful, too, to identify these as "dual, *hierarchized* oppositions," in which the male is always superior to the female (90-1).

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her subsequent repudiation of the exclusionary aspects of that poetics in favor of a more inclusive yet specifically female-identified vision" (143). Diehl's chronology of events seems right to me in that Rich develops an individual feminist poetics before turning to the inclusive grammars of a "common language," but I would qualify her formulation of "construction" followed by "repudiation." My caveat may seem a semantic quibble, but I think it is crucial to recognize that Rich does not resolve intellectually the intellectual tensions in her work. Throughout her career, both her poetry and prose present competing visions of feminist poetics, of language, and of the self. Just as "I" and "we," "she" and "he" bleed into each other in Rich's work, so do binary notions such as construction and repudiation. Rich makes her poems—to revise W. B. Yeats's remark—of the ongoing quarrel with others and with ourselves (331). These tensions, because they remain unresolved, animate "the quarrel with oneself" of her poems.

At the crux of such conflicts is the question of whether the new selfhood Rich proposes should be more inclusive and communal—exemplified in the experience of motherhood (which Rich opposes to the "institution" of motherhood in *Of Woman Born* [1976])—or whether it should mean access for women to the freedom of individual selfhood that under patriarchy has been delegated exclusively to men.[3] In neither Rich's poetry nor her prose does her thinking develop sequentially from one to the other; rather, her writing throughout her career enacts the tension between these two possibilities and seeks a synthesis. This tension in Rich's work, between a new "I" and a new "we," has troubled the poet as well as some of her critics, including those who object to the political implications of any first person plural and those who object to the aesthetic choices Rich has made in her attempt at "a common language." Although many critics have focused on issues of identity in Rich's work, the available scholarship has for the most part treated "identity" as

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[3] The institution of motherhood, as Rich understands it, is a creation of patriarchy that "demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (*Of Woman Born* 42).

something argued for in Rich's work rather than a concept constantly being made and remade. I argue, conversely, that Rich's poems represent a fluid process of making and remaking identity, constantly criticizing, seeking to overthrow, seeking to recreate the bases on which we establish who "I" and "you," "we" and "they" are.

I frame these issues in grammatical terms because the English language is, for Rich, a manifestation of the values of patriarchy, a mode of enforcing and perpetuating those values, as well as an opportunity for her and others to challenge those values in favor of a new language, a new mode of society. If Rich debates herself about how to forge a new self and what that self might be, she is constant in her understanding of the foundational role of language in constituting selfhood and the world in which the self exists. Terence Des Pres quotes from Rich's "The Demon Lover"—"Only where there is language is there world"—in order to draw a parallel to Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of language, self, and world in *Philosophical Investigations*. As Des Pres writes:

> To imagine a language befitting a feminist form of life is, I take it, Rich's "dream." Wittgenstein also says that "the *speaking* of language is part of an activity," a specific way of taking place in the world. He adds that "only those hope who can talk." [. . .] Language and world together make up "the weave of our life," as Wittgenstein puts it. And when, finally, he observes that "the totality of our linguistic milieu consists of language and the actions into which it is woven," he endorses Rich's fundamental belief as an activist-poet: "Poetry never stood a chance / of standing outside history."
>
> (Des Pres 222-3; Wittgenstein *PI* 15, 183, 183, 8; Rich, "North American Time" 16-17)[4]

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[4] To be precise, Wittgenstein does not assert but asks. "Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life" (*PI* 183). I use the fourth edition of the Anscombe et al. translation of *Philosophical Investigations*, so the exact phrasing departs somewhat from that of Des Pres's quotation.

If language establishes the boundaries and even the fact of one's world, then a patriarchal language, as Rich and other radical feminists view English as they have received and used it, can describe only a patriarchal world.

To forge a new language, for Rich, first means identifying the proper origins of the language that has become the oppressor's. Rich's call for a "common language" derives in part from the feminist theology of Mary Daly, who writes in *Beyond God the Father* (1973) that

> [. . .W]omen have had the power of *naming* stolen from us. [. . .] Women are now realizing that the universal imposing of names by men has been false because partial. That is, inadequate words have been taken as adequate. [. . .]
>
> To exist humanly is to name the self, the world, and God. The "method" of the evolving spiritual consciousness of women is nothing less than this beginning to speak humanly—a reclaiming of the right to name.
>
> The liberation of language is rooted in the liberation of ourselves. (8)

Similarly, Rich identifies the real source of naming, myth, and *poesis* as matriarchal: "Thus, the mother's telling, if not the mother tongue, is the source of literature" (*Of Woman Born* xxviii). Before a new language can come into being, however, one may speak of it only in the old language, in what Rich has called "the oppressor's language" ("The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" 39). As we shall see, this fact poses another productive conflict for Rich, as a writer who—her politics notwithstanding—has been estimated from the beginning of her career as a poet of what has come to be called "official verse culture." As Judith McDaniel claims, "The phenomena Rich wishes to describe—a new female identity, the nuances of a male/female relationship—make impossible demands on a limited and sexist vocabulary" (7). For Rich, the choice is not simply between old and new, oppressor and oppressed. If Rich's project is both Whitmanian and Dickinsonian, it is also Eliotic in its attempt to shore usable fragments against the ruins of (in Rich's case, patriarchal) culture.

Although Rich's political concerns align with the ideological sympathies of the Language Poets' critique of bourgeois capitalism and official verse culture, her choice to write in "traditional" poetic forms, in "the oppressor's language," complicates her political and poetic identity, opening what Marjorie Perloff perceives as a lacuna between Rich's politics and poetics. Rich's feminist "call to action," Perloff writes,

> is undermined [. . .] by [her] conservative rhetoric, a rhetoric indistinguishable from that of the Male Oppressor. It is as if Rich, the radical lesbian poet, cannot shed the habit, learned by the time she was 21, a Radcliffe graduate and the winner of the Yale Younger Poets Award for *A Change of World*, of having to write poetry that would win the approval of the judges. (131-2)

Perloff's anti-"elitist," anti-"establishment" biases may well disqualify her critique without my help, but Perloff's misreading of Rich's poetry also illuminates similar and ongoing misapprehensions of Rich's poetics and her place in our picture of contemporary poetry. Writing in 1988, Craig Werner observes: "Critics with an interest in literary theory evince almost no interest in her work. Those who do [. . .] frequently present Rich's use of a discursive voice in her lesbian-feminist poetry as a retreat from the radical implications of deconstruction (or other post-modern insights into the nature of language)" (126).

Readings of Rich's work have changed all too little in the intervening years. Assessing Rich's career in 2013, Ange Mlinko remarks that "if Rich's impact on her fellow feminists was huge, her impact on poets of the last couple of generations has been weak" (36). When Mlinko cites Perloff's critique of Rich, she does so in part to call attention to its flaws, but also to offer her own dismissal of Rich's "sincer[ity]": "Though they can make for good rhetorical occasions, there are few surprises in grandmother poems or poems against torture or war" (37). Neither Perloff nor Mlinko grasp that the force of Rich's rhetoric is her interrogation of its sincerity, her constant questioning of the power of language to represent, compel, and oppress. Nevertheless, Perloff's point about the conflict between "conservative rhetoric" and a liberating rhetoric is worth further attention. I shall

argue that this apparent contradiction between radical politics and "conservative rhetoric" is the very source of the power of Rich's poems. To claim "I am she: I am he" or "We are, I am, you are" as the same state of being is all the more radical because these claims seem to violate our understanding of grammatical number and gender ("Diving into the Wreck" 77, 78). Thus Rich reveals that the old language, insufficient and patriarchal as it is, is something to be salvaged rather than discarded. As Rich articulates in "Power," a poem ostensibly about Marie Curie, "her wounds came from the same source as her power" (17). Language, for Rich, is both the wound and the stitching: at issue is more than the grammatical shift from *I* to *we* as the ostensible speaker(s) of a certain poem, but a larger consideration of language, society, and selfhood. To dream of a common language is to dream a new self, located between the various pronouns through which we address the world.

W. H. Auden's famously condescending introduction to Adrienne Rich's first volume, *A Change of World* (1951), now seems more a challenge to the younger poet than an endorsement of her work. Auden was perceptive enough to see the remarkable talent and promise in his selection for the Yale Series of Younger Poets. In hindsight, however, it seems inaccurate to describe "Miss Rich" as a writer whose poems "are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs [. . .]" (11). These words are familiar to anyone who has followed Rich's career enough to know just how severely Rich's course diverged from Auden's plot.

Another observation of Auden's is less frequently quoted, but more prescient. Referring to "the great figures in 'modern' poetry, novels, painting, and music, the innovators, the creators of the new style," he writes:

> Before a similar crop of revolutionary artists can appear again, there will have to be just such another cultural revolution replacing these attitudes with others. So long as the way in which we regard the world and feel about our existence remains in all essentials the same as that of our predecessors we must follow in their tradition; it would be just as dishonest for us to pretend that their style is inadequate to our needs as it would have been for them to be content with the style of the Victorians. (9)

If Rich's early poems do not openly dissent from the style or attitude of their predecessors, the rest of her career has taught us to see in them the seeds of the revolution to come. Even Rich's earliest work displays a profound concern for the lives of women, especially how those lives are affected by patriarchal forces both overt and covert. At stake in her work from its first page is the idea of the self as a process, a realization of one's potential as a human being, and how this process has been denied to or stunted in women by a society

that privileges males and masculinity. In "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers"—the title refers to figures that Aunt Jennifer is sewing into a screen—

> the massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
> Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.
>
> When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
> Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.   (7-10)

Aunt Jennifer's hand bows under the weight of her husband's—significantly, not *her*—ring. The subjugation of women, as Rich demonstrates here, is insidious in its subtlety. Its outward sign is not a chain but a ring, and a gift at that. Its "heaviness" is both the indication of Uncle's wealth and subsequently of her "worth" as a wife, as well as the yoke of the patriarchal institution of marriage as property exchange. The institution and constraints of marriage weighing upon her, Aunt Jennifer practices an art proper to women of her station. She sews. Her hands are mastered by such ordeals even as they master this particular art. In portraying her sewing, the speaker places Aunt Jennifer in the tradition of other female mythic makers, from the Norns who spool and clip the thread of human life to Penelope and Arachne, whose respective skill at the loom helps the former survive her suitors and dooms the latter in her contest with Athena. But the speaker is also quick to distinguish Aunt Jennifer's fate from those of the male culture heroes of classical epics or even the mythic female figures who appear among the constellations. "The skies are full of them," Rich's speaker remarks—women as warnings, women as curses—in "Planetarium," to which I will return (3). But Aunt Jennifer's death will be as quiet and unremarked as the prancing tigers in her sewing.

"So long as the way in which we regard the world and feel about our existence remains in all essentials the same as that of our predecessors we must follow in their tradition," Auden writes, but "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" demonstrates that Rich's regard for the world differs from that of her predecessors. The poem heralds Rich's lifelong attention to the lives of women which, in patriarchy, both are and are not their own. We know what

Aunt Jennifer's art has produced because the poem has told us. The poem does not say—it cannot speculate—what Aunt Jennifer or any other woman might produce, might become in a society that understands and values them as the equals of men. "[I]t would be just as dishonest for us," Auden continues, "to pretend that [our predecessors'] style is inadequate to our needs as it would have been for them to be content with the style of the Victorians." In the rhymed and metered poems of her early period, Rich turns the predecessors' style against the predecessors with such skill that the change may be difficult to note. As she develops as a poet from this point, Rich continues to explore the lives of women who suffer under and survive the injustices of patriarchy. She comes to understand and articulate language as one of the foundations of that injustice. The changes necessary to correct such injustices must begin with language, and a change of language is a change of world.

"Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," the title poem of her third collection (1963), marks a change in form and tone from Rich's previous work. Marilyn Hacker calls "Snapshots" "Rich's first overtly feminist poem," distinguishing it from earlier work (including "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers") on the basis that in "Snapshots" Rich "not only considered the question of women's aspirations and achievement directly, she placed it within defining social and cultural contexts which would be equally characteristic of her ongoing poetic/political project [. . .]" (16). Albert Gelpi refers to the volume itself as "the transitional book in Adrienne Rich's development," in which

> her themes—the burden of history, the separateness of individuals, the need
> for relationship where there is no other transcendence—begin to find their
> clarifying focus and center: what she is as a woman and poet in late-twentieth-
> century America. [. . .] The psychological and artistic point which the
> *Snapshots* volume dramatizes is Adrienne Rich's rejection of the terms on
> which society says we must expend our existence and her departure on an
> inner journey of exploration and discovery.   (285, 289)

Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law appeared in the context of other notable breaks from New Critical, impersonal formality and toward "open form," as apparent in W. S. Merwin's *The Moving Target*, Ann Sexton's *All My Pretty Ones*, and James Wright's *The Branch Will Not Break*, all published in the same year. Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) looms in this context, too, as will John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs* (1964) and Sylvia Plath's posthumously published *Ariel* (1965). That these names coincide with those poets I have counted as pioneers of the Confessional mode suggests the frequent association of open form with a new openness about speaking from and about personal experience.

I will return to the ramifications of the Confessional context for Rich's work; for now I want to emphasize, first, that the formal change in her poems resembles others in a period of general movement toward open form(s). More important for my immediate purpose, though, is the correlating change Hacker notes in Rich's portrayal of other women and, eventually of herself, a process observable in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." As we shall see in subsequent sections, the ability to write directly about other women's experiences will eventually embolden Rich to write about her own, and will raise the question of on whose behalf a poet is entitled to speak. Rich's concern in both "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" and "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" is for individual women, whether the familiar mothers and aunts or the more metaphorical sisterhood of her fellow female writers. But "Snapshots" also demonstrates Rich's emerging attempt to write about the general conditions as she understands them of women living in patriarchy. Rich's speaker in "Snapshots" begins with anger and pity for a familial mother figure, then widens her scope to seek to understand such intimate female relationships in the context of a patriarchal literary history.

Despite its title, the poem opens not with a daughter- or mother-in-law but with a "you," an address to an older woman whose familial status is not offered here. The opening section confirms and confounds potential associations with the Confessional mode: the poem portrays a domestic, potentially taboo conflict between family members, but the

Confessional "I" is conspicuously absent. Instead, the figures of the opening sections are presented either in the third person or through the "you" with which the poem begins. The speaker portrays this addressee as a quondam debutante, only to turn violently on recollection of her past beauty to describe, with a pity approaching contempt, her fading mind:

> Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake,
> heavy with useless experience, rich
> with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
> crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
> of mere fact. In the prime of your life.
>
> Nervy, glowering, your daughter
> wipes the teaspoons, grows another way.   (7-13)

The *Rich* of the Fifties might have continued in the somewhat disinterested vein of the first stanza, her description of the older woman salted with the disappointed, almost mocking irony of "the prime of your life." In "Snapshots," her speaker is unabashedly angry, and the introduction of the figure of the daughter—not, here, a daughter-in-law—and her own "nervy, glowering" anger animates the lines. The poet has commented upon the importance of articulating anger to the development of her project. She writes in "Blood, Bread, and Poetry" that "to take women's existence seriously as a theme and source for art [. . .] placed me nakedly face to face with both terror and anger [. . .]. But it released energy in me [. . .] I felt for the first time the closing of the gap between poet and woman" (182). I will return to the importance of this gap for Rich and her readers alike, but here I want to emphasize that her use of the phrase "poet and woman" refers not just to different elements within herself but also to the ideas of "the poet" and "the woman," which patriarchy has rendered almost mutually exclusive.

"A thinking woman sleeps with monsters," the speaker says in the first line of the third section (26). This line marks a sea change in the poem and in Rich's career. The adjective implies that the patriarchal subjugation of women is so insidious that other,

perhaps "unthinking" or unaware women might perceive patriarchy as normalcy. To be aware means in part to be aware of monsters who—perhaps unaware themselves—offer a chain in the guise of a wedding ring, and to be aware of the monstrous ways in which patriarchy turns women against each other and themselves. If the first section offers a snapshot of the mother, and the second a snapshot of the daughter, here Rich widens her focus to take in—as much as any one eye or "I" can do so—a thinking everywoman. Here, too, Rich extends the Cartesian understanding of thought as the essence of existence: to be aware of the self in such a way is, for Rich, to be awake to the oppression women experience merely in attempting to be a thinking individual in a society that demeans female individuality and femininity itself. This awareness breeds terror and anger, as Rich has noted here and elsewhere.

The poem's next line depicts a grotesque metamorphosis: "The beak that grips her, she becomes" (27). In this image, the chain that fetters the thinking woman grows into her own flesh, until she herself has become a self-consuming monster. If we imagine this to be the fate of the mother figure from the poem opening lines, then we may also read the speaker's attitude toward her as more complicated than contempt or pity: she begins to understand this individual woman as individual and as exemplar of an abstract, collective "women." Impoverished by masculine expectations and demands for a certain sort of femininity, she is "rich" instead in "suspicion, rumor, fantasy" (8-9). She becomes a monstrous harbinger of what the "thinking woman" of the third section might become. Just as the individual women of the poem's first section develop into the abstract "thinking woman" of the third, so this thinking woman also becomes woman mythologized. In "becom[ing]" "the beak that grips her," she is the Leda of Yeats's poem, caught in the violent "embrace" of Zeus. In this metamorphosis, Rich is able to unite individual, idea, and myth in a single figure. Yeats's Leda finds "her thighs caressed / By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill," "mastered by the brute blood of the air" (1-2, 12). In short, Yeats's Leda is powerless in the swan's grip. Rich's thinking woman, in becoming the beak that grips her,

can empower herself, but only by participating in her own subjugation. For Rich, this realization is also poetically resonant. Through this allusion to (and revision of) Yeats, to which I will return, Rich accesses masculine literary and mythopoeic traditions, and positions herself to remake them.

A series of snapshots may suggest a narrative, but the narrative they offer is marked as much by the breaks between each photograph as by the continuities among them. Rich uses the breaks between the sections of "Snapshots" in a similar way, establishing an associative rather than a linear narrative. These associations are amplified by her liberal quotation from and commentary upon lines and sentences from other writers. "Snapshots" represents one of the early examples of Rich's use of this technique, to which she returns as her career develops. These quotations may at first resemble the associative shifts from one language and writer to another in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Where Eliot uses such language(s) to fracture and reassemble a cultural narrative, however, Rich uses them to amplify and undercut the voices of different predecessors, revising the tradition as she uses it. This is not to say that Eliot does not revise the tradition he has found. The contrary is true, as he emphasizes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Rich's use of quotation, however, is more openly hostile, more vehemently dismissive of what she perceives as the patriarchal or misogynistic perspectives of male writers. To this end, Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls "Snapshots" "like a feminist *Waste Land* in its 'loaded gun' allusiveness [. . .]" (125). Here Rich quotes from Charles Baudelaire, Horace, Thomas Campion, Denis Diderot, and Samuel Johnson, modifying, challenging, and satirizing them in turn. The subtle implication of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" has opened into sarcasm and righteous indignation.

Rich opens section nine, for instance, by quoting Samuel Johnson's famous remark on the notion of a woman preaching. Rich turns Johnson's words against him in order to critique the misogyny of the statement and of a culture that treats such a statement as wit:[5]

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[5] The full quotation is as follows: "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all" (Boswell 327).

Not that it is done well, but
that it is done at all? Yes, think
of the odds! or shrug them off forever.
[. . .]
Sigh no more, ladies.
                                  Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.   (86-8, 95-6)

The identification of "time" as male recalls the gendered personifications of "Father Time"

and "Mother Nature." Time's toast to the fair reminds us that women have been primarily

objects in the literature and history written primarily by men. Mary Daly's claim that the

feminine power to name has been stolen returns here, as the speaker of the poem uses the

language of great male authors—even their very lines—to condemn the uses to which they

have put the language. In Rich's revision of literary history, women have been practically

forbidden to speak, except for the lines men have written for them. "When to her lute

Corinna sings," the speaker says in section six, quoting Thomas Campion, "neither words

nor music are her own" (53-4). Corinna's words are Campion's; she sings as the male poet

imagines her singing: as Christina Rossetti wrote a century before Rich, "not as she is, but as

she fills his dream" (14). And, as Rich observes, when women have dared to write and to

pursue a selfhood independent of male prerogative, they have become objects of scorn. In

the poem's seventh section, Rich quotes from and comments upon Mary Wollstencraft's

Thoughts on the Education of Daughters. That section in full:

> "*To have in this uncertain world some stay*
> *which cannot be undermined, is*
> *of the utmost consequence.*"
>   Thus wrote
> a woman, partly brave and partly good,
> who fought with what she partly understood.
> Few men about her would or could do more,
> hence she was labeled harpy, shrew and whore.   (69-76)

Wollstonecraft—the only female writer Rich quotes in "Snapshots"[6]—represents a model

for the poet, and potentially for all women, but she also serves as a reminder of the price of

seeking selfhood or of articulating that self. The loaded words Rich invokes are only three

of the many labels attached to women who have dared to be something other than objects

for male consumption, whether as an idealized figure in a poem or as a person whose

appearance has not traditionally been toasted by a "Father Time." In the opening lines of

section eight, Rich quotes Denis Diderot's observation—"You all die at fifteen"—to

emphasize the objectification and subjugation implicit in Time's drunken toast (77). Time is

an ogler of young women, who learn to appease his whims: the female figure in section five

"shaves her legs until they gleam / like petrified mammoth-tusk" (51-2). This "she" subverts

nature in shaving her legs to win male approval; the legs that become mammoth's ivory in

this image become museum pieces for the male gaze. That is, they are objects to be mused

at rather than parts of the body of a thinking, breathing woman. Considered in this

manner, the "snapshots" of a title are not only the glimpses of the poem's ten sections but

also the familiar photographs that idealize, sexualize, and objectify women.

Time's masculine priorities are clear enough here, but the role of the personified

Mother Nature in the poem remains more complicated. As Hacker notes, the only

daughter-in-law named as such in "Snapshots" appears in the poem's sixth section, in which

the mother-in-law in question is Nature "herself." In this section, the speaker returns to the

second person address with which she began the poem, but the mother figure of the

opening sections has become, here, the "daughter-in-law":

> Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before
> an unlocked door, that cage of cages,
> tell us, you bird, you tragical machine—
> is this *fertilisante douleur*? Pinned down
> by love, for you the only natural action,

---

[6] To be exact, the tenth section of the poem alludes to but does not quote directly from Simone de
Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

are you edged more keen
to prise the secrets of the vault? has Nature shown
her household books to you, daughter-in-law,
that her sons never saw?   (60-8)

Here the image of the monstrous beak—and the allusion to Yeats's "Leda and the Swan"—from the poem's third section returns in the form of a caged bird. DuPlessis comments upon the earlier image: "When Yeats asks, 'Did she put on his knowledge with his power / before [*sic*] the indifferent beak could let her drop?' Rich responds, 'A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her, she becomes' [. . .]" (125). If, following DuPlessis, Rich "answers" Yeats's rhetorical question with this declarative in the third section, then in the sixth section she complicates matters by answering the question with a question of her own. The violent rape imagery of this section presents a troubling contrast to the self-consuming woman of the third. When Yeats asks, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" Rich responds, "has Nature shown / her household books to you, daughter-in-law, / that her sons never saw?" Maternal "Nature" may stand idle or may even participate in the subjugation of her daughters-in-law in favor of her sons, but she may instead offer a glimpse of her "household books." She may initiate those daughters into a secret knowledge, the accounting—in both the senses of numeration and of reckoning—of the house and beyond.

