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Articulating Space: Short Essays on Poetry

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Argotist Ebooks

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Ruptured Lines as Minor Uprisings

The next breakthrough in poetry will be a permanent separation of Language from the Line.

Language today, whether phonetic or ideographic, is linear. Even avant-garde visual poetry that attempts to be “non-linear” is essentially linear—“non” is merely a prefix for an automatic and inherent part of language. Although the Reader may approach a “non-linear” text from multiple directions, thereby creating multiple vectors, each path to understanding involves an understanding from point A to point B—a durational, logical, linguistic line of understanding.

There are powerful reasons to escape linearity: our language is saturated with our worldview, and for political lives to change—for capitalism to subside as the default economic strategy, for gender and racial egalitarianism to emerge, for “logical,” sentential theories of justice based on a “two-way street” or “equal exchange” (an eye for an eye) to submit to a higher and more abstract system of forgiveness—our language must escape the grid-like logic that allows social “stratification,” ideas of “equality,” and political and economic “equity.” Even communism, at least as it has so far been practiced in the world, refers back to these social ideas of lines (vectors pointing upwards to the rich from the “base” nether regions of the poor and oppressed; the Hegelian dialectic as a mathematical description of social evolution). I would suggest that a higher order of humanity exists (not to sound too Nietzschean) where the lines that currently permeate our language and our politics might be erased, without a trace, where a more abstract view of social, economic, and political systems allows a plethora of different things to exist at once, replacing the current way of thinking that constantly attempts to set both sides of any social situation equal to zero. Social order and language need not be reducible to mathematical logic.

Rachel Blau duPlessis and Lyn Hejinian, both female writers breaking into a traditionally male genre, have distinct views of the line. duPlessis writes that “‘Avant-Garde’ or experimental poets cannot simply discount this part; they must consciously address the social and formal imbeddings of gender. Nothing changes by changing the structures or sequences only” (“Otherhow” 141). She seems to imagine that “representation [is] a site of struggle” (145) but, in her dialectic Marxist approach, does not envision a Space for Writing beyond a synthetic resolution between masculine and feminine discourses. Writing on the margin (to refer to her essay “Whowe”), with

Poetry [that] wanders, vagrant, seeking to cross and recross that line [below which is articulate speech, aphasia, stammer and above which is at least moderate, habitual fluency]: mistaking singular for plural, proposing stressed, exposed moments of genuine ungrammaticalness, neologisms, non-standard dialect, and non-normative forms (144).

still refers to spaces otherwise (and always) uninhabited. Breaking the classical forms of male-dominated artistic fields is at best a rebellion within a strong and impermeable patriarchy. “Ruptured” but still essentially linear poetry can always be criticized as “not poetry,” as an ignorable aberration. A new poetry requires not a marginal stance, not a “ruptured line,” but an *entirely new language*. Lyn Hejinian similarly misses the “mark” when she writes, in defense of the line as the minimal unit of the poem, that “syntax and movement are more important to me than vocabulary (the historically macho primacy of which I dislike in any case)” (“Line,” *LI* 133). Hejinian later writes that “it seems logical to me to write with [lines]” (134). The *meaning* of the words is only one facet of the patriarchy of language. Hejinian overlooks the implications of the “logic” she sees in linear writing: logic as we know it, the inflexible, linear, equalizing logic of man, is the logic of *men*. To reach outside the

patriarchy of language one must reach outside language—or at least endeavor to do so. Here language is not merely the succulent and variable *meaning* of words but their harsh and logical *syntax*. Rupturing patriarchy requires a rupturing not of words' romantic *meaning* nor even their linear *placements* but the invention of a super- or post-linear understanding of language, a compound state of understanding that does not require *order and duration* and the *inextricable mixing of Space and Time* but a state of non-equality, of essential and inassimilable pluralism.

A ruptured line, an unromantic word—these are minor uprisings in the patriarchal state of Language. Even poetry is but a small vehicle for a rebellion against the state of the world as we know it; the language itself must change (and luckily poetry is usually a space where language can shift a bit—but poetry's technology is essentially too old and ingrained into the culture to have the kind of major influence that, for instance, the camera and motion picture have had). Poets like Susan Howe (in “Whowe” and “This Page is My Page”) go as far as any woman in the late twentieth century towards separating poetry from its Romantic, “man speaking to men” history and its grid-like masculine formality; but the constant reference back to the durational line so essential to Language undercuts any rebellion against the world as we know it.

The durational line not only refers to Beat and Black Mountain poetry—not especially friendly to women—but to a classical concept of Time as inseparable from metaphors of spatiality. Time “lasts,” it *moves through something*, its past, present, and future components are traceable on a *time-line*. It occupies space, it *measures* (time=counting=numbers=counters, placeholders). For Language to move beyond the current state of humanity it must not merely be used “neutrally” (erasing engendered words), it must be pushed out of space-time.

Objectivism in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetics

In their essays on the practice of writing poetry, many of the Language poets use Marxist rhetoric to describe poetry writing as a process of production. If poetry is “production,” going all the way back to the Greek “poiesis,” or “making,” which implies that poetry is wrought from words like a horseshoe is wrought from iron, then poetry is an object like any other object, “a small (or large) machine made of words” (William Carlos Williams).

Ron Silliman provides the most obvious comparisons between poetry and Marxist economics, and therefore between poetry and objects, in *The New Sentence*. In “Re:Writing Marx” and “The Political Economy of poetry” he describes the text in terms of its exchange value, and therefore in terms of its comprehensibility and aesthetic value in society. He writes (in “Re:Writing Marx”): “In order to become a book, the text must be transferred to the other person, for whom it serves as a reading value, *through the medium of exchange*” (19). The “book,” which Silliman describes earlier in this short essay as “an external object,” becomes a socially determined object just as a paper dollar has socially determined value. In “The Political Economy of Poetry,” Silliman distinguishes between poetry written *for exchange* (thus, poetry written for exchange with an audience, even if that audience is the writer), thus poetry as commodity, from poetry that escapes commoditization. As poetry is always a social act, in that it cannot escape participation in the social entity that *is* language, poetry is always a commodity. Although the poet always already participates in the larger social exchange of Language, he or she need not produce poems that are already commodities, as one may focus on the labor (practice) rather than the product (form) of poetry, thus replacing a capitalist standpoint with a Marxist one. By focusing on the labor involved in making poetry, one escapes the slick packaging in capitalist societies that make old things seem new—the urgency to create something “new and improved” while at the same time minimizing production and development costs (“Of Theory, to Practice” 60-61) makes for shoddy but exchangeable products. In making poetry, if the focus remains on “craft” rather than “making it new,” poetry can escape the pure economy of exchange even while it cannot escape the larger exchange of Language.

Bruce Andrews also addresses the materiality of language through a sociopolitical frame. In “Index,” the first essay of *Paradise & Method*, Andrews mixes his own theories with quotes from Jerome Rothenberg and Aram Saroyan when he writes:

8. Each word is a syntax, a sensory object—more than descriptions, vehicles, or emotional journalism: sound, texture, weight, targets, rhythms, sight, presence.
 9. Words as sensory objects vs. (or and?) words as signs.
 10. An object is whatever it becomes under the impulse of the situation at hand.
 11. I look at it as an event, not as descriptive instance.
- (PM 3)

Like Wittgenstein’s signposts, Andrews’ words are *things* that take on meaning in (sociopolitical) contexts. A word is an “event, not [a] descriptive instance” in that it does not directly point to a thing but becomes instantly meaningful in a *certain time* that lends context. A word is thus meaningful in its *position* in a sociopolitical, chronological context, and if it is thus important only when it is *positioned*, Andrews implies that the word is a moveable (or, in Silliman’s terms, exchangeable) object. In “Total Equals What: Poetic & Praxis,” Andrews puts the word-object in a political context, drawing (as Silliman does) on Marxist rhetoric to show the social objecthood of the word:

[If] you think of discourse or ideology as something like a mode of production, then literature becomes something that's inscribed onto material within that mode...[Discourse], as mode of production; meaning, means of production; and the organization of writing, the relations of production. (PM 38)

The practice of writing poetry is, then, for Andrews, a particular participation in a larger sociopolitical discourse. It is also a practice of production, and within that production avant-garde writing is an attempt to “reinforce the generative qualities of language’s raw materials” and “laying bare the device” (PM 43-44)—that is, a revolutionary social activity that aims to demythologize language, to bring what is transparent in language (the search for immediate meaning without recourse to language itself, as Silliman points out) into view so that the entire social community can participate in making meaning without putting themselves at the mercy of a politically (and aristocratically) infused syntax.

Andrews uses the word “systemic” many times in “Total Equals What,” implying two qualities of language: First, “systemic” implies that language is arranged in a particular, holistic way that, as Andrews points out, is socially and politically controlled. In this sense, “systemic” implies a frame that is laid onto the world so that a particular sociopolitical group sees the world in a certain way. Fortunately, as political regimes can be overthrown but never escaped, the frame can be shifted (“discursive shifters or social shifters” 42) and redefined. Second, “systemic” implies that language is a body that, like any body, can be scratched or marked (“literature becomes something that’s inscribed onto material within that mode” 38). In this sense, “systemic” implies that someone writing, or practicing literature, can “leave his or her mark” on the greater social discourse, as one might tattoo a body or brand a cattle. Leaving one’s mark on the greater social discourse then refers back to the first sense of “systemic,” in that one’s influence upon the social discourse shifts the grid, enacting social and political change at the same time that it enacts change within the smaller and representative social discourse of literature.