Do subjugation, rape literal and figurative allow access to a secret knowledge unavailable to others? Do the oppressions of the oppressor's language engender eloquence in the oppressed? and if so, then at what cost? The poem proposes no answer to these questions, only a vague promise of a coming goddess-figure rendered in the disintegrating, fragmentary lines that end the poem:

poised, still coming
her fine blades making the air wince

but her cargo
no promise then:
delivered

palpable
        ours.   (116-22)

Albert Gelpi remarks that these "'Snapshots' comprise an album of woman as 'daughter-in-law,' bound into the set of roles which men have established and which female acquiescence has re-enforced. [. . .] The self-image projected here is archetypal, at once individual and collective: a signal of forces which would become a national movement within the decade" (286). In that movement the anger Rich articulates finds its proper conduit into action; for Rich, this is the proper destiny of a poem such as "Snapshots." If the Western literary tradition begins with the wrath of Achilles, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" establishes Adrienne Rich's wrath at what that tradition has built, her attempt to topple and rebuild it.

        One more notable aspect of "Snapshots" is its postscript: from this volume on, Rich dates each of her poems in publication. What is often supplied as a reading aid in anthologies of literature thus becomes an extension of the poem itself. David Kalstone reads this habit as "a way of limiting [poems'] claims, of signaling that they spoke only for their moment. The poems were seen as instruments of passage, of self-scrutiny and resolve in the present" (148). Kalstone's point is sound, but I would extend his argument to say that while the act of dating the poems may limit their particular claims, it also serves to document that moment as one in a continuing process of creating or recreating the self since, as Rich had written in "North American Time," "Poetry never stood a chance / of standing outside history." In identifying the date of the poem, Rich also notes the historical moment of the person who wrote it; that self is one among many who might be identified by the same name, who might be thought of as the same poet even as the poems she writes are tools for extending and enriching the process of becoming something more. Rich articulates as much in a comment on "Snapshots": "It strikes me now as too literary, too dependent on allusion. I hadn't found the courage yet to do without authorities, or even to use the pronoun 'I'—the woman in the poem is always 'she,'" she writes eleven years later, in "When We Dead Awaken" (45).

In "Snapshots," then, Rich has begun to articulate the taboo anger over the subjugation of women, but she has not yet begun to articulate it as herself. Problematic though these notions may be—to speak on behalf of a culture, a subculture, a self—she must nevertheless engage them in her own poems, with her own vocabulary and mythology. Even in "Snapshots" she has borrowed the language of patriarchal authors and of demeaned women writers, but she must learn to speak in a language of her own in order to propose a new way through her anger and the injustice that is its source. The breakthrough comes in "Diving into the Wreck," in which Rich finds the proper metaphor and voice to express the need for salvage and reconstruction. Wendy Martin writes:

> In contrast with *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, published a decade earlier, *Diving into the Wreck* represents a major shift in attitude. [. . .] *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* is written from the perspective of an outsider—a daughter-in-law—who observes but does not affect the world around her. The voice in the poems of *Diving into the Wreck* is strong and resolute; Rich has abandoned the indirect strategies of Bradstreet and Dickinson in order to engage in direct, public confrontation.   (196-7)

Martin's allusion to Dickinson is apt: Rich no longer wishes to tell the truth "slant," as Dickinson advises; she is willing to let its light blind (Dickinson 1, 8).

Rich's pursuit of a usable language—personal but also more public, individual but archetypal—becomes a mythical quest in "Diving into the Wreck," in which Rich's speaker descends into the sea, returns to the womb of terrestrial life in order to be reborn. Martin comments that Rich

> decides to return to her primal origins, to plunge into the depths of her psychic and cultural past. [. . . I]n the depths of the sea, the origin of life, Rich explores the wreck of a ship, a multivalent metaphor for the remains of Western culture, the poet's past, and her subconscious life. As Alicia

Ostriker observes, this watery submersion is an inversion of heroic male

ascents and conquests.　　　(Martin 189, Ostriker 113)

That Martin conflates the speaker of the poem with Rich herself serves to prove Rich's own

point about articulating a personal vision, a personal mythology. While I concur with

Ostriker that Rich's descent inverts the myths of male ascent and conquest, I also read

"Diving into the Wreck" as a variation on the theme of mythic descents into the

underworld. The heroes who delve into the sterile realm of the dead—Odysseus, Aeneas,

Orpheus—return chastened, sadder and wiser. The shades they seek there slip through

their fingers or disappear at a glance. But Rich's "underworld" is anything but sterile; it is

the *maria* so often gendered female in "the oppressor's language," the origin of all life to

which she must return in order to speak to this life, hers and ours. In order to find—or

create—a salvageable myth, language, and self that she can articulate in the world, as

Whitman might, Rich must turn inward, as Dickinson does. In other words, in "Diving

into the Wreck" Rich chooses Dickinsonian means to achieve Whitmanesque ends.

　　　The poem opens not with water but with the "book of myths," the language, history,

and literature of patriarchal culture. This is not a book of the woman's "experience" but of

the world's "auctoritee," as Chaucer's Wife of Bath has called it (Rich 1, Chaucer 1):

> First having read the book of myths,
> and loaded the camera,
> and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
> I put on
> the body-armor of black rubber
> the absurd flippers
> the grave and awkward mask.　　　　　　(1-7)

These are tentative lines: the non-finite clause of the opening three lines delays the action

of the sentence long enough to emphasize the meticulous preparation required for the dive

to come. The speaker offers a checklist of sorts—book of myths, camera, knife—but the

book of myths hardly squares with her other cargo. The latter objects are tools to be used

on the dive; the book of myths functions as the impetus for the dive as well as the wreck she

has come to explore. The main clause of this first sentence occupies just three words—"I put on"—the shortest line of the opening stanza. The rest of the stanza is given over to the inventory of equipment. By the time the speaker is prepared to dive, she may appear to be someone or something else entirely in her body-armor, her flippers and her mask. She is someone or something "put on." This is the first metamorphosis the poem portrays, as the speaker transforms herself into a figure—armored, masked, equipped—capable of exploring the wreck of history, mythology, and herself. She must descend into a sea in which she cannot breathe on her own, in which an unequipped, unmasked swimmer could not speak.

If, returning to Wittgenstein, "the limits of language are the limits of my world," then Rich's speaker must move beyond the limits of her body, and of her world, in order to change that world. The mask supplies the speaker with the oxygen necessary to breathe and to speak; the mask of persona allows the poet to continue her descent toward the wreck itself:

> I came to explore the wreck.
> The words are purposes.
> The words are maps.
> I came to see the damage that was done
> and the treasures that prevail.
> [. . .]
>
> the thing I came for:
> the wreck and not the story of the wreck
> the thing itself and not the myth [. . .]   (52-6, 61-3)

Although Rich's speaker does not explicitly conflate her "book of myths" with the "words" of the stanza I quote, I read them—"purposes" and "maps"—as both the map of the wreck and the wreck itself. This doubling is possible (or inevitable) because, although the words of patriarchal language have wrecked society and themselves, they remain the only available maps to allow this explorer to discover that wreck. To do more—to salvage society, history, even language—requires a new language, a new book of myths and set of maps.

Although Martin emphasizes the shift in tone and technique from "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" to "Diving into the Wreck," I want to suggest that "Diving" also continues the Eliotic project of "Snapshots" in a different mode. Like *The Waste Land*, "Diving into the Wreck" is an attempt to return a sterile world to its proper fertility. What I have called Rich's attempt to salvage resembles Eliot's "shor[ing] of fragments," a collecting of the usable fragments of the past in an attempt to ensure the future (*The Waste Land* 430). As Eliot (and the Rich of "Snapshots") uses the lines of predecessor poets to forge a new poetic language, this speaker uses the book of myths to get beyond myth. Here too this book of (masculine) myths is a useful contrast to the feminine "household books" of "Snapshots." A more balanced accounting, a truer reckoning of "the wreck" of patriarchal society can be accomplished only through the metamorphoses of self and language. If the words are purposes and maps, then words—like the myths they constitute—reveal the priorities and values of a culture. As Rich writes in *Of Woman Born*: "In the interstices of language lie powerful secrets of the culture. [. . . W]e have no familiar, ready-made name for a woman who defines herself, by choice, neither in relation to children nor to men, who is self-identified, who has chosen herself" (249). In the context of the poem, the figure of the wreck supposes a foundered culture that has excluded women from any active role in its language and myths, relegating them to the position of the objects of male purposes.

To explore the wreck—and to find anything salvageable there—Rich's speaker has armored and masked herself. Now she slips that skin and morphs into another, double-gendered form, as

> the mermaid whose dark hair
> streams black, the merman in his armored body.
> We circle silently
> about the wreck
> we dive into the hold.
> I am she: I am he [. . .]   (72-7)

In these lines the nature of the previous metamorphoses themselves changes. In a striking, Whitmanesque turn, instead of being altered from one to another, Rich's speaker becomes

both at once. The "I" speaking the poem becomes a "we;" these pronouns shift to include "I," "she," and "he" within these few lines. The speaker is mermaid and merman, male and female, androgynous and—to adapt a botanical term—gynandrous. She "reads" the wreck by seeing herself among its ruins, identifying herself as the drowned sailor as well as the female figure carved into the prow. In the poem's final stanza, "she" again dissolves grammar and gender in claiming:

> We are, I am, you are
> [. . .]
> the one who find our way
> back to this scene
> carrying a knife, a camera
> a book of myths
> in which
> our names do not appear.   (87, 89-94)

Our sense of grammatical gender and number dissolves here; the new language Rich seeks does not adhere to the familiar divisions imposed and enforced by the oppressor's language, the language in which the book of (male) myths is written and in which "our names"—the pronoun here seems to me specifically feminine—"do not appear." Rich's speaker seeks the wreck but, as Milton's Satan brings his Hell within him, so she carries the wreck with her.

"Our names" do not appear in this book of myths because the power to name, as Daly suggests, has been stolen from women. "If the source of an oppressor's language is a set of false perceptions," Ostriker supposes, "it is necessary to begin at the beginning. The poem suggests a place, a scene, where our iron distinctions between perceiver and perceived, subject and object, he and she, I and you, dissolve" (114). Those distinctions are linguistic as much as they are conceptual or philosophical, so to dissolve them requires dissolving the conceptual divisions between grammatical persons. For Rich, this dissolution also suggests a new conception of selfhood, based in community rather than the individual, "we" instead of "I." Under patriarchy, the women who have sought for themselves the individuality allotted to men have been, as Rich notes in "Snapshots," "labeled harpy, shrew, and whore."

We might oppose these labels to the roles expected of women under patriarchy—mother, teacher, nurse—in which women have been required to put the needs of family and community ahead of their own individual needs, much less their wants. "Institutionalized motherhood," Rich writes in *Of Woman Born*, "demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (42).[7]

In "Diving into the Wreck," Rich begins to imagine a new language; she may even have written the first verses of a new "book of myths" in which a more inclusive, universal "we" may find our names. To "dream of a common language," as Rich has titled another volume, is to attempt to transcend the individual in favor of the collective. But the "creation of self" Rich describes in *Of Woman Born* presents a different problem. Implicit in the refiguring of selfhood as a social, communitarian model is the issue of inclusion: who is the "we" of Rich's poem? One may attempt to dissolve grammatical gender and number in a poem, but how can one presume to speak for the "many," much less the "all"? These questions are ethical as well as poetic; they are the questions of persons whose voices have

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[7] Although Rich articulates most succinctly the imposed selflessness of institutionalized motherhood in the passage I have quoted above, she returns to the theme elsewhere in *Of Woman Born*:

> The child that I carry for nine months can be defined *neither* as me or as not-me. Far from existing in the mode of "inner space," women are powerfully and vulnerably attuned to both "inner" and "outer' because for us the two are continuous, not polar.
> (64)

> Woman did not simply give birth; she made it possible for the child to go on living. Her breasts furnished the first food, but her concern for the child led her beyond that one-to-one relationship. (101)

> Typically [in birth labor] under patriarchy, the mother's life is exchanged for the child; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear. The self-denying, self-annihilative role of the Good Mother (linked implicitly with suffering and with the repression of anger) will spell the "death" of the woman or girl who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies *for herself*—especially when those hopes and fantasies have never been acted-on. (166)

been silenced, suppressed, or mocked, those from whom the power to name has been stolen. Moreover, these are some of the questions that have complicated Rich's project of proposing a new self, and which animate so many of the poems that follow.

Rich's sense of the lives women have led—and have been kept from living—under patriarchy is apparent from her earliest poems onward, but she articulates her grievances against patriarchy more overtly and complexly as she develops as a writer and thinker. Moreover, as Craig Werner observes, "As her understanding of patriarchy clarified, Rich in fact came to feel that concentrating on patriarchy—even to repudiate it—indirectly reinforced patriarchal power." In turning her focus from patriarchy to what Werner calls "cultural solipsism," Rich "encourages a thorough re-vision of the relationship between self and other on both personal and political levels" (37, 41). As she does so, however, she remains conflicted about what sort of self and selves women should create out of the wreckage of patriarchy. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich argues that at least since the Industrial Revolution, men of certain means have been able to pursue their senses of individuality (in professional, philosophical, or spiritual terms), while women have been expected to act and think in terms of a wider community, specifically in the care of others, and more specifically in the care of children (48-52). Of particular interest here for my purposes is Rich's ambivalence about how to proceed as a poet from this political understanding. In some of her work, Rich suggests that the female "I" must be free to pursue her own individuality on equal terms with men. Rich has said in essays and interviews, moreover, that the elimination of distance between poet and poetic speaker was of great importance to her poetic and political development, allowing her to articulate emotions—anger, in particular—that patriarchal taboos had kept unvoiced.[8] Elsewhere (as in "Diving into the

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[8] In "Blood, Bread and Poetry" (1984), Rich writes:

> To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of woman's body and experience, to take women's existence seriously as a theme and source for art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life. It placed me nakedly face to face with both terror and anger; it did indeed *imply the breakdown of the world as I had always known it, the end of safety*, to paraphrase [James] Baldwin again. But it released

Wreck"), however, Rich has expressed the desire to refashion the self as a plural, collective entity: "we" instead of "I." The tension between these feminist visions of selfhood has been a recurrent subject of concern for Rich as well as for her critics. As I have said, Rich does not resolve these tensions intellectually, but creates her own version of a poetics of indeterminacy.

This notion of the poetic vocation as a self-actualizing pursuit squares with Rich's claim that "poetic language—the poem on paper—is a concretization of the poetry of the world at large, the self, and the forces within the self; and those forces are rescued from formlessness, lucidified, and integrated in the act of writing poems." But, as she continues, Rich is similarly drawn to "a more ancient concept of the poet, which is that she is endowed to speak for those who do not have the gift of language, or to see for those who—for whatever reasons—are less conscious of what they are living through. It is as though the risks of the poet's existence can be put to some use beyond her own survival" ("Vesuvius at Home" 181). This model of the poet's role resembles the explorer Rich portrays in "Diving into the Wreck," which Diehl has called "a more inclusive yet specifically female-identified vision." Such a vision of the role of the poet, however, conflicts with some feminists' skepticism of illusory inclusivity, versions of "we" that prove compulsory rather than inclusive.[9] In a remembrance of her relationship with Rich, Cathy Park Hong writes:

> energy in me, as in many other women, to have that way of writing affirmed and validated in a growing political community. I felt for the first time the closing of the gap between poet and woman. (249)

[9] For instance, here is Julia Kristeva:

> [. . .W]e must use 'we are women' as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong in the order of *being*. [. . .] In 'woman' I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. ("Woman Can Never Be Defined" 137)

Shoshana Felman expresses a similar sentiment in "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy":

I had a period when I reacted against her in college. This was when

multicultural relativism was having its swan song in the late 90's. I was taking

a feminist lit theory course and the pronoun *we* was poison. Don't include me

in your *we*. It was a reaction against white bourgeois feminism [*sic*] who

assumed their plight was universal. What about working-class women?

Marxist? Queer? Chicano? The disabled? We cannot speak for each other

with all our differences. Don't assume your common language is mine.

(“Memories and Thoughts on Adrienne Rich”)

Hong concludes, “I misread her, of course [. . .] and I realized that her poetry was so

breathtaking and powerful because of her commitment to the collective.” I think Hong

demurs too much in her claim to have misread Rich. Hong's admonition—“don't assume

your common language is mine”—reminds us that the dream of a common language, while

difficult in its own right, is far easier to imagine than to achieve. Neither Hong nor I doubt

the aesthetic and ethical power of Rich's commitment to the collective, but the poetic and

political implications of such a commitment are no less complicated for these reasons.

The “multicultural relativism” to which Hong refers might have been influenced, for

instance, by the questions Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raises in “French Feminism in an

International Frame” (179): “[. . .] I see no way to avoid insisting that there has to be a

simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I

naming her? How does she name me?” To speak for more than oneself is always to risk

excluding the possibility of other voices. To speak only for oneself is to risk the

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[. . .I]f ‘the woman’ is precisely the Other of any conceivable Western theoretical
locus of speech, how can the woman as such be speaking in this book? [. . .] Is it
enough to *be* a woman in order to *speak* as a woman? [. . .] With the increasing
number of women and men alike who are currently choosing to share in the rising
fortune of female misfortune, it has become all too easy to be a speaker ‘*for* women’.

(3)

individualistic, patriarchal selfishness and solipsism against which so much of Rich's work reacts. As Rich herself writes in "Notes toward a Politics of Location":

> *The difficulty of saying I*—a phrase from the East German novelist Christa Wolf. But once having said it, as we realize the necessity to go further, isn't there a difficulty of saying "we"? *You cannot speak for me. I cannot speak for us.* Two thoughts: there is no liberation that only knows how to say "I"; there is no collective movement that speaks for each of us all the way through.
>
> And so even ordinary pronouns become a political problem. [. . .]
> Once again: Who is *we?*"   (Rich 224, 231, Wolf 174)

The problem is political, indeed, but it is also poetic and philosophical. How does one conceive of the self? What alternatives to the "prestige of the individual" might we—that difficult pronoun again—consider? And what aspects of one's individuality might one lose in turning toward a more collective understanding of the self? How might a poet represent a collective speaker in a poem, given how problematic as it is to represent a unified self? The "dead white males" of the patriarchal canon have long written in a first person plural that seems to assume universality.[10] Such a "we" is necessarily, and sometimes dangerously, presumptuous, as Des Pres argues: "One of the more successful illusions of high culture has been the usage of the humanistic 'we' in reference, supposedly, to all of us or 'man' in general. But this 'we' has always been the property of an educated, elite, male, white, and eurocentric [*sic*]." In Rich's poetry, Des Pres continues, she

> accepts what humanists would rather escape: that even poetry (or especially poetry) is positioned for and against, that the political problem of us-and-them is the poet's limit as well. The poetry of utopia might someday

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[10] If this habit has lapsed somewhat in the contemporary poetry of the United States, the fact of its lapse has not gone unlamented. In a recent and much-discussed essay for *Harper's*, Mark Edmundson argues that "most of our poets now speak a deeply internal language [. . .]. [F]ew are the consequential poets now who are willing to venture [Robert Lowell's poetic] 'our' or, more daring still, to pronounce the word 'we' with anything like conviction" (62).

> transcend these divisions; here and today, meanwhile, divisions continue in
> force, and Rich will not be fooled by "humanity" or "the human condition"
> when such terms are used to mask discord.   (206-7)

Des Pres may not give "humanists" enough credit for understanding the limits of poetry or of humanism for that matter, but I take his point as it relates to Rich's poetry: Rich believes that a reimagined poetry may help to achieve—if not utopia—then at least a more inclusive and creative society. To do so requires a reconsideration of both "I" and "we" in the search for a more collective self. Inherent in this search, though, is the risk of reinforcing the very oppressions the seeker wishes to undo. She who would speak as individual and collective may find herself caught in a poetic and ethical paradox.

As tempting as it may be to pursue a plural or collective self of the kind Rich imagines in "Diving into the Wreck," such a conception would be rooted in what Seyla Benhabib calls the "binary opposition" of public and private spheres and the corresponding gender roles patriarchal societies have assigned to each sphere. To question that division, Benhabib believes, has been one of the "chief contributions of feminist thought to political theory in the western tradition" (108, 12). She continues:

> Because women's sphere of activity has traditionally been and still today is so
> concentrated in the private sphere in which children are raised, human
> relationships maintained and traditions handed down and continued, the
> female experience has been more attuned to the "narrative structure of
> action" and the "standpoint of the concrete other." Since they have had to
> deal with concrete individuals, with their needs, endowments, wants and
> abilities, dreams as well as failures, women in their capacities as primary
> caregivers have had to exercise insight into the claims of the particular. In a
> sense the art of the particular has been their domain, as has the "web of
> stories," which in Hannah Arendt's words constitutes the who and the what
> of our shared world.   (14)

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Here Benhabib echoes Rich's claim that the "mother's telling, if not the mother tongue, is the source of literature." Paradoxically then, in being "concentrated in"—even relegated to—the private sphere, women's concerns and sense of identity have necessarily been public, even generational. As we have seen in each of my case studies, we approach the self most successfully by tangling ourselves in its paradoxes. What so many of us feel constitutes our individual and unique essence is conceivable only in relationship to others. To efface or mock the self only masks its endurance in poetry and thought. To flee the self for the promise of divinity only renders the self more achingly present. And to seek to define the self as a collective entity, to trouble the binaries between self and other, risks erasing the very differences—some oppressive, some precious, some both—by which we have defined ourselves. Collective and even historical concern begins, for Benhabib, in the individual woman, and for Rich, in each woman's individual body:

> We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bring forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed. (*Of Woman Born* 285-6)

To reduce Rich's articulation rather crudely for my own purposes, then, the possibility of transcending an individual conception of selfhood must begin with each woman's individual body. What remains unclear, however, is what conceptions, practices, and expressions of selfhood will allow our collective thinking to be transformed.

The lack of intellectual and emotional clarity has been the condition out of which Rich has created her greatest, most clarifying poems. Like any other thinking woman, the monsters with whom she sleeps include those of self-doubt, and here in particular, doubts about how to construe the self. At the same time, this doubt is an essential part of the

process of what Rich calls "creation of self." Charles Altieri writes that in Rich's effort "to unite the woman speaking the poem with the woman writing it[, . . . p]oetry then becomes in part a process of self-criticism, in part a process of adapting these criticisms into plausible idealizations of states of mind and stances" (178). If Altieri is correct here, then the process of uniting poetic speaker with self—an aspect of "creation of self"—is also an ethical process in its intent to become a more something constituent of a larger community. Reviewing *The Dream of a Common Language*, Olga Broumas remarks (specifically, of "Nights and Days"):

> [i]t may seem paradoxical that the way back toward a common language begins with a fantasy, a speech to one's self; and yet, commonality is an ethics, and as such concerned with value—from the Latin root *val*—indicating courage, discernment, and praise—which, though it does not exist until it is manifest and tested in the world, must be envisioned and revisioned in the mind, the heart, the most private quarters. (285).

It is significant that Broumas should include the word "back" in her sense of Rich's vector "toward" a common language. In such a conception of language, then, Rich is seeking to rectify what has gone wrong, to retrieve a linguistic golden age in which language might unite rather than oppress. If Rich is "radical," as she has often been described (and—in the sense of "radical feminism"—as she has identified herself), she is radical in the sense of returning to the *radix*—the root—of language, which is commonality (*OED*).

Even as I discuss the implications of Rich's ongoing quarrel with herself, I do not want to lose sight of the literary-historical context in which this argument arises. Rich's claim for the elimination of the distance between poet and speaker—a break from New Critical poetic decorum—may seem to share common purpose with the work of the Confessional poets. While this proposition is true insofar as it concerns the technique of speaking "as oneself," the stakes are demonstrably different. The watershed book of the Confessional mode (and the book under review when M. L. Rosenthal coined the term) was Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), in large part because of the break in decorum represented

by the "confessions" of a Boston Lowell about the troubles of his Brahmin family and his own mind. The stakes in Rich's development are different: she speaks not as a member of a patrician family, but as a member of an oppressed group. In doing so she "betrays" herself as an Antigone or a Medea, a female figure whose actions earn the censure of the arbiters of her culture. Despite the praise Rich received for the new direction of her work since *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, one must not underestimate the risk of the seismic break from the work that had earned Auden's condescending praise. Rich had to become a poet who not only did not tell fibs, to paraphrase Auden, but who refused to speak anything but her understanding of truth, one who insists on holding to account her elders and contemporaries. Rich's concern in uniting poet and speaker is less the opportunity to speak about her own life (although she does more of this from *Necessities of Life* onward, too) as might have been the case in the work of Berryman, Lowell, and her near-contemporaries Ginsberg, Plath, Sexton, and Snodgrass. The collapsed distance between Rich's poet and speaker also allows her to articulate herself more clearly to a wider public. As she does so, the distance between "I" and "we" becomes muddied, and the slippage between these pronouns in her poems becomes both problematic and resonant.

Thus far I have spoken of Rich's struggle with "I" and "we" as she and others have articulated the matter in prose. Of "Planetarium," for instance, Rich recalls that in the composition of the poem "at least the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem became the same person. [The poem] was written after a visit to a real planetarium, where I read an account of the work of Caroline Herschel, the astronomer, who worked with her brother William, but whose name remained obscure, as his did not" ("When We Dead Awaken" 47). Rich's revelation about the epiphanic experience of writing the poem is not necessarily apparent in the poem itself, the form of which is similar to others from this era in her career.

"Planetarium" is composed of sentences and fragments broken into irregular couplets and tercets. Punctuation is sparse and irregular, and Rich's own lines are threaded with

quotations from Caroline Herschel and the sixteenth century Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. Rich's epigraph to "Planetarium" reads: "Thinking of Caroline Herschel, (1750—1848), astronomer, sister of William; and others." So the poem, even before establishing its terms as a lyric voiced by a female speaker, establishes itself as a meditation on another woman, "and others." Despite Rich's own sense of having unified poet and speaker in the composition of the poem, the speaker of "Planetarium" is not easily identifiable as "Adrienne Rich." Indeed, in the climax of the poem the speaker transforms herself (in the manner of Whitman, and in anticipation of Rich's metamorphoses in "Diving into the Wreck") into a "galactic cloud" (39). The "I" of "Planetarium," and of so many of Rich's most significant poems, is not fixed but in flux, always in the osmotic process of becoming something else.

The poem proper begins with an image of some of the "others," a word whose heft carries both the senses of *alia* and *alien*, the others who are "other": "A woman in the shape of a monster / a monster in the shape of a woman / the skies are full of them" (1-3). The repetition of "monster" recalls Rich's line from "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law": "A thinking woman sleeps with monsters." The difference seems to be one of reality and myth: in the legends of their origin, these constellations are not monsters *per se*—Cassiopeia, Andromeda, Virgo—but they are *monstrous* in their capacity as harbingers, warnings. Cassiopeia's vanity earns the wrath of Poseidon; her daughter, Andromeda, is subsequently offered as a sacrifice to appease the angry earthshaker. The women in the skies are helpless princesses or queens who must be saved either from other monsters or from themselves. "Galaxies of women, there / doing penance for impetuousness," Rich writes (13-14). The heaven of male imagination becomes, for the women set in stars there, a purgatory in which to do penance. Rich need not comment on the cruel irony of the fact that history has preferred to remember figures such as those set in the sky to the real triumphs of work like Caroline Herschel's, "she whom the moon ruled," Rich writes, "like us," suggesting the monthly "rule" of the moon over a woman's menstrual cycle as well as the classical

mythological lunar goddesses' Diana / Artemis' "rule" of the moon (9-10). Here, as in

"Diving into the Wreck," Rich turns the metaphors of male myth on their heads. If male

mythmakers will portray women as monsters in the sky, Rich will engage and subvert the

metaphor by emphasizing the parallel between the stellar origin of life on earth and the

feminine origin of human life: "I am bombarded yet   I stand," "I am a galactic cloud so

deep   so invo-/luted that a light wave could take 15 / years to travel through me" (34, 39-41).

The poem as a whole may have provided Rich the opportunity to unite author and speaker,

but in these lines the speaker expands beyond herself, into the celestial matter (*mater*) of a

cosmic nebula.

   But the poem also proffers an "us," and this "us"—as is so often the case with Rich's

pronouns—is still more complicated. The first instance of "us"—"she whom the moon ruled

/ like us"—serves to establish the network of commonality among speaker, Caroline

Herschel, the female monsters in the sky, and an intended, female audience. The "us"

recurs in the speaker's comparison of a supernova explosion (as observed by Brahe) and the

female experience of giving birth: "every impulse of light exploding // from the core / as life

flies out of us" (21-3). In this line, "life" is both the new life of birth—the maternal power of

women—and a figurative "life," akin to "vim," that which is taken from women. But the

quotations from Brahe and the poem's cosmic concerns suggest a larger sense of "us" that

might include "all humanity" or even "all life." In fact, the more nebulous this "us" is, the

more inclusive it may prove: to pin down the pronoun as this or that "us" requires a

corresponding "them." As the poem closes, the loose couplets, tercets, and quatrains

concentrate into an unpunctuated eleven-line stanza:

> I have been standing all my life in the
> direct path of a battery of signals
> the most accurately transmitted most
> untranslateable language in the universe
> I am a galactic cloud so deep   so invo-
> luted that a light wave could take 15
> years to travel through me   And has
> taken   I am an instrument in the shape

> of a woman trying to translate pulsations
> into images   for the relief of the body
> and the reconstruction of the mind.   (35-45)

This perorational closure offers a brief *ars poetica*—and another metamorphosis—as the speaker becomes "a galactic cloud" and then "an instrument in the shape / of a woman" whose purpose is translation, carrying over, change and exchange. She does so "for the relief of *the body* / and the reconstruction of *the mind*" (my emphasis). In these last two lines, the definite article creates a poetic indefiniteness: whose body and mind? To assume that these nouns refer to Rich, to a general "women," or even to humanity would underestimate Rich's ambitions. The attempt to reconstruct the human mind supposes ecological, even cosmic implications, concerning not only the cosmic origins of life but its endurance on this planet.

Rich identifies "Planetarium" as a "companion poem" to "Orion," written three years earlier and published in *Leaflets* (1969). I am more interested, however, in the comparable aspects of "Power," a poem composed in 1974 and published in 1978 as the opening poem of *The Dream of a Common Language*. I call "Power" a companion to "Planetarium" in part because Rich uses the text of the poems to situate them in the context of "thinking of" or "reading about" women in the sciences, whose contributions have been overshadowed or outright ignored by their male counterparts ("Planetarium" epigraph, "Power" 6). Moreover, Rich's techniques in "Power"—irregular or absent punctuation, the expansion of typographic space between certain words or phrases—mirror those of "Planetarium." As Caroline Herschel represents the presiding spirit of "Planetarium," the intellectual grandmother of "Power" is Marie Curie. Far from Curie, however, the poem opens with an image of the unearthing of "one bottle   amber   perfect   a hundred-year-old / cure for fever or melancholy   a tonic" (3-4). The image of the bottle "divulged" from earth—Rich chooses a verb often associated with the telling of secrets—may seem a strange "cold open" to the material of the poem, much of which concerns Curie, unless we look at the bottle and the scientist both as artifacts, figures that offer a way of knowing the past that might be used to rectify the present or ensure the future. The first five lines of the poem depict only images

of excavation; the remaining seventeen abandon the images of the bottle of tonic for speculation about Curie. The abrupt transition from one image to the other suggests the jarring juxtapositions of a haiku, but these shifts also allow a glimpse into the flux of the mind whose thoughts are spoken in the poem. In both "Planetarium" and "Power," Rich's poet/speaker writes not just as a speaker "for herself" but for and through the figures of other women; we experience those figures, though, through the prism of Rich's concern. This impulse appears in the earliest stages of Rich's career—in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" or "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law"—but these later poems demonstrate the urge toward a poetic speaker that is larger, more inclusive and outward-minded than the personal "I."

The prevailing metaphor of "Power" is that of the Marlovian adage *quod nutrit me destruit me*: what nourishes me destroys me. The "tonic" that might once have been sold in the unearthed bottle probably was a charlatan's snake oil, as likely to harm as to heal. Curie's discoveries brought her the fame and esteem of two Nobel Prizes, but prolonged exposure to the elements she discovered also caused her death. Rich's speaker supposes that Curie must have understood the nature of the illness she suffered:

> It seems she denied to the end
> the source of the cataracts on her eyes
> the cracked and suppurating skin   of her finger-ends
> till she could no longer hold   a test-tube or a pencil
>
> She died a famous woman denying
> her wounds
> denying
> her wounds came from the same source as her power   (10-17)

Of these closing lines (although her observations are just as applicable to Rich's techniques in "Planetarium") Diehl writes:

> [I]n the poem's closing lines, Rich uses physical space and the absence of
> punctuation (an extension of Dickinson's use of dashes) to loosen the
> deliberate, syntactic connections between words and thus introduce
> ambiguities that disrupt nominative forms. The separation between words

determined through the movement of the reader's eye—the movement past

the 'wounds' where it had rested the first time—the emphasis on the activity

of denial and its necessary violation.   (144-5)

In "Power," the "prestige of the individual" and individual suffering are inseparable. The

easy rejoinder to such an observation would concern the utilitarian good Curie's discoveries

provided for generations of a larger public, but this rejoinder would render private and

public spheres too easily opposable. I am more inclined to agree with Altieri's observation

that "[i]n poems one aligns oneself with other women and one tries to dramatize one's

capacity to take power through and for them. If Curie died 'denying / her wounds came

from the same source as her power,' then one can use her life to see how the two aspects

might be united" (179). Altieri reads "Power" as an especially significant poem in Rich's

oeuvre because it suggests a way out of the dichotomies that, for Rich, have resulted from

and poisoned patriarchal intellectual systems.

I have called "Power" a companion to "Planetarium," but I also consider it, with its

imagery of wreckage and salvage, expedition and excavation, to be a companion poem to

"Diving into the Wreck." "Living in the earth-deposits of our history," the first line of

"Power," refers then to the "divulged" amber bottle as well as what part of our history might

be salvageable (1, 2). The confluence of Curie's power and suffering also suggests the

conundrum depicted in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," in which Rich's

speaker considers the necessary use of "the oppressor's language."[11] "Planetarium" and

"Power" both demonstrate the unifying of speaker and poet not only as a crux in the process

of the poet's "creation of self," but also as an attempt to use that process to expand the

concern of the poetic speaker beyond herself and toward a more public presence. I want to

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[11] Although Diehl does not specifically mention "The Burning of Paper" in the context of "Power," I do want to acknowledge my debt to her observation that, "like Curie, [. . .] the woman poet must recognize a similar repression of her knowledge that what she is doing involves a deliberate rejection of the borrowed power of the tradition, the necessity of incurring the self-inflicted wounds that mark the birth of an individuated poetic voice" (145).

look briefly at two other poems, one roughly contemporary with "Planetarium" and "Power," and one from more than a decade later, both of which demonstrate the gravity of the self that threatens to prevent the "I" from ever becoming "we." Located somewhere between or beyond those pronouns is "The Stranger," published in *Diving into the Wreck*.

The title of "The Stranger" refers to its speaker, a stranger in a room where other "others" are "talking in a dead language" (12). The speaker is an "I"—and, to quote the Strand of *The Monument*, "this pronoun will have to do"—who can only be understood as such, despite being somewhat more or less than an individual. By "more or less" I mean that in the first stanza the speaker appears as archetype, an anonymous walker in the streets of an unspecific city. In this depiction she is at once stranger and familiar: "walking as I've walked before / like a man, like a woman, in the city / my visionary anger cleansing my sight" (6-8). The vagueness of "a man," "a woman," and "the city" presents a moment of near-solidarity with men and women in all cities. But the similes are declensions from sameness, too. The speaker of "Diving into the Wreck" can claim "I am she: I am he," but the speaker of "The Stranger" can be only "like a man, like a woman." She is someone else: a stranger for whom this cityscape and these feelings only seem familiar. The force that clarifies the speaker's experience is the feeling of anger, which Rich herself has named as a liberating emotion in her own experience. The speaker's experience of anger becomes epiphanic: "my visionary anger cleansing my sight and the detailed perceptions of mercy / flowering from that anger" (8-10). Her anger steadies and focuses her until, as if a fever were breaking, the line and stanza break, and the speaker turns to a hypothetical—but much more specific—attempt to identify herself:

> if I come into a room out of the sharp misty light
> and hear them talking a dead language
> if they ask me my identity
> what can I say but
> I am the androgyne
> I am the living mind you fail to describe
> in your dead language
> the lost noun, the verb surviving

> only in the infinitive (11-19)

A lost noun contradicts itself. The phrase recalls Daly's indictment that the female power to name has been stolen. A lost noun names nothing. An infinitive verb is hypothetical action, merely potential energy that remains inert until enacted. In these lines, the dead language is wrenched to reveal its own impotence. The speaker—the stranger—cannot answer the questions of this imagined tribunal because they and she speak different languages. The stranger's existence cannot be expressed in the old, dead grammars, but she must use the dead language in order to be understood—if not by the questioners, then by a reading or listening audience. This is a trouble that Rich's urge toward a new language cannot escape, and a theme she explores more completely in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children." Alternatively, in order to articulate what she is, she must use the figurative language of poetry, an idiom in which the speaker/stranger/Rich herself might use language to explore the possibility of transcending language.

Rich returns to the implications of grammar for the conception of selfhood in the later poem "In Those Years," in which she strives toward an imagined future in order to ask through what lens we might consider the present. Written in 1991 and published in *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995), the poem's fourteen lines and structure of argumentative claim and rebuttal recall the sonnet form, that genre of the most intense search for personal connection and the most painful reminders of each individual's ultimate solitude. I quote "In Those Years" in full:

> In those years, people will say, we lost track
> of the meaning of *we*, of *you*
> we found ourselves
>
> reduced to *I*
> and the whole thing became
> silly, ironic, terrible:
> we were trying to live a personal life
> and, yes, that was the only life
> we could bear witness to

> But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
> into our personal weather
> They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
> along the shore, through the rags of fog
> where we stood, saying *I*

1991   (1-14)

To adapt the question of Roland Barthes with which this study began: Who speaks "In Those Years"? The speaker is an "I," a "we," a "they," all of whom ruminate on the trouble of being any of the above. The poem is set up as an anticipatory history: the future tense looks backward, speculates what "people will say" about "we" and "you" and "I." Whoever the speaker is, s/he looks forward to a future in which the present through which s/he lives now will seem a sad, if necessary, chapter in a larger narrative. The speaker's speculation recalls Des Pres's observation that the "poetry of utopia might someday transcend [human] divisions; here and today, meanwhile, divisions continue in force [. . .]." Those divisions are enacted in the cruelly ironic break between the first and second stanzas. "[W]e found ourselves" suggests the process of "creation of self" of which Rich has written elsewhere, but the line and stanza break offer just enough time to find that the noun "ourselves" will be modified, "reduced to I": reduced in number and reduced in the scope of its vision.

To return to Rich's proposal in "Notes toward a Politics of Location," "there is no liberation that only knows how to say 'I'; there is no collective movement that speaks for each of us all the way through." Neither does any individual person—as Rich argues about poetry itself—stand a chance of standing outside of history. Each of us lives in and through history, and in various degrees of connection and disconnection with one another. The speaker's rhetorical, almost conciliatory "yes" in the poem's eighth line admits the quarrel with herself, admits her own defensiveness about how she (and we) once thought and how we might think in the future about how we thought in the past. When in the last stanza the speaker introduces the "great dark birds of history," the poem shifts from discursive and speculative to an allegorical register. The birds that scream and plunge recall the raptor that

every day tore out the liver of the chained Prometheus, the titan whose name means "forethinking" (*OED*). The desire to think or hope about the future also demands enduring the suffering of the present. In the poem's final line, the speaker portrays the "we"—become "silly, ironic, terrible"—lost in the fog, saying "*I*." Here the grammatical "I" becomes the senseless AI of grief. In Ovid's telling of Phoebus and Hyacinthus, the cry is Phoebus' final wail for his lover; even the god of poetry can articulate nothing more apropos than this open vowel of pain (X.247-330). The cry of one grieving for another is no longer communicative. In the addressee's absence the word signifies only the pain of the remaining individual. This AI/I is inscrutable and, more frighteningly, potentially insurmountable, at least in the dead language we still speak.

One of the problems of formulating a "new language" is that the language in which it is envisioned cannot accommodate it. If Wittegenstein is correct that the limits of one's language are the limits of one's world, then we cannot speak adequately of a new language in this language, the "dead language," the "oppressor's language," because a new language would exist beyond our intelligible world. Even if we treat the idea of a new or common language as purely metaphorical, as the stuff of poetry, and dream that poetry can serve as the new language we need, we still find ourselves tangled in doubts over what form that poetry might take and whose interests it would serve. So it would seem that Rich can envision but cannot enact a new, common language. Neither she nor we might say with any certainty how it would function, who would speak and comprehend it, and how it would refashion the self and society.

I have identified the tensions between individual and community, traditional and open form, old and new languages as animating forces in Rich's poems. Marjorie Perloff identifies them as moments of hesitation that compromise both Rich's poetic and political achievements. Perloff is an eloquent advocate for the historical avant-gardes whose aesthetic she has called the "poetics of indeterminacy," including the Language poets whose ideas I have discussed in my introduction. Although Perloff sympathizes with and often shares Rich's political commitments, she critiques the poet's "conservative rhetoric," implying instead that Language poetry might serve as the new language Rich seeks. Perloff believes that to speak the oppressor's language serves only to further its power to oppress. Rich's own conclusion—most fully realized in her poetry in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children"—is that to speak in the oppressor's language is necessary in order to communicate with speakers, readers, and listeners in contemporary society. I want to demonstrate in this section that "The Burning of Paper" represents not only an anticipatory rebuttal to Perloff's critique but that the poem also contains moments that resemble—but

ultimately resist—the "speakerless" model of writing proposed in some poststructuralist theory and Language writing.

Perloff articulates her critique of Rich most forcefully in a 1983 review of Rich's *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. Having quoted lines from Rich's "Culture and Anarchy" juxtaposing human suffering and women's suffrage, Perloff remarks caustically: "Men, it would seem, are immune from suffering" (131). Perloff's skepticism about Rich's project is not rooted in antipathy toward the radical politics of Rich's work, but her sense that Rich perceives male suffering myopically extends to her disapproval of Rich's "conservative rhetoric":

> One could argue, in defense of such polemical and didactic poetry, that, at this particular moment in our history, what is needed is not the negative capability, the free play of the mind Rich formerly spoke of [specifically, in "When We Dead Awaken"] as a good denied to women by their secondary status, but a straightforward, readily comprehensible call to action. Curiously, however, that call to action is undermined [. . .] by Rich's conservative rhetoric, a rhetoric indistinguishable from that of the Male Oppressor. It is as if Rich, the radical lesbian poet, cannot shed the habit, learned by the time she was 21, a Radcliffe graduate and the winner of the Yale Younger Poets Award for *A Change of World*, of having to write a poetry that would win the approval of the judges. (131-2)

Perloff speculates that "Rich, the radical lesbian poet," still writes for the approval of male "judges," as Rich herself remembers having first written to please her father and other male figures of authority ("When We Dead Awaken" 38-9). Such psychobiographical speculation and throwaway sarcasm like "Men, it would seem, are immune from suffering" distract from the crux of Perloff's argument, which is that Rich has chosen the wrong tool for the task she has set for herself. For Perloff, the notion that "old" poetic forms cannot serve new poetries, much less new societies, is almost a commonplace. That Rich employs those old

forms threatens the reach of her political commitments in addition to her poetic achievement. "How does it happen," Perloff asks, (136), "that a poet as committed to radical feminism as Adrienne Rich should cast her poems, perhaps quite unwittingly, in the very masculine modes she professes to scorn?"

If Perloff's major charge against Rich is that she employs a "rhetoric indistinguishable from that of the Male Oppressor," Rich has already anticipated such a criticism. In fact, for Rich this is the crux of her own political poetics, and an issue she interrogates in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," as we shall see. Rich's comments in an interview with David Montenegro elaborate on the gravity of the question of the "old forms" in a "new poetry," and she adduces her suspicion that the techniques the Language poets present as "new" are retreads of past avant-gardes:

> If you were going to be writing a truly new poetry, could you use the old forms? It's a question that is being asked now in a feminist context—for instance, in the work of the Feminist Language poets, [. . .] what has always been labeled experimental poetry, in the sense of undercutting traditional syntax, emphasizing typography as part of the statement of the poem, using more open field arrangements on the page.
>
> I have a real question about it though because it feels to me like experimental poetry from the early twenties, or of Black Mountain [*sic*]. It does not feel particularly experimental now. The fact that women are doing it is interesting, but women were doing that kind of thing in the twenties too, people like Mina Loy, for example, Gertrude Stein obviously. I guess what I'm searching for is a way of staying linked to the past, pulling out of it whatever you can use, and continuing to move on. (270)

As we have seen her enact in "Snapshots," "Diving into the Wreck," and "Power," Rich here emphasizes her sense of the archaeological mission of poetry and history. Her poetics, as I have argued above, owes as much to T. S. Eliot's Modernism as to Loy's and Stein's. Rich

suggests that the Language poets' claims for their own novelty obscures rather than secures their inheritance of the achievements of the experimental women of Modernist poetry.