Charles Bernstein takes up Andrews’ theme of “systemic” language in “Writing and Method” (*Content’s Dream*). He states:

All writing is a demonstration of method; it can assume a method or investigate it. In this sense, style and mode are always at issue, for all styles are socially mediated conventions open to reconvening at any time. (226)

Writing is always a reflection of sociopolitical values; if Language were not social, or did not have “exchange value,” it could not be communicative. Within the confines of an inherently social medium, the writer can enforce (“assume”) the status quo or rebel against (“investigate”) it. Bernstein intends to “lay bare the device” when he writes that

Much “normal” philosophy and poetry simply adopts a style and works on techniques within it, without considering either the implications of the larger modality or its methodological assumptions. In contrast, a “constructive” mode would suggest that the mode itself is explored as content, its possibilities of meaning are investigated and presented, and that this process is itself recognized as a method. (CD 227)

Bernstein, like Andrews, wants writing itself, as a mode of discourse, to be investigated as a thing representative of a sociopolitical status quo—just as a Medieval artifact may be studied in order to understand the context of its creation. By approaching writing from a “constructivist” standpoint,

Bernstein endeavors to show its physical, rather than transparent, qualities, and thus to call attention to the society that uses that writing as an exchangeable (communicative) item.

These three texts, all of which address the sociopolitical nature of language, use analogous terminology from Marxist discourse to introduce a new Objectivism. Just as the Objectivists saw words as *things* which could be used without Romantic meaning, these Language poets see words as things which, because of their exchangeable nature, reflect their sociopolitical context and can thus be used to identify and change the status quo.

Not a Formless Form but an Edgeless Edifice

New innovations in poetry will not happen in terms of form but rather in terms of how a poem utilizes space and time in more abstract ways—not in terms of how syllables fit into a line, or how a line fits onto a page, or how the page represents words' duration in time (as a score would) but merely how meaningful symbols dance and collapse in time and space, and how to locate their meanings in the constantly shifting grayness of a page without an underlying spatiotemporal graph.

Charles Bernstein witnesses the shift to a “formless” form in his essay “State of the Art.” Echoing Lyotard's *Postmodernism* testimony of artists working against rules, Bernstein calls attention to human ability to cite form within the seemingly chaotic and poets' ability to work constantly against an assimilation of that chaos by providing texts that call form into question. He writes that “*Poetry is aversion of conformity* in the pursuit of new forms” and by form he means “what's swirling so often incomprehensibly around us” (*A Poetics* 1). Bernstein works against form—at least, form as we know it, semantic grids we place over our perception of reality, leaving things “out”—by attempting to allow all terms to remain, a sort of inassimilable white noise of the World. Poetry “provide[s] a site for the construction of social and imaginative facts and configurations avoided or overlooked elsewhere” (*AP* 3), allowing minor things to coexist with classically poetic things, allowing the world to retain its essential pluralistic inconceivability.

Bernstein shifts the focus of poetry from the graph-seen-from-above to the graph-seen-from-within. As one would view a chessboard from the perspective of the Knight, the reader or subject sees the world from within the inassimilable plurality, the white noise, of the poem. In “Narrating Narration: The Shapes of Ron Silliman's work,” Bernstein writes about the essential nature of making meaning—the gradual cognitive mapping of each chessboard square as time progresses.

How to get from A to C by way of, at the least, D. This is not only the story of a poem but of a life—biography. The miracle is rather that you string pieces together and have a syntax comprehended, a life inhabited. (*Content's Dream* 305)

Bernstein points to Silliman's “New Sentence” poetry in exploring this special kind of ground-level cognition, using such metaphors as the subway (“It's all connected and if you don't comprehend that it may be because it's not trying to persuade you that it is.” 306) and architectural plans (“The experience of reading a Silliman text is less the coolly formal pleasure of looking at an architectural plan and more the surprise of being in a building whose plan becomes apparent as you walk through it.” 309) to discuss the instantaneous sense-making that parataxis requires. Traveling through subways and buildings, the subject-making-meaning encounters the world with a rabbit's view, as though she were traveling through a burrow. Although the labyrinth is unicursal—as the Knight can only move in a particular grid—the subject, from his or her perspective, cannot develop an eagle's eye view of the grid, at least not immediately. The subject is trapped with a particular perspective in all its future-less, grid-less multiplicity, and must form a “unified...picture” from “partial glimpses” (311).

A grid-less, partial cognitive map makes for a vision of the world without edges: as early humans imagined the world to drop off an inevitable “edge” of flat space, so the reading subject without a marked form must view the poem as stopping only out of an essential lack of resources—the page ends, and so does the poem. The formless poem is a snapshot of a possibly endless terrain of uncharted and unchartable topography, an interruption of the white noise that “swirls so incomprehensibly around us.”

Steve McCaffery taps into this shape-without-periphery in “McLuhan + Language x Music.” McCaffery cites McLuhan’s prophecies about radio’s effect on our perceptions of Time.

“Electricity,” writes McLuhan in *Understanding Media*, “points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatsoever.” The Electric Age, quite acoustically, brings back the future and looks forward to the past. It is is [sic] the destroying angel of space-time linear seriality. (NI 79)

The electric space of sound—as exemplified by recording devices, radio, television, and, now, sound files (such as .mpg)—allows the subject to dip into a sonic world that exists with or without him or her, and ties itself into chronometric knots. No longer is the past in the past—it can be replayed, rebroadcast, accessed by anyone (especially with the advent of personal computers) at any time. The “delayed immediacy” of Time dominates its meaning for us: we can access historical moments and predict future moments in sonic duration and aural patterns. We can access Gertrude Stein reading her poetry via an .mpg file, switch on the radio to hear an NPR report, and listen to a rerun of *The Simpsons* on television all at once, then turn all of those sounds off and occupy a specific aural Time that exists only with reference to a multiplicity of Time fragments. A Native American theory of Time makes this idea of Time in the Electric Age more digestible: a certain tribe imagined that Time is a whirling, edgeless chaos, without linearity (pastpresentfuture), origin, shape (curve, line, circle), or end. To find oneself in Time, to lasso oneself to a sort of Time-platform where one could momentarily tame its chaos into a livable linearity, one had to build posts to touch periodically. Like a child “saving” himself in a game of tag by hitting “home base” or a journeyman “locating” himself with signposts along his way, the Native American needed to build and touch Time-posts (real, tangible posts, like signposts) to locate himself on a platform of Time in which he could exist. Similarly, Time in the Electric Age requires the subject to dip in and out of a chaos and locate oneself via duration messages in a chaotic Time that disallows categorization into a strict linear progression. This Time is not a *formless form*, as Bernstein attempts to describe in “State of the Art,” but *an edgeless edifice*. Formal innovations in poetry, even as it constantly attempts to accurately describe a chaotic world, are constantly *bound* by artificial edges—therefore, even as they are classically unorthodox, they retain *form*. Moving beyond current manifestations of innovative poetry, a “real” avant-garde would need to acknowledge an *edgelessness*. Assuming that the page is still the unit of containment (which need not be assumed), the unit would be acknowledged as *already* historical and interruptive, as though the poem only existed there as a snapshot of a larger poetic chaos.

Towards a Reinvestigation of Cubism: Adapting Stein for a New Generation of Poets

The Language movement introduced us to Gertrude Stein's syntactical "becoming," revealing the subtlety of a syntactical cubism while highlighting Stein's relation to "language as such"—as a social, politically weighted entity. The subtlety of Stein's artistic positions with regard to Cubism should be reinvestigated by those upcoming visual poets who are attempting to take the Language movement as a given. It is precisely through this re-appropriation of Stein's views of Time and Space that the genes of Poetry may mutate into a new creature with new energy and momentum. Looking to the discoveries the Language poets made with regard to Stein, new poets may move beyond the critiques of how *Stein* uses time and space and utilizes Stein's principles in new work.

The new ways that the Language poets looked at the ways in which humans share language and perceive the world through it often found their roots in Wittgenstein. A slightly different and perhaps more complex view of Language theory can be seen when one looks through the filters provided by the poets' treatment of Stein. A self-proclaimed cubist, Stein focused on the crystalline nature of objects—the "thingness" that disallows a direct naming. Objects are crystalline in that they are always entropic—they are also crystalline in that when we name them, as when we view a crystal, we impose upon them a particular stasis that has nothing to do with their real nature (a more detailed description of crystallography can be found in Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax*). These issues of Time, reality, and semantics are focal points of Language theory, though the ways in which they surface in Language poetry are often much paler than they might be.

At the forefront of the feminist politics latent in Language poetry are female reinvestigations of Stein's poetry as feminist texts. Susan Howe calls attention to a resistance to patriarchy through a redefinition (and thus reversibility) of history by analyzing Stein's syntax. Howe writes: "She reached in words for a new vision formed from the process of naming, as if a first woman were sounding, not describing, 'space of time filled with moving'" (*My Emily Dickinson* 11). Stein moves away from typical language, and thus from the patriarchal social order that teaches us language and filters the world in a particular way. Howe continues: "Gertrude Stein also conducted a skillful and ironic investigation of patriarchal authority over literary history. Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence?" (*MED* 11) Stein actually addresses these questions critically in *Composition as Explanation*. She writes that

There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of them then different from other generations and this is what makes everything different otherwise they are all alike and everybody knows it because everybody says it. (*Composition as Explanation* 21)

Stein writes that each generation is different from the last because of the special way that each considers its surroundings. According to Howe, a way of writing can lead to socio-historical change by breaking open, or calling attention to, the politics latent in language. Another way to look at Stein's generational change and "space of time filled with moving" is to consider the poem as if it were a living, evolving being. Explorers of new visual poetry can look to Stein for earlier experiments in scale and the theme of minor variation over Time:

It was all so nearly different and it is different, it is natural that if everything is used and there is a continuous present and a beginning again and again if it is all so alike it must be simply different and everything simply different was the natural way of creating it then.
(*Composition as Explanation* 26-27)

In the above passage from *Composition as Explanation*, Stein refers to “generations”—groups of people born within certain time frames—but her argument can be applied just as easily to each generation of the semantic unit in poetry such as Stein’s. In Stein’s poetry, each phrase is a slight mutation of or variation on the last, just as each human generation is a slight mutation of the previous one (genetically). Just as each human generation chooses different things on which to focus, each phrase in a typical Stein poem “looks” at a different aspect of the thing it describes—the “simply” different which draws attention to the making of meaning inside minor variations of seeing. The quality of human generations that allows some things to escape consideration at some times is the same quality of Stein’s work which allows a thing to move, unnamed, within a broken net of verbs and pronouns. Things escape real definition while simultaneously gaining fuzzy, compound meaning. This compound meaning happens on a microscopic level. From afar, the word “human” describes a very long history of blurred bodies; if one comes closer to a particular space and time, one sees and understands individuals. The same phenomenon is present in Stein’s phrases: reading a long passage gives one a general understanding, but focusing on short spaces reveals subtle arguments (in her critical work) and previously unnoticed aspects of things (in works such as *Tender Buttons*). Stein’s long columns of slightly differentiated phrases, and block paragraphs of evolving arguments, force the reader into an unvaried space that mirrors the syntax of the semantic units themselves.