In these selections from Perloff and Rich we return to versions of the arguments over Language poetry I sketched in my introduction to these case studies. On one side of the false binary stand the Language writers who claim that the subjective, expressive, individual nature of poetry ignores "the arbitrariness of signification and the constructive character of meaning-making" (Izenberg 784). In Rich's vision of the poem as part of the process of "creation of self," a devotee of Language writing might see a delusion about the work of poetry and the nature of our language-bound and –mediated existence. On the other side of the debate, a "mainstream" poet might claim that the constructs and disjunctions of Language and other experimental writing exclude audiences who have not been educated to read them instead of including them in the process of stripping away the old, capitalist ideologies, as is the Language theorists' goal. For instance, although Ange Mlinko is not particularly sympathetic either to Rich's or to Perloff's aesthetic, she recognizes the poetic and rhetorical achievements made possible in a synthesis of their separate approaches. Mlinko quotes Rich's "Tonight No Poetry Will Serve," a poem in which Rich meditates on and offers metaphors for the materiality of language and the functions of syntax:

> verb force-feeds noun
> submerges the subject
> noun is choking
> verb   disgraced   goes on choking
>
> now diagram the sentence   (15-19)

Of these lines Mlinko writes:

> The conflation of torture with syntax (the executive order to diagram involves
> disarticulating the parts of speech) recalls the Language Poets' insistence that
> the tyranny of syntax mirrors the tyranny of imperialism—and that if we

could smash the former, we would free ourselves from the latter (the pun on
sentence reinforces this). But the deferred or indeterminate meanings of
Language poems don't have the dramatic power that Rich's poem does. Here,
at last, is the vitality that I'd been missing [in Rich's more overtly polemical
poems], and it comes, as I thought it would, with a twist: diagram this, she
says—and suddenly I remember that "grammar" and "glamour" share an
etymology in the Scots word for "magic." (37)

In such a case the distinctive power of poetry's figurative, metaphorical language provides
an opportunity for synthesis that the argumentative claims of critical prose cannot easily
match. I do not intend to suggest here some facile distinction between poetry and prose,
praxis and theory, but I do believe that the logical impossibility of being two things at once
(quantum theory notwithstanding) is the root of metaphor and of the force of poetry to
compel us in ways that other modes of language cannot easily match. "You can refute
Hegel," Yeats remarked, "but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence" ("Letter," qtd. in
Ellman 289). I believe that Rich manages to bridge the apparent chasm between these
different ideas of poetry—poetry as voice, poetry as the selfless expression of language—
most successfully in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children."

I want to look at "The Burning of Paper" in some depth, in part because I think the
poem articulates Rich's sense of conflict about the form(s) of her writing with greater
complexity than Perloff's or Mlinko's readings of Rich allow. In fact, the poem
demonstrates affinities with the Language poets' techniques even as it illustrates the
shortcomings of such techniques. Even the writer who believes that "only where there is
language is there world" also concedes the failures of language and literature as lenses
through which to understand human experience: "there are books that describe all this / and
they are useless" (74-5). The speaker of the poem imagines "a time of silence / or few words
/ a time of chemistry and music," but such a time remains a distant, utopian, perhaps
quixotic vision (23-5). She speaks the poem in a time of speech, a time when she (and

potentially we) need "the repair of speech / to overcome this suffering" (48-9). The poem's

ambivalence about the power of language is complicated by its frequent quotation from

both cited and uncited sources, beginning with its title and epigraph, both taken from

Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit priest whose public opposition to American military

involvement in Vietnam included the use of homemade napalm to burn draft cards in a 1968

protest in Catonsville, Maryland (Polner and O'Grady 195-217). Although most of the

papers we see burning in the poem are the pages of books, the burning of the title refers to

draft cards, and derives from Berrigan's commentary on his Catonsville protest:

> Our apologies   good friends
> for the fracture of good order   the burning of paper
> instead of children   the angering of the orderlies
> in the front parlor of the charnel house
> We could not   so help us God   do otherwise
> For we are sick at heart   our hearts
> give us no rest for thinking of the Land of Burning Children
> and for thinking of that other Child of whom
> the poet Luke speaks   (93-4)

The specter of Vietnam, and specifically of the American use of napalm in its operations

there, haunts the poem, as does the image of fire in general. Rich quotes Berrigan in her

epigraph: "I was in danger of verbalizing my moral impulses out of existence." Berrigan's

conundrum is Rich's: if language fails us—or worse, if language compels consent when moral

impulses demand otherwise—then what good is language? How can one use language so as

to acknowledge its failures in the attempt to transcend them?

The poem proper begins with more paraphrase and quotation, lines of prose that set

the specific scene of the poem's meditation:

> My neighbor, a scientist and art-collector, telephones me in a state of
> violent emotion. He tells me that my son and his, aged eleven and twelve,
> have on the last day of school burned a mathematics textbook in the
> backyard. He has forbidden my son to come to his house for a week, and has
> forbidden his own son to leave the house during that time. "The burning of a
> book," he says, "arouses terrible sensations in me, memories of Hitler; there
> are few things that upset me so much as the idea of burning a book."   (1-8)

The poem opens with three fires: the burning of draft cards, of books, and of children. The "instead" of the poem's title, translated into the text of the poem, implies that the neighbor has overreacted despite his good intentions. "Bothered by an abstract *idea*, Craig Werner writes, "he shows little interest in the boys' hatred of the educational institution or their choice of a math book, itself a symbol of abstract systemization. While she refuses to romanticize the boys' action, Rich perceives a complexity invisible to her neighbor" (65). Werner reads the speaker of the poem here as "Rich"—and although I agree that in this first section the speaker is roughly equivalent with the historical Adrienne Rich, the poem will shift from "her voice" in productive and complex ways. In this instance, the phone call provokes the speaker to consider a library of her childhood home and her incipient fascination with the books there, especially with the *Trial of Jeanne d'Arc*:

> and they take the book away
> because I dream of her too often
>
> love and fear in a house
> knowledge of the oppressor
> I know it hurts to burn   (18-22)

Here is the first instance in the poem of the word "oppressor," which occupies a crucial space in the context of the whole poem. The line bridges the speaker's recollection of the book having been taken away from her, and her notion "I know it hurts to burn."

To what, then, does "knowledge of the oppressor" refer in this instance? The phrase recurs throughout the poem, but its first appearance here suggests a number of possible valences. I suppose that the speaker positions the line in this manner in order to juxtapose the drastic oppression—the burning—of Joan of Arc with the smaller-scale oppression of taking away a book from a child, an act that suggests the male regulation of the female intellect and the male relegation of the female to a sphere of emotion instead of intellect. "I know it hurts to burn," the speaker says, but "know" here occupies a slippery position. Is this the "know" of experience, knowledge gained from having been burned? or the "know"

of an intellectual recognition that is separate from experiential understanding? The poem does not answer these questions, but the first infinitive verb of the next section is "To imagine"—an act that books, language, and the structures they reinforce can both encourage and suppress (23). The burning of the textbooks is the symbolic act of the schoolchildren on the brink of summer's apparently endless freedom, having been "freed" from the daily routine of institutional education. That education is a privilege, of course, but when Rich's speaker emphasizes the failures of language, she also emphasizes the power to coerce and oppress inherent in any education.

The second section of the poem turns away from the phone call, the children, the recollection of the speaker's own childhood, and to the intimacy of an erotic encounter. The speaker imagines "relief"—the word floats in its own line, its own stanza—"from this tongue   this slab of limestone / or reinforced concrete" (30-2). Instead of verbal interaction, she imagines the touch of the body and the lay of landscape. As in "Power," when the speaker shifts abruptly from the images of excavation to her meditation on Marie Curie, here she wrenches herself from this tactile fantasia to conclude: "knowledge of the oppressor / this is the oppressor's language // yet I need it to talk to you" (38-40). In my reading of "In Those Years," I rephrased Barthes's famous question to ask who are the "I," "we," and "they" of the poem. I must ask the same question of the "you" in "The Burning of Paper." Does this second-person pronoun refer to the neighbor of the first section, the lover of the second and fourth sections, or an intended audience for the poem that could potentially include any speaker of the oppressor's language, male or female?

Just as "The Burning of Paper" complicates the matter of the "you" to whom it is addressed, in its third section the poem demands a reconsideration of who speaks the poem. The third section is divided into two stanzas, one of italicized prose, the other of short lines for the most part broken across syntactical clauses. The italics imply a speaker other than the one who has spoken the poem until now, but the poem offers nothing to specify who speaks. Later editions, including the Norton volume of *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*

edited by Barbara and Albert Gelpi, identify the speaker of this section as "one of Rich's students in the Open Admissions Program at City College of New York" (41):

> *People suffer highly in poverty and it takes dignity and intelligence to overcome this suffering. Some of the suffering are: a child did not had dinner last night: a child steal because he did not have money to buy it: to hear a mother say she do not have money to buy food for her children and to see a child without cloth it will make tears in your eyes.* (41-5)

Here is another instance of the collage effect Rich achieves in so many of her poems by blending the speech and writing of others with her own words. The difference between Rich's and the student's quoted words seems obvious, but the implications of that difference are complicated and troublesome. When Rich "breaks the rules" of grammar and syntax, the act may seem to us a gesture of poetic license. As Rich herself notes, such acts are parts of the tradition of experimental poetry. If, however, one assumes that the grammatical deviations from "standard English" in the section of quoted prose indicate something of the writer's education or lack thereof, one participates in the power of language to oppress by signifying the socioeconomic, educational, or intellectual status of its speaker. Such an assumption provides a striking example—with dangerous practical, ethical consequences—of the poststructuralist idea that language speaks us. What Pierre Bourdieu says of taste—that it "classifies, and it classifies the classifier"—is true of language and dialect as well (6). Our language becomes shibboleth: our dialect, our pronunciations and slang betray us as members of one group or another. The three parenthetical lines of verse that follow this selection of prose are themselves fragments: "(the fracture of order / the repair of speech / to overcome this suffering)" (46-8). The juxtaposition of "poetic" and "illiterate" uses of language forces us to examine assumptions—perhaps unconscious assumptions—about what constitutes eloquence and literacy, and how either of these abstract notions constitute our humanity.

The poem's fourth section returns to the scene of the lovers' encounter, but the fantasy of "a time of silence" has passed, not only because their lovemaking is over, but

because the specter of the third section and its wrenching depiction of suffering haunt the

pleasures of sex. The two lovers are

> speaking
> of loneliness
> relieved in a book
> relived in a book
>
> [. . .]
>
> still it happens
>
> sexual jealousy
> outflung hand
> beating bed   (50-3, 67-70)

Speech subsides to gesture, gesture to silence, and none of it suffices to span the loneliness

the lovers experience, the sense of alienation in the midst of the would-be absolute

connection of lovemaking.[12] The lovers' words fail and the books that would salve their

loneliness or at least explain it "are useless" (73-4). For all the supposed wisdom of

literature—and, by extension, for all the supposed wisdom of a poem such as the one we are

reading—none of what we find in those books can explain enough. If we grow wiser in

reading them, we grow into the Socratic wisdom of knowing that we know nothing:

> no one knows what may happen
> though the books tell everything
>
> *burn the texts*   said Artaud   (82-4)

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[12] Rich's understanding of the paradox of intimacy and the failures of language to transcend or even describe solitude recalls the litotes with which Philip Larkin concludes his "Talking in Bed": "

> At this unique distance from isolation
>
> It becomes still more difficult to find
> Words at once true and kind,
> Or not untrue and not unkind.   (9-12)

The quotation is necessarily paradoxical. To call upon the authority of an artist who "called for the destruction of the values and structures that inform Western culture" demonstrates how thoroughly those values and structures are ingrained in us, and we in them (Gelpi and Gelpi 42, note 6). Rich's speaker invokes and rejects at the same time: in recalling Artaud's call to "burn the texts," the poem perpetuates the texts even in endorsing the call to burn them.

In the first four sections of the poem, Rich's speaker quotes from or appropriates the voices of Daniel Berrigan, her angry neighbor, her lover, an anonymous sufferer (revealed in footnotes as a student), and Antonin Artaud. In these sections she has distinguished typographically between "her" words and "their" words, italicizing as she quotes. In the fifth and final section of "The Burning of Paper," the poem achieves a transcendent crescendo; all of these voices blend in an associative prose paragraph, speaking to and beyond each other across time and distance. In this paragraph she alludes to Frederick Douglass, John Milton, Joan of Arc, and Emily Dickinson.[13] When the ostensible speaker of "The Burning of Paper" says "I am composing on the typewriter late at night," we understand her to be the same speaker who spoke on the telephone with her angry neighbor. But this understanding is fundamentally compromised by the intervening voices of the poem. Now the speaker blurs composition and quotation by blending the words of others into her own final stanza:

> In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language   (90-4)

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[13] Dickinson's phrase "I am in danger, sir," is unattributed here but derived from a letter to T. W. Higginson ("Letter" 168). Rich uses the phrase as the title of a poem published in *Necessities of Life* (1966).

In these final, ventriloquized lines, the speaker(s) of the poem become(s) almost unidentifiable. The root of the original speaker—whom I have equated with the historical Adrienne Rich—remains here, but her words are others' words. The poem ultimately locates itself between, on the one hand, the unifying of speaker and poet, and the speakerless model of Language poetry on the other. Mlinko alludes to the "dramatic power" of Rich's "Tonight No Poetry Will Serve," and I want to echo her claim here in regard to "The Burning of Paper." The poem achieves its climactic effects through its employment of multiple voices through—and despite—the original association of the poem's speaker with Adrienne Rich herself. Much as Whitman's "Song of Myself" begins with "I" and attempts to merge that "I" with the "you" with which it concludes, "The Burning of Paper" dramatizes the osmosis of voices among individual, historical speakers. In weaving together these voices, Rich transcends even the Dickinsonian attempt to speak as "Nobody" by speaking as both nobody and somebody at the same time.

Theorists of Language poetry may indeed be correct that the words of a printed poem represent merely the illusion of the voice of a specific speaker. Rich's poem suggests that since we live in this illusion, much as we live in the oppressor's language, we must make the most of it. "The Burning of Paper" demonstrates—to my mind as powerfully as any "Language poem"—that the possessives I use above: "her words," "others' words," are inadequate and illusory. We speak language and are spoken by it. Even as we use language to oppress, language oppresses us, and oppresses some of us, as the poem demonstrates, far more than others. Language is the extent of our knowable world but remains insufficient to our needs. In this final instance of "the oppressor's language," the previous addendum—"yet I need it to talk to you"—is omitted. To repeat it would be tautological: we need the oppressor's language; we may even *be* the oppressor's language. Most disturbingly, the poem demonstrates that we who use the oppressor's language are ourselves the oppressors.

In her critique of Rich's "conservative rhetoric," Perloff argues that Rich "tends to forget that form is itself a political statement [. . .]. Rich, as anyone who has read her prose

knows, is a powerful thinker, a brilliant intellectual. Her current impasse as a poet is that

she has not yet found a form, a language that might be equal to her hard-won insights"

(136).[14] I hope to have shown above that, contra Perloff, Rich is constantly aware of the

political implications of the poetic forms she chooses. I hope to have shown, moreover,

that Rich's "current impasse as a poet" is neither current nor exclusively Rich's. The

impasse Rich faces, and out of which she makes her poetry, is that language is never

sufficient to the expressive needs of the users whose expressive identities are created out of

language itself. For Rich the problem is still more complex, because the whole history of

human language has been concurrent with and complicit in the history of patriarchy. Her

"impasse" is that she wishes to change the nature of language and the nature of thought; no

language, new or common or otherwise, is quite adequate to that task. Her achievement

meanwhile is to have modeled a path from adherence to "old forms" to the reimagining of

them.

The poems of Adrienne Rich—more than those of any other poet under

consideration here—enact a radical critique of the notions of the individual self that have

dominated Western thought since the Enlightenment. Rich also affirms more vehemently

than any of these poets the dignity of the individual, and the individual woman's need for

physical, emotional, and intellectual independence. The privilege of selfhood has been

denied women living under patriarchy; only when women can enact their own "creation of

self" can the problematic, collective "we" improve the dignity of all individuals. The issue of

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[14] Mlinko calls Perloff's critique of Rich on these grounds "an arresting reversal of the usual terms—
'art for art's sake' is supposed to be quietist; 'feminist art' is supposed to be revolutionary—and it
depends on an assumption about the relationship between poetic form and politics as questionable
as Rich's likening of traditional forms to asbestos gloves" (36). I suspect that Mlinko's choice of the
word "quietist" alludes to Ron Silliman's coinage of the term "school of quietude" for the "traditional"
poetic practices he understands as those that Language writing opposes (Silliman, "Monday").
Mlinko seems here to reject the premise that inheriting a poetic forms means necessarily inheriting
its corresponding political implications. Although Rich uses the metaphor of traditional forms as
asbestos gloves, I believe that her work demonstrates a thoughtful and powerful remaking of those
inherited, traditional forms.

the self is especially problematic in Rich's poems because in no other poet's work is that idea so interwoven with the most fundamental aspects of everyday existence. Even as Rich attempts to envision a new conception of self, based in the community rather than the individual, she remains a fierce defender of female individuality. This is the crux of her political and ethical commitments and of the achievements and shortcomings of her poetry. Rich's poems can indeed be strident, polemical, shrill and sneering, but they have always depicted her quarrel with the self just as much as her quarrel with the world. Those quarrels have of course been political, but they have also engendered a poetry of profound self-critique and have demonstrated the aesthetic power of such critique. By looking within with the fierce self-scrutiny of Dickinson, Rich attempts to achieve a "Song of Myself" that rivals Whitman's in its power to include and to reconsider the boundaries between self and community. By writing in the oppressor's language, she forges an idiom and an ethics that are distinctly her own.

Chapter Four

Divided to the Vein: Derek Walcott

In my previous chapters I have examined the methods and stakes of various poetic

deployments of the self: strategic and theoretical in Mark Strand, existential and formal in

Charles Wright, personal and political in Adrienne Rich. In the poetry of Derek Walcott,

the work of crafting a self in and through poetry is as existential as it is for Wright, as

political as it is for Rich, and as strategic as it is for Strand. The stakes of self-craft are, for

Walcott, simultaneously individual and national, historical and mythical. In Walcott's

poems, as in Rich's, the self is a position of privilege to which both individuals and cultures

may aspire but which historically cannot be assumed. Walcott's attempt to establish a

personal identity in his poems is concomitant with his ambition to use poetry—specifically

his marriage of Caribbean landscape, seascape, and human history to classical and British

forms and figures—to establish a cultural identity for the West Indies.[1] The identity that

Walcott seeks to forge is a consequence of his (and his islands') colonial history, but in

poetry, Walcott believes, neither the individual nor the culture must be bound by history.

"It is the language which is the empire," he writes, "and great poets are not its vassals but its

princes" ("The Muse of History" 51). Walcott takes up the task of liberating his islands, his

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[1] Although Paul Breslin does not explicitly identify Walcott's process of self-fashioning with his
effort to fashion an identity for the West Indies, he does argue that "the successful definition of an
authorial 'I' and the imagining of a society in which the poem can take place are part of the same
process, informing and enriching each other. The imagined society need not literally exist, but it has
to be derived from one that does, as a potential latent within it" (2).

language, and himself from that history of colonization and enslavement, refashioning it into the mythic history of the "nowever" present tense of poetry.

Walcott begins his poetic career with the self-imposed onus of forging identities for himself and his homeland from the poems he writes. Walcott "creates" his West Indies in his own image: "divided to the vein" ethnically, racially, linguistically ("A Far Cry From Africa" 27). St. Lucian by birth, Walcott has spent much of his life in the United States; of mixed English and West Indian ancestry, he has wrestled with one island's "standard English" and another's "patois." Walcott's self-conscious embrace of the vestiges of the Western poetic tradition, from "standard" English and iambic pentameter to epics in the modes of both Wordsworth and Homer, represents a double choice to claim that tradition for himself and to validate the place of the West Indies within it. Moreover, this decision contrasts Walcott with poets who have chosen for various reasons to write in opposition to the canonical traditions of Anglophone poetics, including in the Caribbean the "Nation language" of Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite and others, as well as the constructivist aesthetic of the North American Language Poets. Walcott rejects such approaches, instead arrogating to himself the task of "purifying the language of the tribe" ("What the Twilight Says" 9). Although I call this task a choice, for Walcott the choice is also not to have to choose between (and thus oppose one or more) traditions, since he himself embodies multiple traditions and different registers of those traditions' languages. "Standing 'between' the conflict to choose sides," Rei Terada writes, "[Walcott] simultaneously *contains* the conflict as a difference within his own identity" (9). Consequently, the self that Walcott deploys in poems is divided and ambivalent, formed in the flux between places, ancestries, languages and poetic forms. His understanding of self in terms of place—particularly the places between places—contributes to a poetry of geographical, biographical, and linguistic betweenness.

The importance of place in Walcott's poetics has been well documented in available scholarship on the poet's work. Less attention has been paid, however, to the specifics of

Walcott's use of place as the basis for and method of crafting an individual and cultural identity. In this chapter, I shall demonstrate a narrative relationship between place and poetry, a mode of poetic imagining and narrating in terms of place that binds the poet to place(s), individual histories to cultural and national histories, via the figurative linguistic and imagistic valences of the poem itself. To describe this process in Walcott's poetry, I borrow the term "chorography" from Richard Helgerson's scholarship on Early Modern England. Helgerson speaks of the emergence of a national consciousness through the "chorographic" imagining and narrating of place. Distinct in scale from the whole-earth study of *geo*graphy and in focus from the *topo*graphic attention to surface, chorography is quite literally the writing (*graphia*) of place (*choros*), and thus the term carries with it the inseparable relationship between a particular place and the people who name and map it. In Helgerson's notion of chorography, the chorographer not only maps a place but places himself within that map, and in doing so he (re)creates both the place and himself. So the poet, in the case of Walcott, inscribes himself in the place he describes in his poems. This process becomes still more complex when the poet leaves that place for others, complicating habitation and representation with the work of memory. Through my anachronistic invocation of "chorography," we may understand more completely Walcott's attempt to create in terms of place a poetic identity for himself and a cultural identity for the West Indies.