Stein’s “becoming”—a sort of continual change towards an undefined future, as happens in natural evolution—is often described by the Language poets. Stein’s position on nouns and naming involves a particular visualization of the dynamism of Space and Time. Where names usually pin down an aspect of a thing, verbs, pronouns, and connectors act as “shifters,” allowing the language recipient to understand multiple identities of a thing at once. This multiplicity is not assimilated, but rather allowed to exist as a multiplicity, when Stein writes such lines as:

Suppose, to suppose, suppose a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. To suppose, we suppose that there arose here and there that here and there there arose an instance of knowing that there are here and there that there are there that they will prepare, that they do care to come again. And they to come again. (*An Elucidation*, as reprinted in *transition* 1927, p. 13)

Stein uses very few nouns here, and those things that are nouns are also Times. As the transition between “a rose” and “arose” suggests, Space and perspective are mutable with respect to Time, allowing the perceiver to amalgamate many versions of a thing before understanding the nature of a thing—a nature which is, even when “understood,” never assimilated as a flat or static entity. Hejinian explains in her astute “Two Stein Talks” (printed in *The Language of Inquiry*) that “things can be viewed ‘objectively,’ which is to say viewed as objects but also viewed in the process of coming into objecthood” (97). Although Hejinian uses Stein to illustrate sentential/linear meaning (the pet semantic unit of an entire generation of philosopher-poets), Stein’s argument can be viewed as an imaginative exploration into the Space and Time inherent in language that make language much more interesting than linear development allows. Stein’s language allows for *change over time*: the development of memory in relation to meaning and the combination of multiple views into a crystalline whole. This effort to depict the evolution of an object over Time is at the heart of cubism, but may be taken in an abstract form from Stein’s work and established as a root for a new wave of visual poetry. Barrett

Watten describes this phenomenon of multiplicity and its relation to Time in his critique of Robert Smithson's landscape sculptures (in *Total Syntax*). Watten writes:

A monumental stasis, compelling and inert, is for Smithson a hopeful development in art. This hope is connected to the recognition and exploration of states of entropy by artists as the art world falls apart into 'endless amounts of points of view.'... The breaking apart of the spatial order undermines the authority of the present time." (TS 69)

Watten, like Howe, hopes to change the politics of the immediate future by calling into question the ordering of Space and Time through language. His "endless points of view" are the trajectories of a utopia where every point of view is equally a vision of reality. New poetry, which more often than not takes democracy as a given (just as it takes Language poetry as a given), can construct these endless points of view not only syntactically—as Stein attempted to—but spatially and aurally—multiple voices, no lines (lines are always automatically boundaries, as is grammar), an extant pluralism never blended into a "melting pot" but allowed to exist in a differentiated, entropic, nearly boundless system of signs that border on nonsense.

Cubism involves two major shifts in thinking—shifts that the Language group never really made. Even in their efforts to create "non-linear" poetry (as occurs occasionally in Charles Bernstein's *Dark City* and Bruce Andrews' early works), the unit of measure was always the line—the line was the given even when works attempted to be "non"-linear. Rethinking cubism as a root system for a new visual poetry involves throwing out the idea of the line. Things can no longer be "non-linear" because to break into a new way of thinking about poetry the word "linear" must be completely eradicated. Cubism lets us imagine a world without lines by allowing so many lines to exist at once, that we can abstract the idea of the plane. Cubism's multiplicity of perspective provides the observer with the illusion of motion, denying any direct or singular "progression" through a poem, painting, or other environment. The Language group, still working out of Beat and Black Mountain histories, continues to see the poem as a pathway that passes through and delineates Time and Space. The New Sentence and even critiques of it, such as Lyn Hejinian's "Line," focus on the linear semantic unit. Even more advanced criticism such as Charles Bernstein's "Words and Pictures" and Bruce Andrews' "Lines Linear How to Mean" look to "duration" and "delimiting" as the primary components of meaning in language. In a new visual poetry, such as work by Steve McCaffery and Michael Basinski (among others, especially as represented in the magazine *Essex*), no "progression" through Time and Space is marked out for the Reader—poems are not just multicursal but *multidimensional* labyrinths of meaning, nonsense, and material. The word "material" leads to the second major shift needed to break with the current views of poetry: the page is not a blank canvas or silence, not a score nor a painting, but a topological space that expands in multiple spatiotemporal "directions." That the line no longer exists indicates that things drawn linearly are obsolete—the cube replaces the square as the unit of visual measure, separating new visual poetry from work by Apollinaire and bpNichol by destroying the ease of a meaning-depiction relationship. The cube in this case is not just two squares with four lines mapped onto a two-dimensional space, but the *principle between* the two-dimensional cube and the third dimension (namely, that an $n + 1$ dimension can be mapped only inaccurately onto an n dimensional field). Rethinking cubism opens an enormous imaginative (and imaginary) space in which to use words, breaking out of the confines of progressive Time and linear Space.

The materiality of the page, the mirroring between differentiation within the page and differentiation of meaning, and the break from a two-dimensional plane to a three-dimensional one, extant in Stein's theory, are aspects of poetry in use by contemporary visual poets. Ian Hamilton Finlay, Cecilia Vicuña, Robert Grenier, and Steve McCaffery are more influential to these poets than Apollinaire, Pound,

Nichol, or Johnson—those poets whose poetry reflects a direct relationship between meaning and visual representations. The same abstract principle of un-naming, of allowing unassimilated multiplicity, is present in these forerunner's works and those of Stein. Finlay and Vicuña's works border on the meaningless—without extra-lingual boundaries, such as the entrance to Little Sparta or Vicuña's ceremonial *precarios*-making performances, the spectator may not know to find meaning in objects that, though syntactic, are rarely lingual. In Grenier's work, too, the ability to recognize the poem *as such* is called into question, forcing the viewer to learn a new language much more complex than any of the Language poets' in order to read the poems (works such as Charles Bernstein's *Dark City* often force the reader to dance between lines to make meaning, but the meaning always comes together quite linearly), which sometimes consist of only a few words—and no lines—on a page. McCaffery's work, perhaps the most influential to young poets, plays with a topology of the page similar to a smoothness found in Stein's barely differentiated phrases. A reader of Stein finds herself in a constant shift of meaning, and must cling to the smallest fragments of differentiation in order to understand the wash of phrases. In McCaffery, the differentiation is much bigger (less microcosmic) but the constant shifts of focus in works such as *Carnival* force the reader into a tectonics of meaning. These examples are quite different from the works of Apollinaire, Nichol, and Johnson, because although in *all* of the poets the visual aspect is important, in Apollinaire, Nichol, and Johnson, it is *essential*. The calligramic aspect of the work of these three poets subtracts from the dynamism of shifting meaning and visual playfulness in works such as McCaffery's—the meaning-vision relationship is immediate and simplistic rather than pluralistic, shifting, and dangerous.

Syntax: The Final Frontier

In their investigation of Language, the last generation of poets—especially those working with the New Sentence—sought after a minimal unit of meaning, and found syntax. Although the Language Poets did not explore the ramifications of this minimal unit in their poetry nearly as much as they wrote about it in their poetics, poets working at the same time (often considered peripheral) *did* explore and are still exploring the ramifications of minimalist syntax, challenging poetry in ways the Language poets cleared paths for but never really investigated.

Poets working on the fringe of the Official Verse Anti-Culture that is the Language “Movement” include Amelia Etlinger, Cecilia Vicuña, and new visual poets, Steve McCaffery and bpNichol (as well as their Canadian inheritors, poets such as Christian Bök, Darren Wershler-Henry, Kenneth Goldsmith, Jay Millar, Stephen Cain, Christopher Fritton, Ric Royer, etc.), Nick Piombino, John Cage, Arakawa and Madeline Gins, Robert Smithson, and concrete poets such as Ian Hamilton Finlay. Not *all* of the works by these poets and artists embody the special valuation of syntax that I will describe in this essay. When I mention Piombino, I mean specifically his collage works; with McCaffery and Nichol, I mean such works as *Carnival* and *Zygal* but not *Ow’s Waif* or *The Martyrology*; with Bök I mean parts of *Crystallography* and his collage-like UBU works but not *Eunoia*. All of these works have a very specific use of syntax in common, and that is a particular readable materiality that is independent, but not completely separable, from Saussurean “meaning.”

In order to explain the material syntax that is not only the minimal unit of poetic meaning but also the next area of poetry ripe for real exploration (now that the Language poets have destroyed all grid-like poetic structures, leaving the language malleable in ways previously unimagined), I will concentrate on two poets: Amelia Etlinger and Cecilia Vicuña. I think that it is important that both of these poets are women coming into the art form of a patriarchal language. They are working after Stein, Riding-Jackson, and Howe, and have had a way cleared for them, but at every step upon the path of changing poetry there is an implicit whispering to women to overhaul the language or stop using it...whether Etlinger or Vicuña heard this whispering or merely responded to it subconsciously is uncertain, but their effect on poetic language serves, at some level, to answer the challenge of the woman writing. Although the other poets mentioned above often use language in ways similar to Etlinger and Vicuña’s use, their motivations are dissimilar and their resultant work not a tenth as drastic as these two poets’.