That the West Indies, as Paul Breslin writes, "exists as an imagined community, but one that has not achieved political embodiment" offers an opportunity for Walcott to imagine (and thus, create) the community in his own poetic language (2). Walcott writes his own divisions into the characters in whom he sees the region embodied. It may be appropriate then that the most famous of Walcott's thousands of lines are voiced by one of his characters, Shabine, the sailor-speaker of "The Schooner *Flight*":

> I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
> I had a sound colonial education.
> I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,

and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.   (40-3)

Despite the either/or formulation of these possible identities, Walcott's poetry

demonstrates the bothness of the Caribbean as he understands it, here marrying the

colloquial language of a West Indian sailor with the marching, "colonial" English iambic

pentameter. Jahan Ramazani describes this bothness as a kind of poetic "hybridity,"

modifying a term common in postcolonial discourse:

> Educated as imperial subjects yet immersed in indigenous traditions and
>
> customs, these postcolonial poets grew up in the potentially productive
>
> tension between an imposed and an inherited culture—productive, that is, for
>
> the powerful literary mind that can create imaginative forms to articulate the
>
> dualities, ironies, and ambiguities of this cultural in-betweenness.   (6)

    The sense of "in-betweenness" to which Ramazani refers is amplified (or

exacerbated) in Walcott's work by his own evolving sense of himself as a "traveller" or a

"prodigal." As the circle of Walcott's professional ambition widens to match his poetic

ambition, he finds that his effort to establish himself as the poet of the West Indies

requires him to leave those islands and to relocate to the United States, and specifically to

New York City and, later, Boston.[2] As Walcott's poetry becomes more and more marked

by travel (including longer and longer relocations), the sense of division that animates his

early poems deepens and spreads; he becomes a cosmopolitan, and in doing so he finds

himself further divided from even the divided identity he has forged. Adam Kirsch notes

this phenomenon in his review of *The Prodigal* (2004): "The paradoxical result of this success

[. . .] is that Walcott now feels at home everywhere and nowhere. The poem is the record

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[2] In his biography of Walcott, Bruce King argues that the poet felt he needed to "make it" in New
York. Despite the fact that London might have seemed the more obvious choice for someone who
"might think of himself as British," it was apparent that "New York [. . .] was by 1959 the centre of
the modern cultural world." Moreover, Walcott had been warned "of how easy it was to earn a
literary reputation in the West Indies and settle into satisfaction without the competition of
publishing abroad" (159). Thus, Walcott's eventual move to New York represented both a
professional opportunity and an aesthetic challenge.

of a journey—or, since it has no real beginning or end, of a wandering, a self-imposed exile" ("The Odyssey").[3] As Walcott has said: "All their betrayals are quarrels with the self, their pardonable desertions the inevitable problem of all island artists: the choice of home or exile, self-realization or spiritual betrayal of one's country. Travelling widens this breach" ("What the Twilight Says" 35). Thus, Walcott has crossed a gulf in order to validate himself and his archipelago, but in doing so he has opened another between himself and his home. What neither Kirsch nor Walcott makes explicit here, however, is that since the land is so thoroughly implicated in Walcott's identity (and he in the land's literary identity), to be separated from that place—physically, psychologically—is also to be exiled from himself. Again, as I will show, the idea of chorography is of particular use here to describe the relationship among the poet, the land, and the poetic creation that also creates them. But we must also clarify the somewhat muddy vocabularies of itinerancy that are often applied to Walcott's poetics.

Walcott's sense of division is evident in the language he has employed to describe his experience. In different poems, essays, and interviews, Walcott is an "exile," a "traveller," a "prodigal." This lexicon demands more rigorous critical attention than it has previously received. Throughout his career, Walcott has both used and chastised himself for using the term "exile." More recently, he has adopted the term "prodigal" instead, even using the word as the title of his 2004 book length poem. Walcott does not choose lightly the figure of "the prodigal," but neither he nor his critics have unpacked the metaphor as thoroughly as it demands. In Walcott's work and in much of the critical work about Walcott, the idea of the "prodigal" is deployed exclusively to describe one who departs home, repents, and returns, following the Christian parable from the Gospel of Luke but in fact missing an essential aspect of the parable (Gregerson, Conversation). In acquiring the sense of one who has lived away from home "but subsequently made a repentant return," the term

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[3] Kirsch's phrase "the poem" refers specifically to *The Prodigal* here, but I would extend his point to "the poem" in Walcott's work more generally.

"prodigal" has been divested of its original meaning of "recklessly wasteful of one's property or means," a valence that I wish to restore here (*OED*). In other words, what makes the second son in the parable "prodigal" is not that he departs and returns, but that between his departure and return he squanders his inheritance and brings himself to shame, living among pigs as a hired swineherd (Luke 15:11-32). In order to understand the divided inheritance of Walcott's ancestry and the ambivalence of his poetry in which he considers himself a "prodigal," we must attend to both of these lineages of the prodigal son parable. Walcott has indeed implicated himself in a cycle of departure from and return to his home island, but we must also understand his ambivalence about this cycle as an anxiety about the uses to which he has put the "gift" of the English language, which he has claimed as his birthright and inheritance.

Despite the variety of Walcott's poetic and personal travels, his aesthetic compass remains fixed on the polestar of the Anglophone canonical tradition, bringing him into aesthetic and philosophical conflict with more "radical" poets in the Caribbean and the United States. Walcott has been explicit in his suspicion of some Caribbean poets' "servitude to the muse of history [that] has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters" ("The Muse of History" 37). As the most visible and forceful advocate of "Nation language," the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Walcott's exact contemporary) is often identified as a figure oppositional to Walcott. Patricia Ismond, for instance, refers to "Edward Lucie-Smith's pronouncement that the West Indies must choose between Walcott and Brathwaite [. . .]" (220). The opposition of Walcott and Brathwaite may make for a useful critical fiction—sometimes even for the poets themselves—but it also represents another example of a false binary in Anglophone poetry, another impossible choice between old and new, tradition and innovation, repression and liberation. Although I do not linger on this particular binary in

this chapter, I do want to note it in the context of the specious opposition of Language poetry to official verse culture.

Although Walcott has become a poet of both the West Indies and the United States, his place in the poetics of the latter is more difficult to define. Walcott has identified himself as "on the perimeter of the American literary scene," "not really committed to any kind of particular school or body of enthusiasm or criticism," but he has also expressed disdain for what he considers the pretensions of "the avant-garde, which I despise" ("The Art of Poetry" 228-9, Kjellberg). Walcott's reverence for the Anglophone tradition—and specifically his attempt to establish an identity for himself and for his homeland within that tradition—represents an implicit rejection of the claims of American avant-gardes such as the Language Poets. The very techniques that the Language Poets identify as falsely naturalistic (e.g., traditional meters, poetic narrative) are those that Walcott uses to demonstrate that he and the West Indies belong(s) to the Western literary tradition, and that the tradition belongs to him and them. The African American poet Marilyn Nelson expresses a similar sentiment in her essay "Owning the Masters":

> I know, I know: The tradition is the oppressor. The tradition doesn't include
> me because I'm black and a woman. [. . .] Yet the once enslaved are heirs to
> the masters, too. [. . .] Too often we ignore the fact that tradition is process. [.
> . .] The Angloamerican tradition belongs to all of us, or should. As does the
> community into which the tradition invites us. That means the metrical
> tradition, too.   (10, 12, 14, 15)

Moreover, because Walcott feels that the Anglophone tradition is his own inheritance, he is wary of those poets who would seek to depart from that tradition, as if "the tradition" were a Hell for Satan to fly from instead of something he carries within him. "We know that the great poets have no wish to be different," he writes, "no time to be original [. . .]." "[. . . I]n any age a common genius almost indistinguishably will show itself, and the perpetuity of this genius is the only valid tradition, not the tradition which categorizes poetry by epochs and

by schools" ("The Muse of History" 62). One of the contributions of this chapter, then, is to provide a more thorough understanding of how Walcott facilitates the process that is tradition, how his longing to enter the canon reshapes the canon itself.

The Language critique of "official verse culture" (and the capitalist system with which official verse culture is identified) is a critique of the bourgeoisie compromised in part by its own position within the bourgeoisie. The critique of the self as a social construct, of the lyric voice as an illusion of falsely "naturalistic" poetry is based in the assumption that these constructs and illusions themselves are fundamental assumptions. I do not wish to suggest that the Language critique is without merit; as I have written, I consider this critique necessary for understanding and reshaping Anglophone poetics over the last thirty years. The Language argument, however, critiques privilege from a position of privilege, whereas Walcott (especially in his early poems) writes from a position of aspiration. Like Adrienne Rich, he wants access to the privileged position of selfhood for himself and for his homeland. The desire for such "access" to selfhood, as Walcott's work demonstrates, should not be misunderstood as naïve; on the contrary, Walcott's biographical circumstances and his own poetic intelligence make him especially qualified to aspire to a Western, even bourgeois idea of selfhood and to critique or undermine that idea at the same time. As Ramazani writes:

> the idea that the poetic 'I' represents either an inviolably private interior or
> an ideological sham bears little on the first-person pronoun in a short poem
> about the linguistic tear of the Middle Passage. [. . .] Neither poetry
> conceived of as the lyric expression of personal feeling nor as the postmodern
> negation of commodified language is sufficient to help us enter the work of
> [postcolonial poets].   (3)

Ramazani stakes out a position between both the assumptions of official verse culture the Language Poets critique and the assumptions of the Language Poets' critique itself. This third way resembles the approach to poetic language that Walcott endorses in "What the

Twilight Says," where he imagines himself called "the mulatto of style. The traitor. The assimilator" (9). Walcott would adopt these curses as he would adopt, and adapt, the curse of history. As fine as Ramazani's reading is, his sharp focus on *Omeros* (touching here and there on other significant poems in the Walcott canon) also threatens to distort our sense of the immense scope—Walcott has been publishing volumes of poems for more than 65 years now—of the poet's work. In this chapter, I seek to offer a more accurate sense of the breadth of Walcott's career, especially regarding the process by which the poet creates a poetry of the divide he feels within himself, then finds himself divided again by the poetry he has created. I invoke and reinvent the vocabularies of chorography as a potential answer to Ramazani's call for "a more flexible language" necessary to describe the complexities of Walcott's poetics (63). If Joseph Brodsky is correct, in speaking of Walcott, that "[p]oets' real biographies are like those of birds, almost identical—their real data is in the way they sound," then Walcott would use the sounds he makes to enter the Western poetic tradition, and to remake it in his—and in his islands'—image (164).

Derek Walcott may consider himself a prodigal, but he began as a prodigy.[4] His earliest published poems, gathered and self-published when he was eighteen, offer glimpses of the talent he would develop as he matured. They also display the self-consciousness of the novitiate, a self-consciousness that does not subside (though it alters in form) in Walcott's later work as it so often does in many other poets. But most young poets, whose work can seem too embarrassed or too proud by half, do not bear the weight of the poetic tradition as keenly, nor do they tend to take on the history and myth of their homelands as explicitly as Walcott does. The details of Walcott's origins have been well documented, not least by the poet himself, so I will not recapitulate them here. What I want to emphasize is the metaphor of origin that Walcott emphasizes in his own work: a "schizophrenic" or "double" identity—split among cultures, nations, histories, and languages—which Walcott views as both endemic to St. Lucia and embodied in his own genetic ancestry ("What the Twilight Says" 4). I choose the word "schizophrenic" because Walcott himself has chosen it more than once to describe his boyhood as well as his life as a writer.[5] If one takes the word literally—the German and Greek origins of "schizophrenia" mean "split mind"—then my phrase "schizophrenic identity" is a contradiction in terms (*OED*). Schizophrenia defined as such is a "split," or a disordering of stable identity (hence the ease with which it is misidentified as "multiple personality disorder" in popular culture); for Walcott, this split is an opportunity to create an identity for himself and for St. Lucia on—and in—his own

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[4] The pun is Rita Dove's, from her essay "'Either I'm Nobody, or I'm a Nation,'" in which she observes the process by which "The Prodigy Turns Prodigal" (66).

[5] Although Walcott has described his origins as "schizophrenic," at other times he has distanced himself from that terminology. "We [members of Walcott's generation] were quite aware of the fact that the background of the Caribbean was a background of slavery. But my generation was not schizophrenic about the heritage of the Empire and the heritage of the Caribbean. It was a double rather than a split thing" ("Interview," Rowell 123). Instead of canceling each other, however, these apparent contradictions should serve further to emphasize the sense of plurality in Walcott's background, whether that plurality proceeds from the splitting of a unified whole or its doubling.

terms.[6] As he writes in "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," "Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole" (69).[7]

This particular statement of fragmentation recalls the fact that the history of colonization in the Caribbean and the Americas has never not been an instance of profound rupture. Nevertheless, Walcott advocates an approach to the historical and mythical past that would allow him to continue in a line of poets, "[t]he great poets of the New World, from Whitman to Neruda," whose "vision of man in the New World is Adamic" ("The Muse of History" 37). Of course the very phrase "New World" recalls that the project in question—whether the twentieth-century poetic ambitions of Walcott or the seventeenth-century political and religious aims of John Winthrop and others—is more redemptive than original, more Christlike than Adamic. Although the endeavor to achieve an earthly paradise is thoroughly vulnerable to mockery or historical critique, it remains central to the myth of the New World, the "archipelago of the Americas" "from Alaska right down to Curacao" ("The Muse of History" 64, "The Art of Poetry" 212). This knowledge is neither lost on Walcott, nor does it deter him: "Fact evaporates into myth," he writes. "This [Adamic vision] is not the jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun, it is an elation which sees everything as renewed" ("The Muse of History" 38). The oxymoron built into the word "renew" suggests a process of mythic recreation that obeys poetic logic even as it defies the facts of history. Walcott's deliberate choice to envision these myths as ripe for revision is neither naïve nor ignorant of the facts of history. In fact, his efforts toward an Edenic (re)naming of his own garden suggests a deliberate rejection of and alternative to V. S. Naipaul's claim that "[h]istory is built around achievement and creation; and nothing

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[6] I deliberately keep to the broadest possible definition of the term "schizophrenia" here, as my interest in its etymology and possible valences is literary rather than psychological.

[7] In his chapter on Walcott, "The Wound of History: Derek Walcott's *Omeros*," Jahan Ramazani reads the poet's sense of his own art as an attempt to mend the wound of history, a wound embodied in the character of Philoctete in Walcott's *Omeros* (49-71).

was created in the West Indies" (29).[8] Walcott refuses the apparent self-loathing in such a statement just as readily as he does the "masochism" of Caribbean writers too caught up, in his opinion, in the sorrows of the region's colonial history. Nevertheless, Naipaul's claim looms behind much of Walcott's effort to mythologize the history—or alleged lack thereof—of the West Indies.[9] The story of Adam, after all, is a story of exile too.

Walcott's Adamic persona, however he might wish to name the New World in his own way, nevertheless speaks the language of the English canon. Or, to be more precise, Walcott *writes* the language of the English canon. This distinction is necessary because the "schizophrenia" of which Walcott has written extends to and is born of his experience of language. "My real language," he has said, "and tonally my basic language, is patois. Even though I do speak English, it may be that deep down inside me the instinct I have is to speak in that tongue."[10] These competing instincts are aspects of what Walcott calls "not only a dual racial personality but a dual linguistic personality" ("A Conversation" 29). The

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[8] Walcott has responded to this claim of Naipaul's on several occasions, among them in a 1962 review of "The Middle Passage," in which Walcott imagines a dialogue between himself and Naipaul:

> "[. . .] and nothing was created in the West Indies . . ." Nothing? Come, come, Naipaul. V. S., know your literature, how about "A House for Mr. Biswas?"
> "Sir, that book was not created in the West Indies."
> "Where was it created?"
> "In England, sir."
> "My apologies, again. You may sit down, Naipaul."
> ("History and Picong" 19)

[9] In "The Art of Poetry" interview with Edward Hirsch, Walcott responded more explicitly to Naipaul's claim: "Perhaps it should read that 'Nothing was created *by the British* in the West Indies.' Maybe that's the answer" (213). Nevertheless, I am not convinced that Walcott would stand by this claim, as he has also insisted on the benefits of the "sound colonial education" he received in St. Lucia, to borrow a phrase from "The Schooner *Flight*," and of the pleasure of working in the English language itself.

[10] Bruce King is more specific in his biography of Walcott: "People [in St. Lucia] spoke English and French Creole. Alix [Walcott, Derek's mother] could speak Creole, but Derek and his friends spoke good English at home, at school, or with equals: Creole or Caribbean English was used when speaking with servants, maids, joking on the street, or at the market" (31).

poetic aspect of Walcott's linguistic personality was formed in large part in the British Commonwealth system of education, in which "what you were taught was the same syllabus as all the colonies and protectorates of the empire and England itself. [. . .] But in addition to that, it was not, for some reason, incongruous to do Latin in a place where you could look outside the window and see bananas" ("Interview," White, 153). Lacking significant St. Lucian precursors, Walcott felt the Adamic necessity and opportunity to name things for the first time; that same lack, however, ensured that Walcott would look primarily to Europe—Homer, the King James Bible, Shakespeare, and others—for his poetic models.[11]

Walcott has nonetheless refused to be characterized as a colonial poet aspiring to a colonizer's English; rather, he has arrogated that English to himself. In this choice inheres Walcott's ambition for himself as a poet and for the West Indies as a culture: to refuse no aspect of their history, and to use those histories and landscapes to generate a myth of themselves. "I do not consider English to be the language of my masters," Walcott has said. "I consider [the] language to be my birthright. I happen to have been born in an English and a Creole place, and I love both languages. It is the passion, futility, and industry of critics to perpetuate this ambiguity" (Interview, Sjöberg 82). Indeed, critics and other poets, too (the poet's dear friends among them) have perpetuated the idea that Walcott writes in an English to which he must lay claim.[12] Paula Burnett comments on the peculiar

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[11] King provides a more detailed account of Walcott's cultural education: "Walcott was brought up culturally as a European, reading Hawthorne's 'Tanglewood Tales' and Charles Kingsley's 'The Heroes.' He wrote Greek-styled epics in unrhymed pentameters, using as a model Kingsley's myth of Perseus. He was reciting verse in school, drawing and painting about the European world he read about. [. . .] He saw the world in terms of Europe, then the United States. In his teens he read American novels by Steinbeck, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Sinclair Lewis" (32).

[12] One of the earliest major endorsements Walcott received from the literary world beyond the Caribbean was that of Robert Graves, who wrote of Walcott's volume *In a Green Night*: "Derek Walcott handles English with a closer understanding of its inner magic than most (if not any) of his English-born contemporaries" (Jacket copy). Joseph Brodsky—another poet whose biographical circumstances brought him "into" English—speaks of Walcott as "having English." In this expression language is construed as a possession, even as it possesses, even as it creates us ourselves: "[. . .] from this height of 'having English' [. . .] that the poet unleashes his oratorial power in 'either

position in which Walcott finds himself because of his insistence on his dual European and African inheritance:

> Since an ambiguous refusal of fashionable views has marked his aesthetic choices, it is perhaps not surprising that he has often projected himself in his works as an isolated figure. He has felt the need to counter not only colonial discourse but the first phase of oppositional discourse, thus marginalizing himself for many years from both sectors of his community, those oriented to Europe and the West and those oriented to Africa.   (35)

Walcott feels no need to aspire to the English language itself; born into it, it "belongs" to him as much as it does to any other speaker of English. Nevertheless, his poems (especially his earliest work) depict an aspiration to the Anglophone literary tradition as well as Walcott's struggle to find a poetic idiom in which to represent—to celebrate and to sing— himself.

Consider, for instance, the simultaneous self-aggrandizement and self-mockery of "Prelude" (1949), published when Walcott was eighteen.[13] The poem starts, stops, and starts again, with relative clauses filigreeing an otherwise simple sentence: "I, with legs crossed along the daylight, watch / The variegated fists of clouds that gather over / The uncouth

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I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.' The dignity and astonishing vocal power of this statement are in direct proportion to both the realm in whose name he speaks and the oceanic infinity that surrounds it" (166).

But one can hardly separate this pleasure in the "possession" of language from an acknowledgment of the fact that the spoken patois of St. Lucia is not the English of the English. This Caribbean patois is a definite marker of race, class, and provinciality. Thus, to "have English" means to lay claim to something from which the poet has been separated. At a round table discussion with Brodsky, Heaney, Walcott, and Les Murray, Michael Schmidt asked: "Is there a British poet who should be here amongst us?" Walcott responded: "I think all the British poets are here" ("Poets' Round Table" 45). The poets of the "mother tongue" are borne in these poets for whom the mother—an adoptive mother tongue at that—are borne in these poets from the provinces.

[13] I refer to "Prelude" by its title in *Collected Poems 1948—1984* (1986) and *Selected Poems* (2007), in both of which it is the opening poem. In *The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948—2013* (2014), the poem is retitled according to its first line, "[I With Legs Crossed Along the Daylight Watch]."

features of this, my prone island" (1-3). Already the speaker's posture—literal and figurative—connects him and distances him from his homeland. The pose is that of sophistication amid a beautiful, if "uncouth," island. The poem begins with "I," then retreats from it, detailing instead a scene from "my prone island" that juxtaposes tourists visiting the island to the island's natives. The latter are:

> Found only
> In tourist booklets, behind ardent binoculars;
> Found in the blue reflection of eyes
> That have known cities and think us here happy. (6-9)

The speaker imagines himself and his fellow St. Lucians under the gaze of visiting tourists, seeing himself in their blue eyes. Here, the Europeans see while the West Indians are seen; the Europeans find and the St. Lucians are found. The self that the speaker sees reflected in the tourists' looking eyes is of course a distortion of what he perceives himself to be. But the act of writing the poem, of fixing the moment in poetic language, allows the speaker to gain some measure of self-determination for himself and for his island. In the poem, the West Indies can look back; they can speak.

The next time the lyric "I" appears in the poem, in the third stanza, it is again stopped with a comma and elaborated upon in a relative clause, before the speaker turns to the central crisis of the poem: "Time creeps over the patient who are too long patient, / So I, who have made one choice, / Discover that my boyhood has gone over" (11-12). Similarly, these lines betray a world-weary pose common enough in young poets, but they also reveal a skill for phrase-making, for rhythms and rhetoric, uncommon in poets of any age. The young Walcott is talented enough to write these lines, but he is also canny enough to suspect them. After a stanza break, he contradicts himself, even scolds himself for taking up the mantle of the poet; in doing so, he allows himself to write the grandiose line and to undercut it in the same breath:

> And my life, too early of course for the profound cigarette,
>
> The turned doorhandle, the knife turning
> In the bowels of the hours, must not be made public

> Until I have learnt to suffer
> In accurate iambics.   (13-17)

The speaker's ambivalence extends to his assertion, simultaneously humble and self-aggrandizing, that he must not "publish" his life until he first can suffer adequately in accurate—and thus publishable—iambics. Of course, the publication of the poem—in Walcott's 1962 collection *In a Green Night*, and often republished with the year of its composition noted—brings the life, the talent, and the pose all into the public sphere; or rather the poem's publication claims the public sphere as part of Walcott's own individual purview. At the same time, Walcott's allusions to the Anglophone tradition ("accurate iambics") and to Dante (the "reluctant leopard of the slow eyes" in the poem's last line) establish that purview as part of a tradition about which the poet, as we have shall see, remains ambivalent, if aspirational (26). Indeed, the title *In a Green Night*, an allusion to Andrew Marvell's "Bermudas," suggests the recasting of the Anglophone literary tradition in a New World context. The choice of the title "Prelude" for this individual poem suggests Walcott's self-conscious sense of beginning in the poetic vocation.