Etlinger’s work, created in the 1960s and 1970s in central New York State, is currently housed in the Poetry and Rare Book Collection at SUNY Buffalo. Etlinger began writing relatively normal free verse poetry, usually taking nature and love as her subject matter. After an extended illness, her writing changed dramatically, and she began situating a few words on a page and covering the page with chaotic stitches of fragile threads, pollen, leaves, dried flowers, dirt, sand, and other natural objects. In some pieces, the poems—still usually about nature and love, but now said minimally, such as “Eric / love / blue / butterfly” with each word situated in each other word’s space (four groups of four words)—are enclosed in sewn-up paper cards that barely open, offering the reader only a glimpse of the words through the weblike threads and soft white pollen. Eventually, after informing herself of the concrete poetry movements of the times, Etlinger dismissed the word parts of her poems altogether, sending the Library boxes of pollen, rocks, sticks, and thread, and, eventually, small tapestries with abstract patterns. Etlinger’s tapestry patterns were meant to so fully embody meaning that words were unnecessary—the colors of the thread make meaning just like Paul Sharits’ Structuralist films do, just as Cecilia Vicuña’s *precarios* do.

Vicuña's *precarios* are made meaningful not by *patterns* of thread or objects, as in Etlinger's work, but by the *performance of making* the work. Vicuña's own actions in making the precarious are *significant*, syntactical. She weaves her *cloud-net* in the same way in the movie by that title. In her presence, one senses the insignificant being delineated, made important, demarcated, as language perhaps originally was for us when we were very young children and were just coming into sense. To make a *precarios*, which is a conglomerate of pieces such as string, wood, and feathers—again, natural objects—Vicuña takes these natural objects from their natural places and very carefully, even ritualistically, places them in a new context, together, tied with thread, yarn, or string in a sewing of language. Vicuña's primary interest is in the Chilean word for "language," which is the same word as "to weave" (in that language). The interplay of fabric and fabrication, of *real* thread and the "thread" of narrative, is central to Vicuña's redefinition of poetry through the focus on the automatic signification of syntax. Her *precarios*, which, like Etlinger's work, have no attached words (spoken or written, though her rites that bring *precarios* into being often involve nonsense chanting and purring), challenge poetry as such and border on "art"—but their syntax, their message-in-the-medium, lets them occupy a poetic territory and reconfigure its borders.

Articulating Space: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

Poetics and the Creation of Individual Meaning

In a “postmodern,” post-Barthes society, the writer is constantly on the edge of extinction. Bound by language and thereby chained into contextual social constraints, the writer has little space to move and even less space to “create” in the classic sense. No longer a “man speaking to men” (Wordsworth) or an “unacknowledged legislator of the world” (Shelley), the poet must articulate a space for his or her work before his or her voice can be aligned with a sense of individual identity and heard as a “speck” (duPlessis 127) in the fabric of sociopolitical discourse.

The issue of identity or “self” is the fundamental issue in Language texts. Without an “I,” “I” cannot speak, write, create, or even think. The subject is required to answer the question posed by Hejinián, “Am I speaking?” (WS 32). The poets’ collective preoccupation with subjectivity is based on the problem of a speaking being. To speak and be heard, one must use a language understood by others; therefore, one’s thoughts are constantly mediated by the social bed of language that can accept them. If “the boundary of my language is the boundary of my world,” as Wittgenstein writes in his *Tractatus*, the individual’s most private thoughts and relationships with the outside world and social life are bound by the society from which he or she has learned language and in which he or she can articulate thoughts through language. These poets regard language, previously considered a tool for communication, as a social web that “forms consciousness” (Bernstein 141). Bruce Andrews writes that “social life speaks right through us,” we who are “always already exposed to language” (SWI 185-186). He goes so far as to write: “meaning means the elimination of identity,” (SI 209). To “mean” involves using language, and using language involves being so much a part of society as to lose what one may classically define as “individuality” or “identity.”

To be a writer with these chains around the subject writing, and therefore a creative being whose creativity is limited by the social fabric in which one can think and use language, one must create a space in which to articulate thoughts that are on the edge of what a society considers useful and normal. The writer must intentionally marginalize him- or herself to even attempt to create something beyond the edge of the sociopolitical discourse in which he or she is automatically and constantly involved. Although a creation of something “beyond the edge” is impossible for one using language, creation of things *at* the edge, pushing the boundaries of language and social constructs, is a desirable goal for poets (if one dangerously similar to Shelley’s above quote). At the margin of social discourse, one can endeavor to “scar meaning” (SI 210) and become a “speck in the history of [sociopolitically bound] texts” (duPlessis 127). One attempts to “make one’s mark” on language, to claim it for oneself. duPlessis quotes Howe’s *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, which speaks of marking as “an inscription signifying ownership or origin” (duPlessis 123)—I attempt to make my mark on language to make it mine and thus find my identity within it, to make the “tract of land held in common” partly *mine* rather than just “held in common” (as language is). From the margin—the uninhabited blank space of the page of social discourse, a space both within the larger “page” of all-language and beside it, at the edge of it—one can do one’s best to comment on what language leaves out—the sociopolitical traces left when victors wrote social histories that erased names, languages, genders, national histories, and other identifying factors.

This figurative marginal space is essential for the speaking subject: articulating new and interesting ideas (even in a language already bound by social norm) requires clarifying that which is outside language in order to reclaim or reinvent language and thus identify the self (speaker or writer). One

kind of person for whom this marginal space is important is the female. duPlessis describes the nature of Susan Howe's work as "a struggle against female erasure. Self-erasure and self-affirmation. A theatrical. A masque. A ritual for naming. For naming loss" (129). Similarly, Charles Bernstein writes that "[Gertrude] Stein celebrates her suspension of identity, this holding off naming to see what otherwise emerges" (144). The female writing in male language (societies where the male is dominant have male languages: even the word "female" implies the superiority of the male) must find a way to express the "new, unapproachable, unrepresentable, and unattainable" (Bernstein 143). This postmodern expression of the "unpresentable" (Lyotard) attempts to zoom in on the neglected spaces between language—the places that the social constructs of a politically bound language system has purposefully erased. To identify oneself as a person if one is not in the majority (white, male, protestant, etc.), one must find a way to escape the usual puppetry of identification (Bernstein 141) by approaching the borders, the unnamed places of language, and thereby rejecting its sociopolitical body. Hejinian advises that, since one needs a community that can understand and accept one's speech—from the margins or from anywhere in society—to be *heard* in one's reidentification, renaming, restructuring language, one must create one's own community. A writer, constrained in his or her creativity by the necessary boundaries of language, and therefore by community, can reconfigure the community so that the margins of discourse are not ignored—those pushing at the boundaries of language, prodding its politically empty spaces, are listened to, are heard.

The implications for individual creativity are problematic: if one nudges the boundaries of language so that language expands to accept ones self-naming, one becomes more central to language, more socially normal. The desire for the *new* and for that that constantly challenges any hegemonic system is then smothered. The margin is never really accommodated by automatically political language systems; the systems only establish new blank spaces, erase new identities, disallow new aspects of self-naming. Creativity is always automatically political—its newness challenges *something* in the language even if it is not very innovative. However, creativity is always *already* social: even those working against the power structures imbedded in language must use language against itself in battle. The choice, finally, is whether to seek out spaces to articulate the problems in language (and power and social structures) or to simply *stop*, in protest.

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“The intention is always to thwart design”: Reading *The Black Debt* through McCaffery’s Poetics of Excess

Steve McCaffery’s *North of Intention* outlines a poetics of excess, or general economy, by analyzing the works of Bill Bissett, Claude Gauvreau, and bpNichol. In “Writing as a General Economy,” McCaffery writes: “a textual economy would concern itself not with the order of forms and sites but with the order-disorder of circulations and distributions” (*North of Intention* 201). On the back cover of *The Black Debt*, he explains that “the effect [of the disjointed nonsensical phrases in *The Black Debt*] is one of economy rather than structure, a distribution and regulation of autonomous parts propelled by powerful velocities of displacement.” McCaffery’s use of disjointed, disjunctive phrases in *The Black Debt*’s dialectic chapters, *Lag* and *An Effect of Cellophane*, plays out the poetics of a general economy that he outlines in *North of Intention*.

McCaffery describes a poetics of general economy as a poetics of *excess*; this excessiveness includes nonsense (“witz” and the paragrammatic), libidinal flow, and a tension of subsurface energy against the poetics of restrictive economy, or classical poetry. The term “general economy” is Bataille’s:

The general economy, in the first place, makes apparent that excesses of energy are produced, and that by definition, these excesses cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without meaning. (NI 201)

McCaffery attaches this theory of excessive energy to everything “wasted” by social discourse: orgasm, dreams, *jouissance*, nonsense, metaphor, and the paragram. Each of these wasted forces calls attention to everyday use and disuse. Pure pleasure without production, “involuntary expenditure” (202n), the metaphor that “distributes its indeterminacies among the significatory scenes it helps to establish, offering displacement as a *potential* disposition but fixing a residual potentiality between the two terms” (206), and the paragram that “counters the supposition that words can ‘fix’ or stabilize in closure” (207) are all examples of the excessive signification that allows the general economy to participate in a dialectic with a restricted economy by offering a language without directly useful signification. These devices of a general economy allow signifiers to separate from their signifieds and enter into a Bergsonian “mobile” language, thereby revealing Silliman’s “transparent” language of restricted economy as a false lucidity. They show language’s strata, “urging an exploration of both language and anti-language and an awareness of the forces that refuse textualization” (93). Devices of a general economy reveal the inner-workings of a restricted economy, self-consciously showing the materiality of language’s components by presenting mere waste, or excess signification, to a reader seeking meaning.

The examples of poetry that approach a poetics of a general economy that McCaffery gives in *North of Intention* include works by his Canadian contemporaries, Bissett and Nichol. McCaffery writes, “*The Martyrology* is a doubled production that positions the Subject precariously inside two vast, oscillating economies that together circulate and distribute the flow of linguistic and non-linguistic stimuli” (58). Nichol’s work places the reader in a position where she or he can see both the restrictive and general economy—the transparent usefulness of what one takes for granted about language and the material uselessness of words whose “components...suddenly declare themselves as independent and different” (62). Language dissolves into its structural parts, revealing the chemistry of its habitual combinations. *The Martyrology* calls attention to a general economy by showing that the restricted economy the reader takes for granted is a plane of “infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining

to form networks of signification,” and thus a space always on the verge of nonsense and excess. Similarly, bissett’s orthographically anomalous poetry reveals an energy underlying straightforward meaning that restrains pure, transparent, communicative exchange by bordering on meaninglessness. McCaffery writes that bissett’s work has a “Lack of aim, lack of definition, lack of meaning...simply the need to expel...waste produce...energy...excess...an economy of total and irreducible non-conservation” (104).

This relatively pure waste (compared to conventional poetry, which stresses meaning and narrative) allows a “flow” that involves a forgetting of strict meaningful boundaries—boundaries that bissett’s works are happy to help erase. This “flow” entails a mobility of signification (that McCaffery also discusses with regard to metaphor in *The Martyrology*); bissett’s poems represent an overflow, like magma onto a plain, of waste-signification onto the page. Even this metaphor is inexact, however; language’s component parts cannot be pinned down. McCaffery writes that “The surface is not contextualized—it is not a surface of, under, or around anything—but the flow of force itself, obliterating insides and outsides, and freeing writing from the domain of the categorical” (100). bissett’s libidinal (excessive, non-productive) flow of language marks a separation of language from context and of signifier from signified—as none of bissett’s words are in context or immediately recognizable. As in Nichol’s work, the separation of language from its objects makes for a material mobility, and thus for an excessive or detachable (disposable) poetry.

McCaffery’s own *Black Debt* is a project of excess. Composed of strings of nonsense phrases, including spelled-out numbers, *Black Debt* is, at its most simple level, an experiment in parataxis. It is also, in a sense, a tribute to the comma; the first section, *Lag*, is written in the same style as the second section, *An Effect of Cellophane*, but the process of finding meaning in each section is different because of the scission the comma adds in *Lag*. The differences between the sections can be understood as three dialectical sets: First, *Lag* and *Cellophane* represent the made thing and the process of making, respectively. Second, *Lag* and *Cellophane* reveal the dialectic of forgetting and remembering. Third, the two chapters correspond to a synthetic new Body that entails both reference and recombination. Each of these dialectics points not to an opposition between a restricted and a general economy, but to an oscillatory synthesis between methods of making meaning that walks the thin line between the lucid and the ludic.

A treatise made of self-referential, and thus self-contained, language games, *Lag* closes in on itself:

Lag presents a series of statements whose phrasal nature is determined wholly by the comma. Although their field of reference is a tangible world of social issues, these segments interweave with devices of deliberate artifice: puns, palindromes, anagrams and numbers that carry a further linguistic disposition towards self-reference and micro constitutions outside intention. (BD back cover)

Lag “marks the finale of popular language” (36), making words work on their own, as “small (or large) machine[s] made of words” (William Carlos Williams) that fold into each other and obey the logic of the larger poem-world without referencing a second-order trajectory of authorial meaning or intentionality. *Lag* is an amalgamation of disparate entities that are strung together with a light hand into a web of excessive language. Its self-referential character calls attention to the materiality of words, removing their use-value (meaning) and placing them within the non-exchange of general economy, where supply exceeds demand. Phrases in *Lag* that explain its system include the opening phrase, “Sentence not sentence” (11), which serves as a succinct preamble to an endless string of decontextualized clauses. *Lag* moves away from the author’s intentionality, stating “stacked intentions

seem inevitably vicious” (19) while at the same time requiring exchange because “understanding by itself goes wrong” (18). *Lag* acknowledges that “we fragment knowledge to provoke” (66) and uses a vocabulary of excess, including words like “membrane,” “throw up,” “tampon,” and “pyrrhic” (11-119). McCaffery’s excessive language and fragmentation in *Lag* are crafted waste products of language (like Frank Stella’s *Shards* series, which features carefully painted recycled scrap metal). Word groups in *Lag* are made things without contexts, waste products of the materiality of language brought into view with reflective literary devices and self-conscious textual signification.

In contrast to *Lag*’s focus on materiality, *Cellophane* focuses on process. These two systems are not opposed, just as general and restrictive economies stand not in opposition but rather in a dialectical relationship. McCaffery writes in *North of Intention*:

I want to make clear that I’m *not* proposing “general” as an alternative to “restricted.” One cannot replace the other because their relationship is not one of mutual exclusion. In most cases we will find general economy as a suppressed or ignored presence within the scene of writing that tends to emerge by way of rupture within the restricted, putting into question the conceptual controls that produce a writing of use value with its privileging of meaning as a necessary production and evaluated destination. (203)

As restricted and general economies stand in a non-exclusionary dialectic, so do *Lag* and *Cellophane* with their separate but subtly synthesized disjunctions. *Lag* and *Cellophane* are not mapped onto “restricted versus general”; both exist within the general economy of excess production—language without transparent meaning. Each of the two systems simply shows a different method of engaging excess. In dialectical opposition to *Lag*’s materiality, *Cellophane* provides an undifferentiated process that constantly rejects its fragmentary meanings. *Cellophane* is an expulsion and revisiting: the reader approaches each word seeking a connection, however small, to the words before and after it, seeking some form of narrative. *Cellophane* focuses on this atomistic meaning-making, forcing the reader’s eyes and mind to flicker between small, undifferentiated phrases in search of local narrative where “semantic phrases [are] filled and emptied” (back cover). Self-referential literary devices are not as populous in *Cellophane*. The emphasis is on the process of understanding rather than on the words as products; words are forced to the non-surface of a decontextualized flow.

Cellophane’s productive flow and *Lag*’s products correspond to a theory of excess Time, where *Cellophane*’s form reveals a constant remembering and *Lag*’s involves forgetting. *Cellophane* is “a continuum of time understood as force and appearing in the incessant recombinations of a finite vocabulary” (back cover). Its lower-case, unpunctuated strings of words force the reader to traipse back and forth from one strand of meaning to another, attempting to carry as much meaning along as possible in case he or she finds a context. The successful reading of *Cellophane* involves a pure accumulation and synthesis of meaning; and even then, context is not guaranteed. Meaning is falsely holistic—there is no way to assimilate the “incessant recombinations,” yet the reader’s mind appreciated the necessity of assimilation for contextualization and meaning. In contrast, *Lag*’s meaning is a stacking of opaque objects onto one another—it “resists all drives to accumulated meaning” (back cover) and requires the reader to forget each phrase as the next one appears. Meaning is purely atomistic; each phrase stands alone as its entire narrative. In *Cellophane*, the reader is exhausted with unbearable memory (a Nietzschean digestive disorder) and forced to engage a continuum of language with no semantic grid to delineate fragmentary meanings. In *Lag*, the reader is forced to forget in order to understand the next phrase’s self-referentiality. Time exists in an excess of remembering and an excess of forgetting, lending the reader no sense of present context or structural security.

The third dialectical relationship between *Lag* and *Cellophane* is that of reference and recombination within the body. Both entities are self-sufficient, material, time-limited flows of excess signification, but each entity has a different way of using linguistic material. *Lag* is full of puns, anagrams, instructions, and other devices that use words in an algebraic way, such as “mass debate not masturbate” (84), “construct as reflection” (67), “eleven thirteen seven one six four” (19), or “from T block to F cell the process centers in the victim” (105). *Lag*’s composition is self-referential, not only in that it uses puns that recycle meaning, but also in that it explains its own creation in phrases like “construct as reflection” (67), “through body parts this stays grammatical” (24), and the first phrase, “Sentence not a sentence” (11). *Lag* is self-contained and self-conscious, like a body looking into a mirror to determine whether its configuration is accurate. *Cellophane*, in contrast, is like a body without self-awareness. It does not have the power to forget or to examine itself; it merely has the power to live. *Cellophane*’s genetic material is language, and its set of linguistic genes combine to form a whole too wide-ranging to assimilate. *Cellophane* does not “stay grammatical” as a body; instead, its parts are, as McCaffery describes, “rhizomatic” (back cover), whereas *Lag*’s body is like the night sky: stars are created and disappear on their own timescale, but the reader (of the sky or the page) sometimes attributes meanings to certain perspectival locations of stars (constellations).

The Black Debt is, like *The Martyrology* and the works of bill bissett, an excessive flow of language that highlights the materiality and mobility of the word and the verging-on-uselessness of a language of restrictive economy. The recombinant, paragrammatic, process-oriented, memory-dependent nature of language in *Cellophane* can be contrasted to the reflective, material, self-conscious, forgetting of *Lag*, but both of these chapters of *The Black Debt* call attention to the opacity of language and its abilities to be used in ways other than those a restrictive economy of language makes available.

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- “Lyric’s Larynx”, *North of Intention* (Roof Books, 2000). 178-184
- “*The Martyrology* as Paragram” *North of Intention* (Roof Books, 2000). 58-76
- “Michael Palmer’s LANGUAGE of language”, *North of Intention* (Roof Books, 2000). 44-53
- “Writing as a General Economy”, *North of Intention* (Roof Books, 2000). 201-221

The Plasticity of Poetry

“The words... create around me a new atmosphere in which I move, a stranger and tormented.”

Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*

Japanese architect Arakawa and his partner, poet Madeline Gins, lead a pair of prospective homeowners through a “house” that consists of 2400 square feet of cloth lying low to the ground. Entering the house, the visitors find that in order to do anything—move, sit on furniture, cook—they must constantly lift the fabric “roof” of the house high enough over their heads to slither through the space. One of them observes, “Rooms form depending on how we move. If I bend down, I nearly lose the room.”² This interdependency of agent and architecture is characteristic of Arakawa’s work, which consistently explores the theoretical problems of being a body in space. Questions of how one occupies space, how one affects and is affected by architecture, move to the fore. A building is no longer a dwelling-space, but a site of reciprocal becoming.

Arakawa’s and Gins’ collaborations highlight the key feature of the plastic arts with regard to a person’s use of space. Specifically, they remind us of architecture’s special relationship to the traditional artistic categories of *nebeneinander* and *nacheinander* (simultaneity and succession). Traditionally, painting is placed under the category of simultaneity, since it supposedly affects us all at once, while music is placed under the category of succession, since it supposedly affects us only as a pure flow of time.³ In contrast, the plastic arts reveal the co-implication of these categories by demanding that the subject change her *use* of her environment, thus introducing a dimension of temporal succession along with that of spatial simultaneity.

Architecture and sculpture require some special action of their observer; I do not merely witness and remember, but use those skills in my interaction with spaces. In a building, I must follow the architect’s design. Confronted by a sculpture in a museum, I must change my path in order to see it or avoid it. I do this all the time anyway—I see, index, and remember my surroundings in order to negotiate them. Arakawa’s and Gins’ productions reinforce this condition by disrupting everyday life and making seemingly simple movements in space impossible or very difficult. In their sites of “Reversible Destiny,” houses are internally ruptured by fake topographies, so that to get to the kitchen one must cross the chasm of the living room, or to get to the bathroom one must tiptoe around the mountain in the bedroom.⁴ Conventional architecture also plays this game: stairs located in an inconvenient place urge me to use the elevator; I disrupt a room by moving a chair that is in my way. The plastic arts are therefore about a body’s movement through a *charged* space, where the movement of temporal succession necessarily compromises the spatial simultaneity.

What I want to theorize under the heading of “plasticity” is thus those aesthetic features that reinforce the concomitance of space and time, simultaneity and succession. Some visually complex poems, including such controversial works as Susan Howe’s *Singularities* and Steve McCaffery’s *Carnival*, are examples of “plastic” poetry because they manipulate both my spatial experience of the book-page and the way that I temporally move through it or remember it. These visual poems consist of scattered word fragments on the page that require the reader to choose paths that do not necessarily run from the top left to the bottom right of the page. The reader must slowly sound out the phonetic fragments of the poem, which often cannot be voiced until letters or parts of letters are recognized. The reading of the poem can only extend temporally insofar as it pieces together spatial marks and vice-versa. Of course, this interdependency of space and time characterizes all reading, but the distinctive trait of Howe’s and

McCaffery's aforementioned poems is that they reinforce this condition. The reader and the poem are caught in a reciprocal becoming, where the poem becomes the map of the reader's travels, and the reader is forced to take certain paths due to the structure of the poem. We are faced with pages that seem more like construction sites than like neutral canvases, texts that manipulate and mislead the reader and open themselves to multiple readings that eschew a straight, score-like poetic musicality. This way of producing poetry from the materiality of language and of reading it from inside its own syntactical structures requires a theory of plasticity that can describe and explain the significance of poetic devices such as extreme fragmentation and non-linear text. The aim of this essay is thus to delineate what a theory of plasticity can contribute to the reading of poetry. In particular, I want to demonstrate how such a theory is suited to analyze avant-garde visual poems that have not yet been properly addressed on their own terms.

Historically, "plastic poetry" has been conflated with terms like "concrete poetry," "calligrams," and "visual poetry." The term most often denotes poetry that has simply been made of materials other than paper, like the poem inscribed in concrete on bpNichol lane in Toronto,⁵ or the sculptural poems of Ian Hamilton Finlay. However, the material three-dimensionality of poems should not automatically grant them the status of *plastic poetry*. This term must be reserved for works that disrupt the reader's virtual field in the same way that architecture and sculpture disrupt an active person's real, physical field. A plastic poem must change the reading space in such a way that the one who reads is forced to make amends for new structures in his or her virtual path. The words on a page must be plastic in virtual space as architecture and sculpture are plastic in real space. In other words, plastic arts disrupt an agent's space: *to have plastic poetry we must disrupt the reader's space*. I will argue that this rupture does not stem from, as in the ordinary plastic arts, a real physical occupation of space, but rather from the disruption of the virtual space that one moves through when reading a poem.

To understand what a "virtual" reading space is we must further analyze my proposed analogy between the plastic arts and plastic poetry. Avant-garde works of plastic art call attention to the way we use space every day. We see and remember our physical surroundings in order to recall them for future occupation. Arakawa's and Gins' projects remind us of this diurnal activity by disrupting it. Plastic poetry works in a similar, albeit more complex, way, by reinforcing elementary conditions of reading. When we read any text, the interplay of words, letters, fonts, ink, and paper already requires *work*: real physical and mental effort to *make* meaning. This process of making meaning is already *virtual*, in the sense that meaning is never *actual* but requires memory and expectation in order to be formed in the first place. The gears of memory and expectation are already at work in syntax and thus operate quietly beneath our understanding of meaning. For example, we read the newspaper without thinking about the process of gathering sense from printed language. Plastic poetry, however, calls attention to this process in two ways. First, since plastic poetry usually has a fragmentary visual component, it calls attention to the physicality of reading. This forces the reader to recognize that there is more than one *level* at work in reading. Reading is not an immediate or transparent process, but a physical effort. Second, plastic poetry interferes with syntactical continuity by disrupting what the reader expects to find, or by suspending her memory of a word by breaking the word into unrecognizable fragments. By thus disrupting the reading process, plastic poetry calls attention to the way a reader uses the virtual space of memory to syntactically organize fragments of language into meaning. Like experimental architecture, the poetry I designate as "plastic" calls attention to the syntactical organization of space and time (in terms of the physicality of the page and the virtuality of the reader's memory) that already underlies every moment of action and thought.⁶

In order to explore the "virtual reading spaces" of plastic poetry, some assumptions that underlie historical discussions of visual poetry must be discarded. As mentioned above, poets have traditionally

called poems “plastic” when they are made of materials other than paper. However, these concrete pieces do not radically alter the way we think about poetry—the words we encounter in the poems directly relate to the form of the spaces in which the poems are situated, thereby reducing three-dimensional poetry to a planar reading space (top to bottom, left to right). More crucially, the supposedly plastic poetry is reduced to what I will call a calligraphic conceptual space.⁷ A calligram is a poem in which the outline of a shape is filled with words that describe that shape, as in Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Il Pleut* (“It Rains”), in which words describing rain pour down the page. The calligram’s “playfulness” is simply a joke, and once the reader “gets it,” the calligram has operated as little more than an ideogram, portraying but hardly problematizing the relationship between signifier and signified. The calligraphic element traps the reader in a conventional mimetic space; the direct relationship between the words and their configuration on the page makes the poem flat, not plastic. The reader does not *move through* anything; as soon as he or she recognizes the relationship between the picture and the poem, whatever virtual space the words might have created is deflated. When I assert that many real material poems are merely calligraphic, I mean that their content closely mimics their form. Their material, three-dimensional existence is echoed or explained in the words used in the poem, providing a direct relationship between form and content.

A calligram’s self-referentiality prevents the reader from entering a virtual plastic space. The production of meaning is constrained by the obvious relation between the poem’s physical format and its regimented reading sequence. There is no syntactical (virtual) space for the reader to explore; the reader is not forced to hesitate between the memories and potentialities of meaning. When the relation between the form and the content becomes apparent, the calligram closes itself off. Calligraphic poems orchestrate the title, format, and content of a piece into a single ideographic moment.

In contrast, a plastic poem allows for play in the virtual space of the reader’s mind. It uses words as things, breaking them open and pairing them together. The fragmentary plastic poem never closes itself off, it never claps shut, it never uses form to directly mimic content. Rather, it entangles the reader in a web of undetermined syntactical relations. By “undetermined,” I mean that the reader can choose from many possible syntactical paths. She is not forced to follow just one path that makes sense; many methods and routes make sense in a more complex way than linear syntax does. The presence of multiple simultaneous possibilities—i.e., multi-linearity—allows for a constant opening of new paths in the poem’s field. This is not to say that the poem’s paths are “undetermined” from the perspective of the author, who calculates at least some of the possible reading sequences.

Unlike the calligram, the plastic poem makes the reader aware of the mnemonic activity of grouping fragments⁸ into letters, letters into syntax, and syntax into narrative. The calligram testifies to the tension between the alphabetic word and the thing it denotes. The plastic poem goes further, revealing the mechanism of meaning as dependent on the reader’s own memory. As a reader’s eye traverses the page, the scattered materials of language become meaningful only in the combinations performed and enabled by the reader’s memory. What is at stake in the plastic poem is not merely a matter of typography or representation in language, but the logic of syntax and its relation to memory.

Consequently, the second assumption that must be discarded is that the value of the “meaning” of a poem inheres in schemas of analogy, correspondence, or aesthetic closure, where the connotations and denotations of the words in the poem reflect the world, the author’s emotions, or the form of the poem itself. Plastic poetry places the value of “meaning” in the tracks of the reader rather than solely in *what* the reader accumulates on her travels. There are two sites of meaning in the plastic poem. First, the reader accumulates fragments of traditionally meaningful words and rearranges them to form micro-narratives or impressions of the work’s overall subject. Second, the reader’s travels through the poem

become meaningful in themselves, since every time the reader approaches the work a different path becomes legible. Even if the reader should encounter only nonsense, the labyrinth of fragmented words itself becomes meaningful (if only because taking a certain path will lead to nonsense, thus warning the reader to choose a different one). This second kind of meaning is purely syntactical, perceptual, or performative, but is based in a logic of syntax that we always presuppose when we describe how language *means*.