As Walcott develops as a poet, he will begin to marry the aspirational quality of "Prelude" with a more self-determined vision of his own place, and that of his island, in the world. How to portray St. Lucia seems to become more important to him than how to portray himself, yet in portraying—even mythologizing—St. Lucia he finds a way to invent himself as a poet. As we shall see, this creation of one's identity via the creation of a land's identity (and *vice versa*) is one of the most important chorographic aspects of Walcott's poetics. An early attempt at this self-creation is evident in "As John to Patmos" (1949), another poem from Walcott's first collection. Here, the poet uses the ambitious titular comparison to establish himself—and to proclaim an earthly paradise—on his own island:

> So I shall voyage no more from home; may I speak here.
>
> This island is heaven—away from the dustblown blood of cities;
> See the curve of bay, watch the straggling flower [. . .]
> [. . .]

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For beauty has surrounded

Its black children, and freed them of homeless ditties.   (8-10, 12-13)

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Although the speaker's youthful certitude softens with age, his commitments are complicated rather than changed. Walcott of course does voyage from home again and again, even to the point that his late poems might be called (if somewhat simplistically) "homeless ditties." Nevertheless, through his literal and figurative travels, the idea of home remains the fixed point of his arcing compass.

In poems, drama, essays, and interviews, Walcott wrestles with the question of how to portray this place, often contradicting himself in the process. He is more clear in distinguishing his own position from that of precursors in the Western and Anglophone literary traditions. In a 1975 conversation with Robert D. Hamner, Walcott compared the situation of the postcolonial writer in the West Indies from those artists emerging from somewhat similar circumstances in the early nineteenth-century United States or late nineteenth-century Ireland:

> [W]hat [those writers] have there [. . .] is an ideal called America and an ideal called Ireland. [. . .] The only historical legends that one individual writer [in the West Indies] would have are ethnic legends of sorts. Each one of them is separate because the Indian would have India, the African would have Africa. But the point is that all of these have been erased from the memory or experience of the writer. So, what has not yet been created or is actually being created by its absence, by the chaos, by the necessity for it to be created—is a West Indies, a West Indian literature. Now that is being made out of the very knowledge that there is not one.   ("Conversation" 28)

Although this ambition for self-determination would seem to fit the template of much postcolonial theory, Bruce King describes Walcott as being ambivalent or even hostile toward such theory, and Ramazani writes that the usual vocabularies of postcolonial theory

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are insufficient for interpreting Walcott's poetry.[14] Because Walcott and his work, as

Ramazani argues, refuse to be glossed by the common lexicon of postcolonial studies, "we

need a more flexible language to describe how a poet like Walcott can put into dialectical

interrelation literary and cultural influences that may seem incompatible" (63).

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[14] King mentions Walcott's distrust of "literary theory" several times throughout his biography, and in moments when he allows himself to editorialize, he seems to share Walcott's skepticism. Some examples:

> The new literatures must be more than corrections of the old. It would be as or more provincial to have a rewritten canon by blacks and browns, no longer exotic natives, staring back. What is needed is a greater compassion that crosses divides and hierarchies, a humility towards the craft of art, a humility toward nature, descriptions of the world through art which make you see your world better. This is Walcott criticizing the Hemingway he admired in his youth; it is also Walcott's response to recent claims that the Western literary canon is imperialist, culturally exclusive, and that all post-colonial literature is essentially Caliban answering back, cursing Prospero in Prospero's language.   (351)

> Although Mosher agreed that the play is not about race he ended his piece with an even more American perspective on the world, which he claims to be divided into 18 per cent whites and 82 per cent 'that is not.' Mosher's 'is nots', echoing 'have nots', assumes or at least associates all non-whites with issues of black power, race, colonialism, and otherness. This is post-colonialism as anti-white cultural imperialism. The great Western person learns that 'There is not *a* superior wisdom at all.' I doubt Walcott would be happy with the kind of American Third Worldist politics that imagines all non-Europeans to be black victims of imperialism or the kind of sloppy relativism that fails to distinguish superior wisdom even if European.   (411)

> He was unconcerned with post-modernist and post-colonialist arguments about how standards and reputations change at various times and places, that nothing lasts, and uninterested in claims that was somehow bad to be ambitious or part of an imperial language.   (499)

> After Walcott moved to Boston his poetry took on a different emphasis, which might be considered more political while being opposed to the basic assumptions of post-colonial theory.   (583)

Ramazani is much more willing to credit the significance of postcolonial theory, if not as an influence on Walcott's poetry, than at least as a lens through which we might consider the work of Walcott and other artists emerging from colonized places. He is careful nonetheless to mention Walcott's own influence on those theories and theorists: "[d]ecades before the academic dissemination of such concepts as hybridity, creolization, cross-culturality, postethnicity, postnationalism, *métissage*, and *mestizaje*, Walcott argued vehemently for an intercultural model of postcolonial literature" (63).

I would propose, then, introducing "chorography" to the theoretical language regarding Walcott's assimilation of influences, his representation (and recreation) of local and personal identity. Although chorography as Richard Helgerson defines it is related to geography, topography, and other studies of natural physical features, he also identifies the chorographic "concern with place" as its most important distinguishing feature (132). Here I want to distinguish the idea of "place" as individual and particular, as opposed to the more general and indistinct "space." Spaces tend to become places when they are named, when they are mapped, and when they are understood in a human context. Helgerson calls "such local particularism and local prerogative [. . .] the very stuff of chorography" and argues that "the dialectic of general and particular that is built into the structure of a chorography in the end constitutes the nation it represents" (137, 138). Thus, the idea of chorography implies narrative relationships between place and space, part and whole, habitat and inhabitants, and ultimately between the chorographer and the place he or she depicts and, in depicting, creates. Helgerson writes:

> [. . .T]he self gives the dumb and inanimate land voice and life, in exchange for which the land grants the self an impersonal and historically transcendent authority. In this mysterious and thoroughly mystified relationship—after all, dirt and water cannot really speak and authority can never escape history— authors are enabled by the authority they confer on the land they describe.
>
> (124)

I want to suggest here that the same is true of the chorographic poetry of Derek Walcott. Walcott uses poetic language to "map" St. Lucia and the West Indies, to constitute an idea of his place and of himself. Helgerson anticipates such a relationship in his attention to the Early Modern maps of England that, he argues, constitute an emerging idea of England and even a "discovery of the self": "Not only does the emergence of the land parallel the emergence of the individual authorial self," he writes, "the one enforces and perhaps depends on the other" (122). Helgerson's words here also describe Walcott's poetic

project as I read it. In fact the language of chorography allows more supple ways of interpreting and describing just how Walcott uses the poem to establish narrative relationships among places, their inhabitants, and the chorographer poet himself. In my conception of chorography, the poem forms a tenuous bond between person(s) and place(s), much as a poetic metaphor itself seems briefly to unite the two nouns it compares. That is, if the metaphor is the locus where ground and figure unite, then the poem (or map) serves a similar function for chorographer and place. Walcott's own talent for depicting the natural features of St. Lucia and their human significance demonstrates his suitability for the role of a poetic, if anachronistic, chorographer of the West Indies. Moreover, his figuring of his island as a geographic manifestation of himself, and *vice versa*, suggests the implications for self-fashioning inherent in such a role. "The poet is not a king," Helgerson writes, "but he, like the cartographer and the chorographer, has a power and represents a power that kings might well envy" (144). In such a context, Walcott's claim that the language is the empire and that poets are its princes seems less rhetorically far-fetched.

As Helgerson writes, the chorographer "is exploring his own native land, the land on whose identity his is founded. The chorographic project is a project in self-description—and, indeed, in self-making" (143). Because Walcott's own identity is founded not only on his native land, but on the histories and traditions of Europe and Africa, his particular project represents a still more complex sort of chorography. His work to legitimize his Afro-Caribbean heritage in an Anglophone literary context, and to legitimize that literary tradition for skeptical West Indians, requires of him a strange poetic alchemy. One of the most reliable ways in which Walcott has accomplished this task—so often throughout his career, in fact, that the technique risks self-parody in his late work—is to figure landscape as poetic figure itself.[15] Just as the ploughed furrows of "boustrophedon" (literally, "ox turn")

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[15] Walcott has used this technique so frequently that even an abbreviated survey of his work provides the following examples:

"To a sea which is crueler than any word / Of love [. . .]" ("The Fisherman Rowing

become lines of verse, Walcott renders the familiar scenes of the Caribbean (and later, other landscapes too) as poetic devices (*OED*). "Formal, informal," he writes in "Homage to Edward Thomas," "by a country's cast / topography delineates its verse" (1-2). In this way Walcott writes the Anglophone tradition into the Caribbean landscape, an act that accomplishes the converse at the same time. Landscape is poeticized; the figures of poetry are concretized in physical space. In a similar way, Walcott renders the mythic archetypes

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Homeward . . ." 10-11).

As the journals report, the prologues of spring
Appear behind the rails of city parks,
Or the late springtime must be publishing
Pink apologies along the black wet branch [. . .]

("Letter to a Painter in England" 8-11)

"When I am twisted like yesterday's paper" ("Canto II" 72).

"I learnt your annals of ocean" ("Origins" 6).

                                        I seek,
As climate seeks its style, to write
Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight,
Cold as the curled wave, ordinary
As a tumbler of island water [. . .]   ("Islands" 6-10)

"I looked for some ancestral, tribal country, / I heard its clear tongue over the clean stones /
        Of the river [. . .]" (*Another Life* 7.1.34-6).

"I must put the small clear pebbles from the spring / upon my tongue to learn her language, /
        to talk like birch or aspen confidently" ("Upstate" 38-40).

"A drop punctuates / the startled paper" ("The Hotel Normandie Pool" 31-2).

"In autumn, on the train to Pennsylvania, / he placed his book facedown on the sunlit seat /
        and it began to move [. . .]" (*The Prodigal* 1.I.1-3).

"[. . .] while the small plow continues on this lined page [. . .]" (*White Egrets* 43 ['Forty Acres']
        11)

I am not the first to notice that Walcott's reliance on this figure—Wes Davis calls it "a shuttling between landscape and text"—tends toward "self-parody" in his later work (249).

of Ancient Greece in particular characters in his poems. This method too can risk self-parody: one might wish for more symbolic rigor in, for instance, Walcott's tendency to transform into a Helen, a Nike, any young woman on whom his eye falls. I want to claim here, however, that the impulse toward mythology and mythologizing is a chorographic parallel to the impulse toward cartography. The cartographer maps a particular place, but in mythologizing those places, he may also locate them within a human context that includes—but is not bound by—history. If one of the essences of chorography is the establishment of a narrative relationship between a place and its inhabitants, then Walcott also extends that narrative relationship to incorporate resonances with the familiar characters and settings of the Western literary canon.

In his early poems, Walcott positions the West Indies—figuratively, if not geographically—between Europe and Africa, as we shall see in "A Far Cry from Africa." Refusing to choose between the two, he instead ventures a third way to stand among—and also to contain or embody—the various cultures of his homeland and history. In "Prelude," Walcott seems almost embarrassed of St. Lucia, at once vain and shy about the work of poetry. By the time Walcott writes his first major poem, "A Far Cry from Africa," eight years later, he has emphasized the importance of his archipelago in its position "between" Europe and Africa. Moreover, he has learned to capitalize on his own ambivalence as a rhetorical technique and poetic gift. "A Far Cry from Africa" introduces more explicitly the theme of existential ambivalence that will come to characterize Walcott's work as a whole. From the title onward, Walcott plays with the idiomatic expression of "a far cry," the phrase suggesting, first, the significant distance between the speaker of the poem and the continent of Africa. But we may also understand the "far cry" to come *from* Africa, where the events of the poem are situated. In the poem's opening lines, Africa is portrayed as bestial; even the Kikuyu of the second line (which places us more immediately in the historical context of the Mau Mau Uprising) are rendered as one group of animals buzzing about the body of another: "A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt / Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as

flies, / Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt" (1-3). We might read these lines as examples of a speaker's condescending, racist attitude toward the continent in general and the anti-colonial militia in particular, or we might read them as an adoption of those attitudes in order to undermine them. I want to suggest that to take either position is to miss Walcott's own struggle between those positions, dramatized in these opening lines of the poems and stated more explicitly as the poem moves toward its conclusion.

In portraying the Kikuyu as "quick as flies"—striking quickly and dying just as quickly—Walcott can simultaneously compare the African soldiers to animals and to illuminate the beastliness of the comparison itself. The colonial British fare little better in Walcott's view, figured here as "the worm, colonel of carrion" (5). Here Walcott seems to play with the false cognates "colonel" and "colony": the former derives from the Italian *colonna* (column), the latter from the Latin *colonia* (tiller, farmer, settler in a new country) (*OED*). Whether commanding a military "column" or settling a new country, both the flies and the worm feast upon the dead. But the speaker also characterizes the British as coldly rationalizing: "'Waste no compassion on these separate dead!' / Statistics justify and scholars seize / The salients of colonial policy" (6-8). These sibilant lines practically hiss with indignation toward the British colonists and their "policy" toward the "savage" Kikuyu. Toward both groups the speaker poses unanswerable questions, juxtaposing the calculations of "colonial policy" with real atrocities, consequences of colonization (9-10): "What is that to the white child hacked in bed? / To savages, expendable as Jews?" Between the end of the first stanza and the beginning of the second, the speaker retreats from this interrogative, rhetorical pitch. He broadens his focus to seem to encompass both human and animal, present and past: "the long rushes break / In a white dust of ibises whose cries / Have wheeled since civilization's dawn [. . .]" (11-13). I say "seem to encompass" because the speaker's concern lies not with the long rushes or ibises but with the human scene they foreground; this is why the history he presents dates back only to "civilization's dawn." Here "civilization" carries a bitter irony, as the speaker contrasts the brutality of "natural

law" with that of "civilization":

> The violence of beast on beast is read
> As natural law, but upright man
> Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.
> Delirious as these worried beasts, his wars
> Dance to the tightened carcass of a drum,
> While he calls courage still that native dread
> Of the white peace contracted by the dead.   (15-21)

The speaker distances himself from the British, the Kikuyu, and—via the title of the poem—from Africa itself. But the gap between human and animal in the scene he portrays is troublingly slim. The act of reading animal violence as "as natural law" involves both the human act of "reading," the human concept of "natural law" (whether natural law is in fact natural law is one thing; the idea of it is nevertheless human), and a false distinction between the human and the animal. Those distinctions collapse here, as the human is imbued with bestial deliriousness, the animal with human worry. Even the "white peace" of the dead is "contracted" as one contracts a disease or contracts a legal agreement. The speaker's ambivalence situates him between these various, false poles: Africa and Caribbean (if we allow Walcott's biography into the reading), Kikuyu and British, animal and human.

If "A Far Cry from Africa" were to end here, the poem would still have established the political ambivalence that will characterize Walcott's mature period. The presence of the third and final stanza, however, suggests that for Walcott political ambivalence is also ancestral, linguistic, and even existential ambivalence. This ambivalence seems to imbue the speaker with the particular confidence to implicate himself in the scene he depicts, refusing to choose sides but also implying a certain complicity in his unwillingness to choose:

> I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
> Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
> I who have cursed
> The drunken officer of British rule, how should I choose
> Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?   (26-30)

In this confusion of states of being I hear again the echoes of Milton's Satan, coming to the awful realization that "which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (IV.75). The speaker is not

simply refusing to choose but is unable to choose, as to choose would mean to deny some aspect of himself. European and African, colonel and Kikuyu, "human" and "savage" are presented as potential opposites, only to be proven constitutive elements of a separate figure. The speaker implicates himself as both of Africa and far from it—unable to abdicate the English language and thus unable entirely to abjure British colonial rule, sympathetic to the Mau Mau even as he condemns their own techniques. In not knowing which way to turn, Walcott finds a path; from his ambivalence about himself, he begins to fashion an identity for himself and his homeland.

The maturation of Walcott's self-fashioning, for himself and for St. Lucia, coincides paradoxically with Walcott's departure from the island. In 1948, Walcott won a scholarship to the University College of the West Indies in Jamaica, where he drafted much of "A Far Cry from Africa" (King 80, 94). From this point onward Walcott's biography is marked by geographic itinerancy, first among the islands of the West Indian archipelago, then between the Caribbean and the United States. Moreover, the chorographic work of Walcott's poems shifts from inventing himself via the land- and seascapes surrounding him to recreating himself based on remembered or imagined places. King's comment about Walcott's state of mind as he prepared to depart St. Lucia is appropriate to the poet's lifelong sense of geographic ambivalence:

> Walcott was of two minds about leaving. He loved St. Lucia and had already decided that he was to be its artist, but as a Methodist there was little chance of advancement at St. Mary's [the Catholic school where Walcott studied and later taught], which remained the only secondary school; and the truth was he was becoming bored and anxious to move on. [. . .] Although he would always be nostalgic for the world of his childhood, [. . .] most of his life from now on would be as an exile. He became the Odysseus of his imagination, his life a journey. His poetry and plays became the home he lost, and exile was to become one of his themes.   (81)

Although it is a shorter lyric than many of Walcott's major poems, "Codicil" (1965) represents the flux in which the poet feels adrift. From its title through its last line, the poem looks backward and forward, to Walcott's home and to versions of "elsewhere." Despite the poem's brevity, I read "Codicil" as a major poem in Walcott's oeuvre, as the hinge between the younger poet always looking elsewhere and the older poet still looking elsewhere but also looking back. Is this codicil—"a supplement to a will [. . .] for the purpose of explanation, alteration, or revocation of the original contents" (*OED*)—a document the speaker has received, or which he has prepared? Just whose inheritance the poem represents—and what is to be done with such a bequest—is unclear.

In the poem's first lines, the speaker identifies himself as "schizophrenic;" here he is not caught just between cultures or continents but between ways of writing: "wrenched by two styles, / one a hack's hired prose, I earn / my exile" (1-3). Again, as in "Prelude," the speaker betrays the self-consciousness of aspiring to a certain position. In "Prelude," he aspires to the role of the poet; in "Codicil," he aspires to a romanticized idea of the poet as noble exile. Walcott has conjured Ovid, Osip Mandelstam, and other poets of exile in his poems, but he has also chided himself for referring to himself as an "exile," saying that the term more properly characterizes writers such as his friend Joseph Brodsky.[16] As he ages, Walcott will take upon himself the mantle of "prodigal," a term no less complicated than "exile," if for different reasons. In these lines the speaker adds another dimension to his sense of ambivalence. Departure from home—whatever his current sense of home—is a choice with personal, aesthetic, and professional implications. The speaker feels separated from what he is—better than his prosasic hackery, but also less than his idealized vision of exile poet, a position to which the young Walcott aspires (and about which he grows more

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[16] Walcott "imagine[s] the death of Mandelstam / among the yellowing coconuts" in "Preparing for Exile," and a colloquy with Ovid in "The Hotel Normandie Pool" ("Preparing" 1-2). In "The Art of Poetry XXXVII" interview with Edward Hirsch, Walcott remarks that "I've got to stop using the word 'exile.' Real exile means a complete loss of home. Joseph Brodsky is an exile; I'm really not an exile. I have access to my home" (116).

ambivalent still as he matures): "[I] burn / to slough off / this love of ocean that's self-love" (4-6). Here is another, complex example of Walcott's chorographic impulse: the speaker identifies himself with the ocean, lending the surrounding sea a poetic identity from which he might create his own. But this is a love he simultaneously seeks "to slough off," chastising himself for "self-love." In the long index of Walcott's ambivalences, his love of and skepticism for rhetorical flourish, metaphorical grandeur are often present, as in "Codicil," within a single image. In this he resembles Charles Wright, another master of the art of undermining his own grandest images and lines. As with Walcott's depiction of himself as an exile, the speaker identifies himself with the ocean even as he disapproves of himself for doing so. As we have seen in "Prelude" as well, the speaker's self-incrimination works to enable his aspiration to a particular stature.

"Codicil" turns on its axiomatic seventh line: "To change your language you must change your life" is significant in part for its clear iambic pentametrical rhythm (7). Here is the antipode, as old as Chaucer, that opposes the "hired prose" of the first stanza. Given the "given" of the poem—the speaker's sense of schizophrenia—the inverse of the statement may also be true. To change your life you must change your language. This is less beautiful, less metrical, but no less valid, as in Walcott's work "life" and "language" are almost interchangeable. Both senses of change resound in the next lines, in which the speaker laments both his present circumstances and endless cycles of travel and return. "I cannot right old wrongs" is vague enough to be read as the speaker's personal life, the crimes of history, both, or neither (8). The following lines do not clarify the "wrongs" in question, even as they entrench him in the Caribbean. Until this point the speaker has identified his immediate surroundings only as a "sickle, moonlit beach" (3). The images of decay and poison in the poem's fourth and fifth stanzas serve both to situate the speaker in a specific place and to project his own state of mind onto the landscape:

> I cannot right old wrongs.
>
> Waves tire of horizon and return.

Gulls screech with rusty tongues

Above the beached, rotting pirogues,
they were a venomous beaked cloud at Charlotteville.   (8-12)

That the poem is set in Charlotteville—a beachside village in northeastern Tobago—represents another example of looking forward and backward in the same glance. Walcott moved to Trinidad in 1953; by 1959, according to King's account, he was already considering a life in the United States ("Derek Walcott," King 159). The original title of "Codicil," King writes, was "Postcard," a title which suggests the poem's—and speaker's—sense of wandering, as a missive document from a temporary stay (220).

As the poem looks back—perhaps at the ambitious, committed poet of "As John to Patmos"—its speaker seems more embittered:

Once I thought love of country was enough,
now, even if I chose, there's no room at the trough.