A third assumption that must be discarded for a theory of plastic poetry to emerge is the idea that reading necessarily takes place in a temporally linear order (the *nacheinander* of music). Whether this linearity progresses from the top left-hand corner of the page to the bottom right-hand corner, or in any other singular direction, is irrelevant. The singularity of the direction confines the poem's meaning, and the reader's path, to a specific trajectory. As we learn to read, whatever the syntax and typography may be with respect to our native language, we learn the logic of syntax. The organizational models of syntax we learn neither mimic real thought nor force a reader to negotiate the language—after learning the logic or language, one can be contentedly confined in its unicursal system. Plastic poetry defies the reader's efforts to read smoothly over the text. In his early essay “Thought's Measure,” Charles Bernstein suggests what effects such syntactical complications can have on our conception of poetry. He writes:

“Thinking” as the conceptual basis of literary production suggests the possibilities for leaps, jumps, fissures, repetition, bridges, schisms, colloquialisms, trains of associations, and memory....⁹

By allowing these effects to show up on the page, plastic poetry reveals the tension between thought and expression, calling into question the way that we represent thought while offering a complex impression of the subject of the poem. Even meanings accumulated on one's journey through the plastic poem do not arrange themselves in neat lines, but mimic the schisms, reservations, mnemonic connections, and escape routes at work in any and every activity of thinking.

Poems such as Charles Bernstein's “The Lives of the Toll Takers” call the reader's attention to his or her own reading. This opacity of language reaches its peak in a comic way typical of Bernstein in the following excerpt:

(g
hness is it
rd).¹⁰
houlis
s own rewa

Reading “(g” and traversing the page to “houlis” thwarts the reader; even the mere pronunciation of these fragments is impossible until one reaches “hness,” which in itself is not pronounceable. The reader must confront each fragment, but also race to find its components in order to make sound or meaning. Here, sound and meaning are secondary to sight and hesitation, making the reader aware of the gaps in her own expectations. While the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets often write in clichés or commercial language but twist the phrases to reveal the unreflected way that we use language in everyday life (“virtue is its own reward”), Bernstein's poem goes further than usual by disrupting the words themselves. Bernstein here forces the reader's eyes to hop from one line to the next. The physical difficulty of joining the letters into words delays the reader's articulation of them and thereby delays her understanding of their meaning. Memory and hesitation form a virtual mental space for a

range of interpretive possibilities to co-exist, allowing the reader to see the materiality of the written word and the range of possibilities and limitations of mnemonic devices and syntaxes. The treacherous process of reading becomes its own reward.

Surrounded by the fragmentary, non-linear text of a plastic poem, the reader must piece together meaning at even the most fundamental level. The barely legible word or letter replaces the phrase as the most important nexus for meaning, and the resulting micro-narratives are themselves maps or histories of the reader's negotiation of the space. Plastic poetry presents the reader with visceral language. Entrapped in the poem's own space and time, the reader must make a logical sequence from the fragments. The reader finds conventional meaning—the denotation and connotation of a word assembled from fragments—and also experiences the physical or syntactical meaning of reading language.

An example of this latter kind of meaning can be found in Cecilia Vicuña's *precarios*,¹¹ which are miniature, ritually produced masses of material. Five sticks, a shell, and a feather are tied together with beaded thread: this made thing is a language not of words, but of gestures in time and space. Vicuña's precarious objects are made in a more physical way than we usually think of language, but the syntax—a logical relation of things that can be interpreted so that the reader remembers the space and time of the gesture by proxy, i.e., through the syntax itself—is there. Instead of showing where sounds happened in time, plastic poems like the *precarios* show where movement happened in space; if writing were a record or score for sound, these objects would analogously be records and scores of choreography. Like linguistic poems, these “gestural” poems require the reader to perceive an order of signifiers over time and to remember her temporal travels in the space of her mind. Instead of recording time in space in the usual way, where the poem is a spatial score waiting to be fulfilled or realized by oral, temporal performance, Vicuña's cross-genre works reveal that syntax is always both spatial and temporal.

The history of plastic poetry, while limited, has had at least two major fountainheads. The typewriter art of Steve McCaffery and the painterly historiograms of Susan Howe provide examples of how poetry can behave like architecture, demonstrating the properties of gesture, syntax, and reciprocal becoming described above.¹²

Steve McCaffery's visual poem *Carnival: Panel 2 (1970-75)*¹³ both demands and generates a theory of plasticity. *Carnival* was first printed as a book with sixteen perforated pages, which the reader could remove and post on the wall in a giant, continuous sheet.¹⁴ The pages look like landscapes, with words weaving and circling like topographical maps. Dragged through a typewriter, words on the page are scrambled in wavy lines, aborted in half-written sentences, and relieved by the occasional partial paragraph. McCaffery augments the residue from the paper's flamboyant excursion through the typewriter with rubber stamps, leaving circles of barely legible “CHANGE OF ADDRESS” and chains of “C.” The space between all of these micro-narratives is filled with small, typewritten letters, so that a magma-like flow from the eruption of words occupies the planar page. Unlike many of McCaffery's graphic poems, there is only a vague relationship between the disrupted words, the form of the poem, and the title. Indeed, to look for direct relationships is to miss the point. The title of this piece *keeps it* from being calligraphic: dismissing the form as carnival-like overlooks the pleasure of moving through the work. The objective of the title is not to disorient the reader in carnival madness, but rather to lead her into the work's micro-narratives. McCaffery writes of *Carnival*:

Carnival is closer to cartography, to a diagram or topological surface than a poem or “text”... [It] eschews any general left-right orientation that stabilizes linear terrains, but the

resulting textual space is less labyrinthine, or rhizomatic than striated—layered with fault lines, fissures, blocks, apertures, dead-ends, blocked linearities, boundaries, textual hollows, semantic geodes, overprints, concretions, excretions. All of this serves to provide simultaneously a map *and* the territory mapped, a geology, and a field in which continuous linear syntax is replaced with detours and continuations, propelling the reader-traveler into morphings and movements.¹⁵

The plasticity of poetry is not dependent on a real three-dimensional object but is a virtual structure composed of the reader's collected sense data as he or she moves through fragmented poetic spaces. It is thus a *history* generated by the reader's composite awareness, and a geological record revealed by the fragments' current positions on the page. The arrangement of parts could have been otherwise; the reader could have traversed them in other ways. McCaffery highlights how the discovery of the physicality of reading is concomitant with the discovery of the poem's virtual topological space:

Possible [tensions exist] between [the] surface (page) and [the objects] on that surface (print). The page ceases to be a neutral surface of support and becomes instead a spatially interacting region; it is granted thereby a metaphorical extension. Conceived as a spatially significant unit, the page carries dimensional and gravitational implications.¹⁶

The arrangement of words reveals the underlying geological forces as they react with the tectonics of the page. The task of the reader is not to form a clear understanding of the poem, or to figure out the relationship between the words and their form (a relationship which may not even exist), but to physically traverse the page, to give in to the poem's manipulation of the reader's sense of space. This traversal of the page entails a reciprocal becoming: the page's syntactical topology emerges—as precarious and historical—as the reader pieces together fragments. This is especially clear in the *Carnival Panel* poems, where the reader must physically *make* the text (by tearing out the pages and arranging them) and then constantly *keep making* the text (by reading it) at the same time as the text *makes the reader* (by forcing her to travel in certain paths).¹⁷

While distinct from McCaffery's typewriter poems, Susan Howe's visual poetry also calls for a theory of plastic poetry. In Howe's visually complex works, including "Thorow" from *Singularities*, we see that plasticity *is* about representation, although not in the way that calligrams are. Howe's world of distorted, hand-me-down inscriptions cannot be described as linear narratives, as "word paintings," or as directly representational calligrams. Rather, Howe's interest in historical narratives entails a linguistic topology. The words on the page reflect the corruptibility of "telling" over time—standard spellings change, typography shifts, "meaning" is erased, and the storyteller's viewpoint is distorted. This tectonics of language is represented by the braided narratives and the shifting historical perspectives of voices recorded by the poems. "Thorow" shows the palimpsest of words that result from Howe's historico-textual reworking of her source materials. Aborted expectations lead the reader down dissolving paths. Even sound (usually a good guide through Howe's poems) seems insufficient to put together anything but uncertain narratives. Questions of the reliability of one's travels are echoed in the poem's own history, as Howe draws on personal narratives from the age of American Puritanism. These narratives are pervaded by the inconsistencies that stem from the temporality of the textual archive (spelling, handwriting, typography, and paper itself having changed significantly in the past two hundred years, and thus sometimes being illegible) and from the manipulations of the traumatized or self-promotional author (the unreliable captive, Thoreau's smudged truth).¹⁸ A warily built linguistic artifice allows these paths not chosen to remain as caveats in the reader's experience of the poem.

"Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk," another set of poems in *Singularities*, also contains visually

complex poems. The words in both “Thorow” and “Scattering” seem thrown and scattered, and the reader often has to turn the book around to read from different angles. Even when she has turned the book and read all of the lines, it is not clear to the reader which order the phrases should be put in to form a final narrative. Her memory must try to remain open to numerous reading alternatives that can never merge into a gestalt. The title “Scattering as Behavior Toward Risk,” although not calligraphic, describes the reading process of the poem. The phrase aptly describes the concomitance of “scattering” and “risk” in the poem itself. At every juncture in her reading of the poem, the reader must ask: did I make the right connection, did I find the right fragment? Howe’s ruptured poetic spaces are the residue of syntaxes, vocabularies, and histories that we *thought* we knew. In her book on Emily Dickinson, Howe asks: “Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence?”¹⁹ Howe’s work shows the importance of “hesitation” as a questioning of socially approved roles and rules for language.²⁰ The risk of misunderstanding thus also carries the possibility of creation.