I watch the best minds root like dogs
for scraps of favour.   (13-16)

These lines recall the bestial imagery of "A Far Cry from Africa," but here the speaker characterizes himself and his compatriots as scavenging pigs and dogs. American readers in particular may find themselves hearing echoes of Allen Ginsberg's outrage in the opening lines of "Howl" (1956): "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, / angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night [. . .]" (1-3). In these lines, Ginsberg seethes at a homogenous, materialistic America. Walcott looks to his own home and finds such mediocrity and corruption that it no longer seems like home. "I am nearing middle- / age," he writes, now recalling Dante's *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* ("Codicil" 17-18, Dante 1). In "Prelude," the Dantescan image of the "reluctant leopard of the slow eyes" seems forced, an appendage to the rest of the poem. By contrast, the sense of betweenness the speaker

conveys—further emphasized by breaking the line in the middle of "middle-age"—squares with every aspect of "Codicil' and with Walcott's own state of mind. He portrays himself between cultures, islands, styles, and even between lives. I have said that I consider Walcott to be at his best when he draws poetic energy from this betweenness, but in "Codicil" his sense of betweenness is akin to nothingness: The speaker's now-jaded sense that commitment to his homeland is insufficient parallels his sense of personal emptiness. If, as he fears, love of country is not enough, he shall have to turn either to other countries or other loves. In essence this means beginning anew, as the final lines of the poem imply:

> At heart there's nothing, not the dread
> of death. I know too many dead.
> They're all familiar, all in character,
>
> even how they died. On fire,
> the flesh no longer fears that furnace mouth
> of earth,
>
> that kiln or ashpit of the sun,
> nor this clouding, unclouding sickle moon
> whitening this beach again like a blank page.
>
> All its indifference is a different rage.   (21-30)

This is one of the more resonant instances of Walcott's tendency to poeticize landscape: the beach whitens "like a blank page," into a simultaneous symbol of authorial struggle and possibility.

As much as Walcott writes himself into "his" landscape, and as much as he seeks to embody the physical features of his homeland, the blank page of the beach remains indifferent. Worse, even its indifference is an invention of the poet's. Whether the "different rage" of the closing line of "Codicil" is the beach's or the speaker's is unclear, just as one cannot say definitively whose is the will and testament of the poem. In "Codicil," Walcott's ambivalence becomes a spiritual exile that the poet will match with his physical, geographical departure from St. Lucia and the West Indies in general, as he begins to spend

the majority of his time living, working, and being celebrated in the United States. Despite

the ensuing cycle of departure and return, those returns can never be true homecomings. If,

as King suggests, Walcott becomes the Odysseus of his imagination, he is as much

Tennyson's Ulysses as he is Homer's:

> Come, my friends,
> 'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
> Push off, and sitting well in order smite
> The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
> To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
> Of all the western stars, until I die.   (56-61)

One of the remarkable paradoxes of Walcott's career is that he "exiles" himself *into*

empire—the United States—instead of finding himself dispatched to the provinces.

Moreover, he finds himself in the capitals of a new empire rather than in those of the realm

in which he received his education, his language, and his sense of self. Walcott's Odysseus

finds himself always homing but always deterred; even looking from the window of the

home he thought was his, he stands again considering his fortunes on the sea.

From a critic's perspective, the Odysseus metaphor is too good to be true. (Reviewing Walcott's *Collected Poems*, James Dickey remarks—a bit cynically, in my view— that Walcott "was quite literally born into a major theme" [Dickey].) Real, inchoate lives do not so easily fit the shape of archetypal myths. They may, however, be shaped to fit those myths in the language of poetry or, as in Walcott's case, the myth may be also reshaped to fit the particular situations of individual persons or even a nation. We recall that Walcott makes himself the Odysseus of his own imagination, and that his imagination is steeped in the myths—Odysseus, Caliban, Crusoe—of European literature. Walcott's Adamic vision of the "New World" is adapted from the existing cultural vocabulary of Europe, and of England in particular. Making his "exile" in America, he takes his version of a European myth to a place which itself is a real, inchoate vision of a European myth. The New World's newness is an invention, even a delusion—and perhaps a necessary one—of the old world. Adam himself was free to name everything but himself.

The turn to Odysseus also seems a conscious turning away from the metaphors of Walcott's early career—John prophesying in exile on Patmos or Crusoe the castaway. If Walcott now casts himself as Odysseus, he also imagines himself as the "No One" Odysseus claims to be in his encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus (Breslin 1). When Shabine, the speaker of "The Schooner *Flight*," declares "I had no nation now but the imagination," we can hear in his alienation the ambitions of the poet (146). We may also note that the picture of an imagined nation may well be nobler than the state itself, as the self of one's own mythology is often nobler than the "real" life. The real St. Lucia remains Walcott's nation, but he increasingly imagines it as a mythical Ithaca. He no longer "has" St. Lucia, as (in Joseph Brodsky's words) he "has" English, the language that Walcott claims is the empire whose expanse he traverses ("The Sound of the Tide" 166, "The Muse of History" 51). From this crucible emerges the Odyssean, the "prodigal" Walcott. Walcott departs the West

Indies and works in the United States in order to bring the West Indies, and his own work in particular, into the literary consciousness of Americans and other speakers of English. Here the parable of the prodigal son—considered in full—is of particular value to our discussion. Although the template of departure and return is a resonant figure for Walcott's own relationship to his island(s), that metaphor is enriched when we return to it the poet's fear of being a "prodigal" in the word's original sense of squandering one's inheritance through foolishness and extravagance. Walcott's own "inheritance" is something more precious than coin: he has often described the English language, and the Anglophone poetic tradition, as his "inheritance," his skill for poetry as his "gift." Unlike the second son of the parable, Walcott can spend his inheritance without squandering it, as the language itself is an inexhaustible inheritance. As Walcott writes, "It is the language which is the empire, and great poets are not its vassals but its princes." As one of its "princes," it is Walcott's privilege as well as his duty to the language to deal judiciously with its expressive wealth. This wealth, paradoxically, is put to its proper use only in being lavished at every opportunity.

At the same time, Walcott's poems betray the guilt of departure and the fear of having to return to his island as the prodigal son returns to his father—as a failure, a supplicant. Both Odysseus and the prodigal son come to live among swine, stricken with guilt and far from home. To leave St. Lucia and the West Indies is Walcott's chosen way to create a literary identity for them and for himself, but to fail in the endeavor would mean to betray his home twice over. Rita Dove observes that

> the fate of any member of a minority who 'makes it' is double-edged. [. . .] As a special case, he or she is envied, even reviled. Move away from the home court and you're accused of being 'dicty'; return and you're a prodigal. Write about home and you blaspheme; choose other topics and you're a traitor. [. . .] Even before leaving for study abroad, Walcott felt the first twinges of the Prodigal Syndrome: envy from the outside, insecurity and guilt from within.

It doesn't matter if the prodigal returns in shame or glory—the time away

from 'home' will always be suspected and interpreted as rejection.   (67)

Perhaps Walcott has chosen an impossible task. Perhaps the possibility of failure has been

inscribed in the work of this poet since his first poems. Lest he fail in the poetic endeavor,

then, Walcott incorporates this fear of failure into his poems and characters, suffering

publicly (as the speaker of "Prelude" might have admired) and "in accurate iambics" as well.

The sense of having betrayed a home pervades "The Schooner *Flight*," in which

Shabine has abandoned a wife and a lover as well, Maria Concepcion, for the other *mar*, the

sea:

> The pain in my heart for Maria Concepcion,
> the hurt I had done to my wife and children,
> was worse than the bends. In the rapturous deep
> there was no cleft rock where my soul could hide
> like the boobies each sunset, no sandbar of light
> where I could rest, like the pelicans know,
> so I got raptures once, and I saw God
> like a harpooned grouper bleeding, and a far
> voice was rumbling, "Shabine, if you leave her,
> if you leave her, I shall give you the morning star."   (134-43)

The passage is rich with complicated and potentially contradictory religious imagery.

Despite the resonance of her name, Maria Concepcion is neither the Virgin of Christian

iconography nor even the speaker's wife; she is in fact Shabine's mistress, whom he leaves in

the poem's opening lines. In his raptures, Shabine thinks he sees God "like a harpooned

grouper bleeding," but the voice he hears sounds more like that of a tempter than a

redeemer. In return for leaving Maria Concepcion, whose name also echoes the Marian

epithet *Stella Maris*, "star of the sea," the voice offers Shabine instead "the morning star."

Throughout the poem, Shabine laments the exchange but also seems to understand it as

inevitable. Near the end of the poem, Shabine imagines Maria Concepcion "marrying the

ocean, then drifting away / in the widening lace of her bridal train / with white gulls her

bridesmaids [. . .]" (425-7). Each in his or her way, then, Shabine and Maria Concepcion

both wed the sea. Here we see Shabine figure his abandonment of his home as a man abandoning his domestic ties. Later in the poem, he figures "History" as an absent patriarch, a philandering master who has abandoned Shabine and refused to acknowledge any of his "illegitimate" children. So we may understand Shabine's anxiety as that of a man who fears continuing a cycle of abandonment, but who nevertheless seems unable to do otherwise. The cycle of engagement, abandonment, and guilt continues in historical, religious, and familial terms, even as the speaker exchanges "Maria" for "*mar*," his "nation" for "the imagination."

As Walcott's own sense of his place changes from physical presence in the Caribbean to metaphorical "presence," so the chorographic aspects of his poetry must change too. Instead of mapping the islands of his daily life, he instead maps places in his mind, shaping the poetic language of the European canon to write himself into the observed and imagined landscapes of both the Caribbean and the United States. The idea of chorography still applies to Walcott's poems of itinerancy, but it must be understood more fluidly, as if Walcott were attempting to map the constant flux of the sea, trying like Keats to write his own name in the water. As Shabine says in the first section of "The Schooner *Flight*":

> Well, when I write
> this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;
> I go draw and knot every line as tight
> as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
> my common language go be the wind,
> my pages the sails of the schooner *Flight*.[17]   65-76

Having departed both St. Lucia and Trinidad, Walcott is again between worlds and between lives. Having put his Ithaca behind him (and thus, before him), he may now reinvent it, and reinvent himself as a traveler on a mythic journey.

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[17] One can hear the echoes of Shabine's speech in part XXV of Walcott's *Midsummer*: "My palms have been sliced by the twine / of the craft I have pulled at for more than forty years. / [. . .T]he lines I love have all their knots left in" (11-12, 15).

I have already alluded to "The Schooner *Flight*," which I consider the first major poem of Walcott's "prodigal" period, and which a consensus of readers has canonized as the poet's finest lyric. The poem, a 472-line dramatic monologue in eleven sections, opens Walcott's 1979 collection, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. Written in loosely rhymed iambic pentameter, "The Schooner *Flight*" represents one of Walcott's rare forays into a more relaxed vernacular, even at some points approaching West Indian dialect or "nation language." The language is not quite patois, not quite the elevated English of Walcott's poetic diction, but a creole of both. Walcott's protagonist is an alter ego, a figure who is simultaneously individual and composite in the most fundamental aspects of his identity:

> a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes
> that they nickname Shabine, the patois for
> any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw
> when these slums of empire was paradise.
> I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
> I had a sound colonial education,
> I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
> and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.   (36-43)

It is perhaps appropriate that the latter four lines in my quotation, so often cited as a kind of shorthand for Walcott's entire career, are spoken by the sailor-poet Shabine. In the context of the poem, they remind us that, but for Shabine's life as a sailor, he could easily be mistaken for Walcott himself. Shabine, as Rei Terada writes, "meets Walcott halfway, being half autobiographical, half fictive; half creator, half creation; half poet, half sailor; half individual, half communal" (112). To Terada's incisive observation I would add that Shabine is both a catch-all for certain physical and ethnic characteristics (a red-headed West Indian of European and African ancestry) and an individual, a word from a divisive vocabulary recast as the name of this eloquent speaker. Walcott's characters and speakers are often at once individual and composite; in naming this character, moreover, Walcott names a phenomenon:

> [. . .] almost inventing a new word, Shabine, from a term which existed in

French, in Haiti, and in Trinidad with other ranges of meanings. After 'The Schooner *Flight*' every educated West Indian would use 'Shabine' for a 'red' male as if they always had. A meaning had been invented, something named, which corresponded to a new West Indian recognition of the many cultures of which the region consists and that not all shades of black were 'black.'"

(King 375)

Shabine is individual and composite, and like Walcott he is notable for his "doubleness." Here is a sailor-poet who has abandoned one home with a wife and children, and another with a mistress, for the homelessness of the sea. Through the voice of Shabine, who cuts a fellow sailor for "fuck[ing] with [his] poetry," Walcott can thread "simple speech" into his usual rhetorical grandeur without seeming to apologize for using either register or for using them together (294). Not all shades of black were black in the Caribbean, King reminds us, and registers of language—both spoken and literary—are similarly various, and similarly politically charged.

Indeed, a keen awareness of the various shades of whiteness and blackness pervades the poem, and shadows Walcott's own sense of unease, in the West Indies as well as about leaving the West Indies. In Part 3, "Shabine Leaves the Republic," the poet-sailor says:

> After the white man, the niggers didn't want me
> when the power swing to their side.
> The first chain my hands and apologize, "History";
> the next said I wasn't black enough for their pride.   (147-50)

The choice of the word "pride" here suggests the complexity in which Shabine finds himself caught. The collective noun "pride" denotes a group of lions; in this instance, the lion is both an African symbol of strength and a bestial metaphor reminiscent of those Walcott uses in "A Far Cry from Africa." In the same breath, Shabine puns on the phrase "black pride," a political and cultural movement of which he has grown skeptical. Finding corruption and in-fighting among the people he might otherwise consider "his own," Shabine exiles himself to the sea. Like Walcott's, Shabine's rhetorical energy flows from

national, ethnic, and racial ambivalence. Walcott himself "felt that he too was an exile, even a political exile, and he had also left a family and life behind." King writes that "Walcott had not been directly forced out, but he had felt that the lack of support for [the Trinidad Theatre] Workshop, his inability to support himself as a writer in Trinidad, were due to his being mulatto [. . .]" (358). With Shabine, then, Walcott can say "I had no nation now but the imagination," a line that echoes the earlier declaration of the nationhood that Shabine (with Walcott) embodies (146).

As Shabine embodies a nation, he also meets the embodiment of History, an encounter he recalls in this same section:

> I met History once, but he ain't recognize me,
> a parchment Creole, with warts
> like an old sea-bottle, crawling like a crab
> through the holes of a shadow cast by the net
> of a grille balcony; cream linen, cream hat.
> I confront him and shout, "Sir, is Shabine!
> They say I'se your grandson. You remember Grandma,
> your black cook, at all?" The bitch hawk and spat.
> A spit like that worth any number of words.
> But that's all them bastards have left us: words. (160-69)

Here "recognize" carries multiple valences: in its common vernacular usage, "recognize" means "to cognize again," as one understands another face as familiar. The word's older resonances connote an odd etiquette of power and oppression, as "recognize" in an obsolete form refers to a feudal superior resuming possession of land or, only slightly more recently, "to accept the authority, validity, or legitimacy of; *esp*. to accept the claim or title of (a person or group of people) to be valid or true" (*OED*). History's spit in "The Schooner *Flight*" constitutes facial recognition and familial, legal, and political disavowal in the same gesture. All History has left Shabine is words, but History finds himself at a loss for words when confronted with his children and grandchildren, who are inevitably darker and poorer than he might like to recall, and whose memories are far longer than his own.

When History hawks and spits, I cannot help hearing in that guttural noise the echoes of the citizen in the Cyclops episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Walcott follows Joyce in his chosen exile from and obsession with his homeland, and in his desire to compose the as-yet unwritten epic of his nation. As his name/title indicates, the citizen is both individual and composite, a xenophobic Fenian who wordlessly refutes the Jewish Leopold Bloom's claim that his nation is Ireland:

> —A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the
> same place.
>
> —By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that's so I'm a nation for I'm
> living in the same place for the past five years.
>
> So of course everyone had a laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to
> muck out of it:
>
> —Or also living in different places.
>
> —That covers my case, says Joe.
>
> —What is your nation if I may ask, says the citizen.
>
> —Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland.
>
> The citizen said nothing only cleared the spit out of his gullet and,
> gob, he spat a Red Bank oyster out of him right in the corner.   (331)

In both Walcott's and Joyce's texts we find a similar conflation—although with differing degrees of earnestness—of the idea of nationhood and of the individual who may embody or constitute a nation. Bloom's people, like many among Walcott's, constitute a diaspora, first uprooted and then made unwelcome. As Joyce depicts an Ireland of corruption and fecklessness, Walcott presents Shabine as disenchanted with both political administration and rebellion in Trinidad. "I have seen things that would make a slave sick / in this Trinidad, this Limers' Republic," he says, but nevertheless, he "no longer believed in the [Black Power] revolution" (110-11, 170). Just as Joyce's Stephen Dedalus declares that "[h]istory [. . .] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," soon Shabine experiences

his own nightmarish encounter with history in a literal, if spectral, sense (34). In Walcott's mythology of the New World, Homer's Odysseus wanders alongside Joyce's Ulysses. But since neither they nor he can escape the events of history (as opposed to the poem's personified History), Walcott must find a way to face them, and to integrate them into his own map of the world.

The fifth section of "The Schooner *Flight*," subtitled "Shabine Encounters the Middle Passage," depicts the apparition of ghostly ships, eternally retracing the routes of the Atlantic slave trade. Shabine's description of the first appearance of the ships is apropos of Walcott's own poetic treatment of the Caribbean's colonial history: "it was horrors, but it was beautiful" (207). Among the "sails dry like paper," Shabine sees two visions of his own heritage (209):

> high on their decks I saw great admirals,
> Rodney, Nelson, de Grasse, I heard the hoarse orders
> they gave those Shabines, and the forest
> of masts sail right through the *Flight* [. . .]
> [. . .]
> Next we pass slave ships. Flags of all nations,
> our fathers below deck too deep, I suppose,
> to hear us shouting. So we stop shouting. Who knows
> who his grandfather is, much less his name? (215-18, 228-31)

But Shabine already knows the answer to this question. His grandfather's name is History, whose mistress was his black cook, and History does not recognize the red-headed, dark-skinned grandson he sees in the streets of Port of Spain. In this moment we can see just why Walcott feels that the idea of a self is something to which he and other West Indians must aspire rather than a privilege he and they can take for granted. In cultures where one's surname is traditionally passed along patrilineal lines, what becomes of one whose father or grandfather refuses to acknowledge them? The illegitimate children of "History" are denied both a home and a proper name. No wonder, then, that characters in "The Schooner *Flight*" are named according to their looks (Shabine), or to their home (St. Vincent, called "Vince"), or to some combination thereof (Maria Concepcion). For Walcott, such familiar ruptures,

misrecognitions, and injustices are also opportunities—political and aesthetic alike—for new tissue to seal up the historical wound.[18] We can hear murmurs of Shabine's voice in the remarkable last sentences of Walcott's essay "The Muse of History," which represent both a radical break from the bonds of absolute historical event:

> I accept this archipelago of the Americas. I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father. I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper "history," for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon. [. . .]I give the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, that exiled you from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and your gift.   (64)

This passage notwithstanding, all of Walcott's poems of travel seem just as haunted by the historical events of the Middle Passage as they are informed by the mythical events of *The Odyssey*. What Ramazani has called the "wound" of the postcolonial writer, or what we might here call the wound of the prodigal, smarts in the ocean's saltwater, but it begins to be healed there too (49-71). From this point in his career onward, the chorographic attempt to unite poet and landscape, even in the tenuous bonds of metaphor, has as much to do with remembered and imagined places, remembered and imagined selves, as with the concrete facts of maps and chronicles. "[A] man lives half of life," he writes in *Another Life*, "the second half is memory" (15.IV.23-4). By the end of this section of "The Schooner *Flight*," we understand that it hardly matters whether Shabine's encounter with the ghost ships is

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[18] For a more complete treatment of the trope of colonial history as wound, see Ramazani's chapter on Walcott and the "wound" of history in *The Hybrid Muse*.

supposed to be "real," hallucinated, or purely allegorical. What matters is that it persists in his memory and becomes part of the myth he creates of himself, the myth of this salt-soaked poem.

Shabine's experience of the Middle Passage represents the first of two climaxes for this dramatic monologue. In the poem's tenth section, a looming storm panics Shabine and his mate, St. Vincent (383-5): "'Be Jesus, I never see sea get rough / so fast!" Shabine exclaims. "That wind come from God back pocket!" Indeed this storm, like those summoned by the gods in Homer, is loaded with divine implication. The storm is the third apparition of "history" in this poem that both recalls and attempts to transcend historical events, in which myth and history churn over each other like the confluence of two currents. Here the veil between the poet Shabine and the poet Walcott is at its thinnest, as Shabine recalls "the faith / that had fade from a child in the Methodist chapel / in Chisel Street, Castries," where Walcott attended religious services in his youth (404-6, Breslin 211). Personal history and poetic artifice entangle in this storm that also weaves the nightmare of history with Shabine's own premonitions of drowning:

> "I'm the drowned sailor in [Maria Concepcion's] *Book of Dreams*."
> I remembered them ghost ships, I saw me corkscrewing
> to the sea-bed of sea-worms, fathom pass fathom,
> my jaw clench like a fist, and only one thing
> hold me, trembling, how my family safe home.
>
> [. . .]
>
> proud with despair, we sang our how our race
> survive the sea's maw, our history, our peril,
> and now I was ready for whatever death will.   (395-9, 408-10)

The resignation implicit in "I was ready for whatever death will" is an understated resolution to the storms of the poem, but it also represents the achievement of the distance (physical and psychological alike) necessary for Shabine to live with "history," the same distance to which Walcott appeals in "The Muse of History." This position of distance differs from the "cool" that Walcott disavows in "A Far Cry from Africa" in that here he

refuses to turn away from history, but he also refuses to be in its thrall. Nevertheless, such distance offers its own perils, as we shall see in *The Prodigal*.

After the storm, Shabine's tone is more relaxed, even disinterested. If he does not necessarily welcome the notion of endless travel upon the seas, neither does he lament it: "Though my *Flight* never pass the incoming tide / [. . .] I am satisfied / if my hand give voice to one people's grief" (439, 441-2). Whereas the epic journeys of Odysseus and the rather less heroic wanderings of Leopold Bloom both end in returns home, Shabine's travels continue despite the poem's ending:

> the flight to a target whose aim we'll never know,
> vain search for one island that heals with its harbour
> and a guiltless horizon, where the almond's shadow
> doesn't injure the sand. There are so many islands!
> As many islands as the stars at night
> on that branched tree from which meteors are shaken
> like falling fruit around the schooner *Flight*.   (452-8)

In this moment, the islands of the Caribbean become a cosmos in their own right. The comparison between islands and stars is apt, as "The Schooner *Flight*" represents the Walcott's ongoing shift from a Caribbean poet with cosmopolitan aspirations to a cosmopolitan poet with nostalgia for a lost, or maybe only imagined, home.

If "Codicil' is a poem of departure and "The Schooner *Flight*" a poem of the journey, then those of *The Fortunate Traveller* (1982) are poems of arrival and adoption. Walcott's continuing struggle with multiple identities grows only more complicated as he begins to "[fall] in love with America," as he writes in "Upstate" (37). Although Walcott's title for the collection plays on Thomas Nashe's Elizabethan picaresque *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), *The Fortunate Traveller* is as American (with all the varied implications of that problematic adjective) as any of Walcott's work. Many of the poems bear dedications to the friends who helped welcome Walcott to the United States and to an international literary community with its nucleus in New York City, including Robert Giroux, Anthony Hecht, Susan Sontag, and Mark Strand. More significant than the dedications is Walcott's attempt in certain

poems to adopt a colloquial, almost folksy, idiom reminiscent of Robert Frost: "No soap," Walcott writes in "The Man Who Loved Islands," a poem that Teju Cole singles out as one of Walcott's "poor attempts at American vernacular" (Walcott 28, Cole). The corrugated tin, the galvanize, the lexicons of oceanic hues so familiar from many of Walcott's poems are conspicuously absent from these. Instead, Walcott applies the same painterly attention to the humid continental climate in which he finds himself, as if he could get the whole idea of America into a single sentence:

> The hillside is still wounded by the spire
> of the white meetinghouse, the Indian trail
> trickles down it like the brown blood of the whale
> in rowanberries bubbling like the spoor
> on logs burnt black as Bibles by hellfire. ("Old New England" 13-17)

But this dream of America is not Trinidad or St. Lucia, much less Ithaca. Walcott still considers himself to be in exile. His individual predicament may be more personal than political—in "The Hotel Normandie Pool," for instance, he claims to "have learnt that beyond words / is the disfiguring exile of divorce"—but it is nevertheless a geographic and psychic rupture from his idea of home (71-2). That said, "exile" remains a choice that Walcott has made, as he has made himself in the image of an exile. The choice to live and work in the United States means for him a different kind of conflict than the "true" exile of Ovid or Joseph Brodsky. The forced exile has no choice, and this is the source of her or his lament, but the lack of choice may also alleviate the exile's guilt. She or he who chooses exile, by contrast, may lament the fact of the choice, as Walcott implicates himself in the guilt of having departed and the fear of having to return a prodigal, a supplicant who has wasted his gifts. Walcott has said that "it is harder / to be a prodigal than a stranger" (*Another Life* 23.II.9-10). In his biography of the poet, King is more specific: "Going to the United States had meant betrayal of the [Trinidad Theatre Workshop]," he writes, "leaving his children, spending three-quarters of the year in a foreign land with grey skies and snow" (468-9). Living in the Caribbean, Walcott had felt pulled by the necessity to "make it" in

New York. Living so much of the year in the United States, Walcott risks losing the sense of self forged elsewhere.

These contradictions are evident in Walcott's interviews as well as in his poems. He has insisted on being "primarily, absolutely a Caribbean writer," although in the same interview he claims "America" as the New World of which he is a citizen, too:

> In places that are yet undefined the energy comes with the knowledge that this has not yet been described, this has not yet been painted. [. . .] My generation of West Indian writers, following after C. L. R. James, all felt the thrill of the absolute sense of discovery. That energy is concomitant with being where we are; it's part of the whole of America. And by America, I mean from Alaska right down to Curaçao.   ("The Art of Poetry" 212)

Walcott is downright Whitmanesque here in his attempt to contain contradictory multitudes. In one moment he speaks of having spent so much time in the United States that, upon his returns to St. Lucia, he feels like "a tourist *myself* coming from America;" in the next he reasserts his roots: "I've never felt that I belong anywhere else but in St. Lucia." And finally, as if coming to terms with his own contradictions—as he continues to attempt in his poems—he says: "I don't think of myself as having two homes; I have one home, but two places" (220, 223, 225). I want to linger on Walcott's use of the possessive "have" here, as I have done elsewhere, and as Brodsky and other critics have both spoken of the poet's "having" English. In English, "to have" a home is a common enough idiomatic expression. "To have" a place seems a contradiction, unless we speak of "having" a place within a larger institution or structure. One can "have" a home, a place, or a language only to the extent that homes, places, and languages too possess, create or recreate us.

So in "Upstate" and other poems in *The Fortunate Traveller* we may observe Walcott's attempt to create a new place for himself, if not a new home, in America. Written on a Trailways bus between Oneonta (where Walcott had read poems at Hartwick College) and New York City, the poem opens with the sharp image of "[a] knife blade of cold air [that]

keeps prying / the bus window open. The spring country / won't be shut out" (King 382, "Upstate" 1-3). The spring country here is as much an idea of America, still fresh enough to Walcott's speaker, as it is the landscape through which the bus travels. The speaker projects his annoyance with his present circumstances onto those around him—the "stale-drunk or stoned woman," the "Spanish-American salesman," and the "black woman folded in an overcoat" (5-7). Then he turns to the villages he sees through the bus window and imagines the lives of the people living in them: "fields, wide yards with washing, old machinery—where people live / with the highway's patience and flat certainty" (11-12). The word "villages" is not especially remarkable unless one considers its frequency in Walcott's poems about the Caribbean.[19] Here the word functions as a kind of psychological fulcrum from skepticism to an inevitable, if imperfect, love of America. This imaginative move seems to mollify the speaker—as landscape is so often the means through which Walcott apprehends himself and other people—allowing him to move from the elegiac "the Muse is leaving America" to the eventual moment of epiphany: "I am falling in love with America" (14, 37).

The process of falling in love—Walcott compresses it into two stanzas—remains as much a mystery in the poem as it is elsewhere. At the beginning of the second stanza, the speaker seems almost worried: "Sometimes I feel sometimes / the Muse is leaving, the Muse is leaving America" (13-14). It is as if the speaker himself needs to repeat these lines, as if he is only half-convinced of them. As the bus travels on the speaker imagines the Muse as "a chalk-thin miner's wife with knobbled elbows, / her neck tendons taut as banjo strings, / she who was once a freckled palomino with a girl's mane" (17-19). This daydream, this "departure comes over me in smoke / from the far factories" (23-24). The daydream is the departure, but so is the change it has brought into the speaker through this redemptive

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[19] Consider, for instance: "*O sea, leaving your villages of cracked mud and tin* [. . .]" ("Origins" III.5), "[. . .] or follow the path / of the caked piglet through / the sea-village's midden [. . .]" (*Another Life* 21.I.10-12), "Those villages stricken with the melancholia of Sunday [. . .]" ("Sabbaths, W. I." 1).

vision of the Muse-as-miner's wife. It seems to be she, a *Liberty* figure, who allows the

speaker to move more easily between villages, who intercedes on behalf of the country so

that, by the end of the third stanza, the speaker can accede: "I am falling in love with

America" (37). Walcott's speaker falls in love with the landscape, with imagined if not real

persons, and with a myth of America in which he now participates, whose next lines he

seems ready to write himself. What follows this confession is an unconditional embrace of

landscape and language: "I must put the cold small pebbles from the spring / upon my

tongue to learn her language, / to talk like birch or aspen confidently" (38-40). This is a new

chorography for Walcott. Having mapped sea grapes and almond trees into his poems, onto

himself, he now wishes to talk the talk of the trees native to the northeastern United States.

This language, this "talk" becomes the speaker's key to the landscape and to the people

within the landscape, even the motley crew of the bus. The speaker imagines himself in love

with this lady Liberty:

> I will knock at the widowed door
> of one of these villages
> where she will admit me like a broad meadow,
> like a blue space between mountains,
> and holding her arms at the broken elbows
> brush the dank hair from a forehead
> as warm as bread or as a homecoming.   (41-47)

The poem begins with a "knife blade of cold air" and ends "as warm as bread or as a

homecoming." For Walcott, the use of the word "homecoming" is especially resonant given

the itinerant imagery of much of his work. The women in Walcott's poems—frequently

idealized, sometimes objectified—have often seemed to be goddesses or muses in the

disguise of human clothes. In *Midsummer* XXV, "a girl slapping sand from her foot" almost

becomes "Nike loosening her sandal" (22, 21). In *Omeros*, Helen works in a beachside bar.

The American muse—Liberty or Columbia or a new vision altogether—waits like Penelope

for the traveler to come home. The image survives its grandiosity perhaps only because we,

with the speaker, know such a homecoming to be purely imaginary or mythical. The poet

for whom she serves as muse knows that he has two places, but only one home, and that home now is as mythical as Ithaca, even as it (or lack of it) continues to define him.

    The Fortunate Traveller may be something of a misnomer for a collection that traffics so thoroughly in Americana; likewise *The Prodigal* (2004), a book length poem in eighteen sections, features as many heartsick leave-takings as it does homecomings. A travelogue constantly shifting between narrative of the travels and lyric meditation on travel, the poem mentions more than fifty different cities in North and South America and Europe.   Even before Walcott's 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature canonized him as a writer of international stature, the increasing frequency and range of his travels suggested his impending ascendance to such a role. As King writes: "For several decades Walcott had been commuting between his jobs in the United States and homes in the West Indies, and in more recent years he had been commuting as well between England and the United States. Now Continental Europe became part of his market, requiring frequent trips" (533-4). King's record of Walcott's life after the Nobel—despite the poet having built a new house in St. Lucia—reads more like a travel itinerary than a biography. For a poet so invested in rendering landscape in his poems as a conduit for self-fashioning, it is difficult to distinguish where the itinerary ends and the biography begins. At the risk of belaboring the Odysseus metaphor, the Walcott of *The Fortunate Traveller* is momentarily at rest en route rather than permanently so at home. I have called the female muse of "Upstate" a Penelope figure, but more appropriate may be the myth of Circe, in whose bewitching company the travel-wearied Odysseus passes a year before continuing his journey. The "home" opened to Walcott's speaker at the end of "Upstate" may be *a* home, but it is not *his* home. Welcome though he may be, his rest there must remind him of his restlessness. Sick of journeying, he nevertheless continues the journey. The Walcott of *The Prodigal* is again traveling, by sea and air and across the rails, where the poem opens:

> In autumn, on the train to Pennsylvania,
> he placed his book face-down on the sunlit seat
> and it began to move. Metre established,

> carried on calm parallels, he preferred to read
> the paragraphs, the gliding blocks of stanzas
> framed by the widening windows—   (1.1.1-6)

The unspecific pronoun "it" in the third line refers to the face-down book, to the train itself, and to the poem we read here. We do not know what the speaker is reading, but we know that he has established the meter of his own poem by the time the words "metre established" click into place as the final two feet of this iambic pentameter line. Then follow the paragraphs and stanzas of the landscape through which the train travels in its own inevitably iambic rhythm. Walcott again reads the landscape as figures of (and for) poetry, again writes himself into aspects of the visible world, and again looks to his immediate surroundings to attempt to fashion himself from them. "[. . .W]andering [Greenwich] Village in search of another subject / other than yourself, it is yourself you meet. / A old man remembering white-headed mountains" (1.II.11-13). In these lines, Walcott's speaker finds himself wherever he looks, but when he does, the "double" he finds is remembering a different landscape, his own white hair mirroring the remembered mountain's snows. This technique might seem merely self-derivative if Walcott's treatment of "himself" were not so complicated here, through his use of the third person pronoun "he." The poem oscillates between "I" and "he" almost interchangeably, here "at home" in a version of the lyric "I," and there at the distance of the narrative third person. In the third stanza of the opening section, the speaker addresses his perception of a widening gulf between himself and his notion of himself:

> With others in the car,
> he felt as if he had become a tunnel
> through which they entered the idea of America—
> familiar mantling through the tunnel's skin.   (1.1.20-3)

The poem plays with the senses of doubleness of which Walcott has spoken throughout his career, here especially in the apparent ease with which the speaker slides between "I" and "he." The "prodigal" who speaks the poem is explicit about one specific aspect of "doubling" in Walcott's own life: he returns to the memory of his identical twin, Roddy,

whose failing health and eventual death are depicted (if only at a glance) in the poem: "Diabetic, dying, my double," the speaker remarks, almost offhandedly, in the poem's third section (3.1.17). The death of the poet's genetic double, his "real" doppelgänger, haunts the poem as its speaker sits in Europe remembering the Caribbean or *vice versa*, always as much "in" the place he imagines as in the place he inhabits, and subsequently within and without himself.

Although *The Prodigal*, like so many of Walcott's poems, compels with its self-conscious multiplicity, the poem also demonstrates that the identity-switching between "I" and "he," person and poet, is as much a psychic burden as a poetic device. "In my effort to arrive at the third person / has lain the ordeal[,]" he writes, "because whoever the 'he' is, / he can suffer, he can make his spasms, he can die" (15.II.1-3). It is no great imaginative feat for an "I" to envision the demise of a "he," but the "I" cannot fathom its own non-being, even given the knowledge of the death of one's double. This attempt to see the self clearly for whatever it may be is further complicated by the widening distance between poet and person. I want to be careful to distinguish this distancing effect from that of "The Schooner *Flight*," in which the speaker Shabine allows Walcott to speak both more grandly and more idiomatically than he might otherwise be able to do. By the time he writes *The Prodigal*—"an old man's book," Walcott seems much more willing to write unapologetically in a grandeur that risks bombast (1.III.7). He appears at once more brazenly proud of his "gift" and more circumspect about the worth of his poetic accomplishments. *The Prodigal* is indeed an old man's book, a laureate's retrospective, and it betrays the shift in identity inevitable for the poet whose individual language becomes an international concern: what Seamus Heaney has called one's name becoming a name "in inverted commas," or what Jorge Luis Borges describes as the split in identity between "Borges and I" (Hartigan, Borges 246). "A conspiring pen / had brought him this far," Walcott writes, notably using the third person. "Now both lives had met / in this achievement" (2.II.18-19, 23-4). How does one meet one's double?—not the genetic double of his twin, Roddy, but the idea of the poet to

which the person Walcott has so long aspired? That hypothetical question may recall the fabulist alienation of Strand's doppelgänger poems, and in this instance of Walcott's own alienation we may hear echoes of Strand's deployment of the self as commodity. Or, more distant but just as relevant, we may hear echoes of Borges speaking of "the other one, the one called Borges" in "Borges and I" (246). Walcott's depiction of varieties of doubleness evinces a sympathy with the Borges who can say: "I do not know which of us has written this page" (247).

The mythologizing of the self—becoming nobody, or a nation; becoming an Antaeus drawing strength from the earth on which he stands or a Proteus forever shifting form—deludes the "I" about its end. All one's travels lead one to the same place, or lack of place, a "monstrous map that is called Nowhere / and that is where we're all headed [. . .]" (3.II.29-30). "I" knows this, but it cannot quite believe. The knowledge of coming extinction—coming sooner than later—compels the speaker to attempt an articulation of just what his existence is *for*. The death of his brother, and the summative attitude toward his own achievement and inevitable decline, render the questions of last things all the more urgent in *The Prodigal*, a book that the speaker assumes (wrongly) "will be your last" (17.V.10). He is as ambivalent as ever about his own identity and its constant correlative, his allegiance to place. In remembering Roddy, he asks: "What was our war, veteran of threescore years and ten? / To save the salt light of the island / to protect and exalt its small people" (9.II.11-13). In this moment, his home, his family, and the craft of poetry itself are paramount. In the poem's twelfth section, the speaker questions himself again: "Prodigal, what were your wanderings about? The smoke of homecoming, the smoke of departure" (12.I.1-2). Here he depicts himself as a Keatsian chameleon, changing as the scene around him changes:

> On the warm stones of Florence
> I subtly alter to a Florentine
> till the sun passes, in London
> I am pieced by fog, and shaken from reflection
> in Venice, a printed page in the sun
> on which a cabbage-white unfolds, a bookmark.   (12.I.23-8)

The speaker finds himself altered as his surroundings alter, but both he and his surroundings undergo further metamorphoses as they become, as people and places so often do in Walcott's poems, figures for poetry itself.   In the final lines of the poem, place and poetry again converge in a moment that marries the constant change of the sea to the changes of a language and the poet's impossible attempt to "have" it:

> And always certainly, steadily, on the bright rim
> of the world, getting no nearer or nearer, the more
> the bow's wedge shuddered toward it, prodigal,
> that line of light that shines from the other shore.   (18.IV.24-7)

This prodigal, like the prodigal Shabine, continues his wanderings even after the poem ends. But if so much of Walcott's sense of himself is emblematized in the idea of doubleness, the travels by which he has also defined himself only divide by two, like Zeno's paradox, so that he is only approaching but never reaching the end.

Since his earliest poems, Derek Walcott has been a poet of rare ambition and of the still rarer talent to realize it. Despite James Dickey's claim, Walcott might seem to us "born into a major theme" only because he has written himself so thoroughly into that theme, and written the theme so inseparably into his own biography. The cost of Walcott's poetic ambition for his home as well as for himself is the loss of his own sense of home. The prodigal's fear of returning a failure has gradually evolved into resignation to the idea of never returning: the home to which he would return has been forever changed by his own poetry. So successfully has this poetic chorographer written himself into his own land that maps of Castries now show at town center "Derek Walcott Square." His myth of himself, of his archipelago, and of a poetry that validates both, ebbs and flows with his own circumstances, his own place in any given place. It becomes ever more difficult for Walcott to define the boundaries of those myths, just as the shifting tides and sands obscure the place where the land ends and the sea begins.

Coda

When Jahan Ramazani called for "a more flexible language to describe how a poet like Walcott can put into dialectical interrelation literary and cultural influences that may seem incompatible," he was speaking most urgently of our understanding of Walcott's and other postcolonial poets' cultural and poetic "hybridity." He might just as well have been speaking of the need for a fresh picture of the changing poetics of the United States in these early years of the twenty-first century. Our present moment demands the recognition that the divisions by which we have classified our poets are outdated and inadequate. We need a more flexible language to describe what Charles Simic has called "the time of minor poets," in which we "welcome you whose fame will never reach beyond your closest family, and perhaps one or two good friends gathered after dinner over a jug of fierce red wine . . ." (58). Indeed, we need a more flexible language to acknowledge and describe the emergence of our contemporary poetics from a remarkable historical moment in the 1970s and 1980s, when the work of poststructuralist critical theorists and of practicing poets came into contact, and often into productive conflict. I hope that one of the significant contributions of this dissertation is to have begun to articulate the importance of that contact and its lasting influence in contemporary poetics.

What began for me as an attempt to understand the persistent question of the idea of the self in contemporary poetics has become, in retrospect, a period study of the role of that question in the poetic debates of the 1970s and 1980s. If I have stretched the limits of the term "contemporary," I hope nevertheless that I have demonstrated some of the ways in which these questions are both antique and absolutely current. Moreover, I hope that this dissertation prompts further thinking and discussion of other poets whose work in that

particular period exemplifies the fertility of the intellectual and poetic contact I describe. What, for instance, are the poetic, philosophical, and political stakes of the idea of the self in the work of Amiri Baraka? In Lyn Hejinian? To what extent has their work been in conversation with the work of critical theorists? To what extent has this work changed the terms of those conversations? How might it provide us with a vocabulary flexible enough to discuss the poems of this decade, the problems of the next one? I hope that the necessary dissolution of a false binary might reveal both the lasting influence of a specific historical moment as well as the beautiful chaos of the contemporary scene. I am also aware as I write this that, in all likelihood, the proper language to describe our age will be available only after this age, whatever it is, has aged into another.

In my introduction, I venture a provisional and rather rudimentary definition of the self as the object of one's own consciousness, a unique essence of individual personhood. In the course of this study, however, I have more frequently referred to the even more elusive concept of the authorial self or the lyric "I," the words on the page or in temporal space that we take as the product, if not the essence, of the intelligence that ordered them. Recapitulating these definitions now makes explicit just how unsatisfactory they are, and returns us to one of the questions that haunts this project: Roland Barthes's "Who is speaking thus?" Or, more flippantly, to D. H. Lawrence's mock interrogation of Walt Whitman:

> Well then, it just shows you haven't *got* any self. It's a mush, not a woven thing. A hotch-potch, not a tissue. Your self.
>
> Oh, Walter, Walter, what have you done with it? What have you done with yourself? With your own individual self? For it sounds as it if had all leaked out of you, leaked into the universe. (173)

And so it has. For the dissolution of the self—of the individual human body or the articulate intelligence—is both the goal and the fear of so many writers who concern themselves with the issues I have addressed here. To the extent that we are our bodies,

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Lawrence's image of a mushy, leaking self is a quite literal vision of a universal fate. To the extent that we are our intelligences, Lawrence might be understood metaphorically: our words remain the records of those intelligences—however imperfect, however problematic those records may be—as long as the words themselves remain. Thus the poem, whatever its speaker is or is not, preserves both Whitman's illusion that "They are all alive and well somewhere" and Dickinson's that "the Brain—is wider than the Sky—" ("Song of Myself" 6.125, "[The Brain—is wider than the Sky—" 1). These are questions for both philosophy and poetry. These questions demand productive contact, even productive conflict, between the two.

What is it that we encounter when we read a poem? The most basic answer is that we encounter language (although even that definition, once ventured, demands its own exception). And since language, to adapt one of Grossman's definitions of poetry, is a "thing made which makes its maker"—we also seem to encounter an apparition of the "maker" of that artifact of language. The language of which poems are made is not fundamentally different from the language of which STOP and THANK YOU signs are made, but we tend to find these experiences of reading to be radically different. The criteria by which we call language "poetic"—metaphorical figure, prosodic and rhythmic patterning, and so on—often coincide with the phenomena—tone, diction, attitude—by which we identify an "individual voice." Anyone who has read and reread the letters of a lost loved one knows the frisson of apparition, of individual human encounter, experienced in the encounter with even "ordinary" language. Poems, of course, are not people, but the power of poetic language to create the illusion of personal encounter in these apparently arbitrary marks on a page remains, for me, one of the astonishing mysteries of poetry. I locate that mystery primarily in the power of metaphorical language, the "carrying over" in which one noun paradoxically becomes another, and the same process by which the historical person who wrote the poem somehow "carried over"—"translated," to use Strand's term and the etymological cousin to the Greek "metaphor"—in the language of the poem. In these

versions of carrying over we find what I call here the illusion of personal encounter. I use the word "illusion" intentionally, cognizant of its roots in the Latin verbs *illudere* and *ludere*, its kinship both to deceit and to play (*OED)*. In poetry we are willfully illuded; we have put on a different self as we read, as we watch and listen—indeed, we are at play. All of this, perhaps, we know already. All of it bears repeating.

When we speak of the self, we may speak of nothing more than a set of discursive habits for narrating our individual existences and our encounters with written language. But this is precisely why Barthes's questions, Lawrence's and—I hope—my own are so important. To argue about the self in poems is to argue about what we believe we are reading and what we believe it means to us, whoever we are. I do not delude myself that this dissertation has provided a sufficient answer to the question(s) of the self in contemporary American poetry. Nor am I content with having attempted to dismantle an inaccurate model of our poetry, only to fail to offer a useful replacement. But I am also cognizant that at a certain point the wisest action I can take is to concede what I do not know, what I hope to address in the future. These are separate projects, separate conversations in which I hope to take part, and which I hope my work here might advance. I hope to have opened some new opportunities for perceiving the variety of writing and thinking across the spectrum of poetic practice in the United States, especially as we seek to understand what we mean by authority and identity in poetry. Moreover, I hope to have enriched our sense of the achievements—some aesthetic, some intellectual, some political— of four poets whose work seems to me as major as this "age of minor poets" might allow. I look forward to the conversation to come.

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