With the schema of plastic poetry, then, we can discern what McCaffery calls the “dimensional and gravitational implications” of the page. The poem may refer to literary expectations or to a “meaning” in the traditional sense, but there is as much meaning to be found in the reader’s physical traversal of the page. The reader’s uncertain and shifting travels create a space for Howe’s “hesitation” or Bernstein’s “fissures”—a virtual space of reading in which memory constantly reinscribes possible meanings, never settling on a single one. In this way, the plastic poem calls attention to the co-implication of simultaneity and succession. The reader is forced to recognize the spatiality of “successive” elements such as the sound and sequence of the words. She is caught in a multi-linear web of material words, so that the space and time of the poem develop with regard to one another as she traverses the page. Thus, the reader is forced to adapt to the spatiality of the poem while the poem is forced to remain a virtual being in that it exists as open, multiple narratives in the reader’s mind. This exchange between the reader and the page is what I have called “reciprocal becoming.” Reciprocity of becoming happens all the time when one uses language. One constantly negotiates syntactical norms at the same time as these norms form one’s own way of understanding language. But the plastic poem, like avant-garde architecture, forces one further than the everyday negotiations of mnemonic (temporal, syntactical) space. Despite her composition of micro-narratives, the reader never finds a normative blueprint of her travels in space and time. Instead, the map of her reading remains uncertain. Thus, the poem does not simply conform to the reader; it also forces, constrains, and impedes the reader’s map of it.

Considering how poetry is plastic—that is, how the reader interacts with the topology of the page—gives us a vocabulary for analyzing previously neglected aspects of poetry. Although the works of McCaffery and Howe receive much critical attention, it is only by understanding the reader’s relationship to the page that one can begin to assess what is at stake in their most complex visual pieces. Most importantly, we thus provide ourselves with the tools to explore what it means that the page is not a neutral surface. Rather, it is a spatial and temporal site where macro- and micro-historical narratives are marked and erased, come into being and pass away.

¹ Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, trans. Modupé Bodé-Thomas (Johannesburg, South Africa: Heinemann Publishers, 1989)

² Madeline Gins and Arakawa, *Architectural Body*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 27. The house described here is similar to the “Ubiquitous Site House” pictured in Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *Reversible Destiny* (NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1997), 300-301.

³ I borrow these terms from Gotthold Lessing's *Laocoön*. The categorization of painting as simultaneous and music as successive does not take into account the co-implication of space and time, where music sounds are organized and patterned spatially and one observes parts of classical painting in an order determined by the position of objects. These syntaxes of observation entail space *and* time, simultaneity *and* succession, a co-implication which Lessing ignored. Note also that Lessing equates painting and sculpture as simultaneous arts despite the fact that sculpture incites a different choreography from its observer than painting does.

⁴ See Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *Architecture: Sites of Reversible Destiny* (London: Academy Editions, 1994) or visit the theme park in Yoro, Japan. Here I am oversimplifying such models as "Twin House" (*Reversible Destiny* 270-273) and "Knotted Passage House" (*RD* 296-297) because it is difficult to imagine such architecture without seeing it, but there are many other models that make one aware of one's body in space, and that (more specifically) require one to use his or her body in radically new ways.

⁵ A picture of this poem can be found at <http://www.chbooks.com/chb/contact.html>, Coach House Books (9 December 2003)

⁶ At this juncture it may be useful to distinguish "plastic poetry" from reader-response theory. Like reader-response theory, a theory of plasticity draws attention to the reciprocal creation of the text and the reader and to the active, manipulative nature of the text on the page. In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), Wolfgang Iser writes:

...Meaning must clearly be the product of an interaction between the textual signals and the reader's act of comprehension. ... The reader cannot detach himself from such an interaction; on the contrary, the activity stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. (10)

It is this reciprocal becoming of the reader and the text that I wish to take up through the analogy with the plastic arts. However, Iser operates with a "thematic" level of meaning. That is, he focuses on the images the text brings to mind, the narrative it tells, the arguments it makes through its plot and characters. A theory of the plastic text brings reader-response theory to bear on the "syntactic" level of meaning. The reader must physically struggle to read the illegible page, gather items that look like they might make sense, and make sense out of them—even while the presentation of the poem on the page calls attention to the fact that every decision the reader makes is undecidable.

If we think of Iser's theory with regard to the level of syntactical meaning that plasticity endeavors to address, his employment of the term virtual seems to supplement the meaning I describe above. Iser writes (my emphasis):

... The literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that *the work itself* cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two. It *must inevitably be virtual in character*, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism. (21)

Iser seems to mean "virtual" in the sense I am using it, that is, virtual as non-actual. The "work itself" does not simply exist in the "reality of the text" or the actual reader, but is the unstable product of the reader's interaction with the text.

⁷ For a good introduction to calligraphic logic, see Michel Foucault's *This is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley: Univ. of CA P, 1983) 19-31.

⁸ Here and elsewhere when I use the term "fragments" I do not mean to imply a "whole" that has been fragmented, but rather pieces that do not necessarily or instantly refer to a whole; furthermore, there is no implied "breaking" into fragments. The fragments may reveal the page's topology, but they have not "fallen" apart from any pure, unified, original state.

⁹ Charles Bernstein, "Thought's Measure," *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2001). 63.

¹⁰ Charles Bernstein, "The Lives of the Toll Takers," *Dark City* (Los Angeles, Sun and Moon Press, 1994). 26.

¹¹ Cecilia Vicuña, *QUIPOem/The Precarious, The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher, trans. Esther Allen. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1997).

¹² I will explore the relationship of other types of visual poetry to plasticity in later essays. Although I think that visual poetry such as Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," Dada and Futurist collage and typographical poetry, non-verbal but syntactically organized visual matter (such as Vicuña's *precarios* and the recent concrete poems of poets like Derek Beaulieu), and even non-visual anagrammatic poetry can be described as "plastic," the descriptions that Howe and McCaffery give of their poetry have directly fueled the present formulation of plasticity.

¹³ Charles Bernstein and Jay Sanders, *Poetry Plastique* (NY: Granary Book, 2002). 32.

¹⁴ McCaffery writes, "The shape of the panel resulted from a technique of masking (i.e., a sheet of blank paper cut into a particular shape is placed over a normal rectangular sheet and typing is continuous over both surfaces, thus producing a patterned blank space on the lower sheet)." *Poetry Plastique* 69.

¹⁵ Steve McCaffery, *Carnival Panel 2 (1970-1975)* in *Poetry Plastique* 70.

¹⁶ Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine*. (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992) 64-65. The Kids also write: "Altering the syntactic space permits the physical one to change. Altering the physical space allows both book and page to utilize at a maximum their sculptural potential" (RG 65-66).

¹⁷ McCaffery's "Beethoven Sonnets," "On the Red in General," and "Maps: A different landscape" qualify as "plastic" for similar theoretical and formal reasons, although they do less to disorient the reader than the panels of *Carnival*. See "Beethoven Sonnets," *Seven Pages Missing*, vol. 1 (Toronto, ON: Coach House Books, 2000) 83-88; "On the Red in General" and "Maps: A different landscape," *Seven Pages Missing*, vol. 2 (Toronto, ON: Coach House Books, 2002) 150-155 and 70-71

¹⁸ For an account of the traumatized narrator and the violence of Howe's page, see Craig Dworkin's *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2003). 31-49.

¹⁹ Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1985). 11.

²⁰ Cf. Howe's reading of the word "hesitate," *My Emily Dickinson* 21; as well as the feminist implications of rupturing the holy communal language, 17-18. Also instructive are Howe's comments on the multiple reading possibilities simultaneously enabled by Dickinson's habit of putting alternate words in footnotes at the bottom of each poem.

The Aesthetic Implications of “Julia’s Wild”

Just as Louis Zukofsky places himself within a tradition of poetic virtuosity that includes Homer and Shakespeare in *Bottom*, he places himself within a tradition of poetics in which poetry is closer to music than art in *A* (Cf. “A”-12)

Indeed, we see this aesthetic at work in his poems. The final section of *A* and a large portion of *Bottom* consist of Zukofsky’s poems set to Celia Thaew Zukofsky’s music. *A* begins with a tribute to Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion*; *Bottom* quotes from a plethora of philosophers, composers and librettos. By fitting himself along these multiple historical strands, Zukofsky argues that the poet stands within a three-fold tradition. He is a philosopher (albeit with limited knowledge of the truth and limited ability to convey it); he is a poet (in the “man speaking to men” or “unacknowledged legislator of the world” tradition of the Romantics; in the seer tradition of Homer); and he is a composer.

A’s proximity to music is clear to the reader who has been trained in reading 20th century poetry, which uses line breaks and the positioning of words on the page to “score” the poetry so that the reader can recreate the sound the author heard in his mind. Because much of *Bottom* quotes prose passages, it often seems less like music and more like a philosophical treatise, which is perhaps why Celia Thaew Zukofsky must redeem it with a long musical setting. However, many subtle qualities make *Bottom* musical. These include Zukofsky’s careful use of quotation and his occasional burst into musical poetry. He edits the quotations he finds to reveal particular truths (which are not necessarily the ones originally indicated by the passages quoted) and to highlight sonic qualities. Although he often quotes long sections of prose in order to prove a point, he just as often quotes from Homer’s and Shakespeare’s melodious poetry or from librettos written as poetry-approaching-music. Juxtaposed with philosophical treatises, the lyrical poem highlights the lyricism of philosophical language. Everything engaged in *Bottom* becomes Zukofsky’s poem; and, per his aesthetics, Zukofsky’s *Bottom* constantly approaches the sonority of music.

In “Julia’s Wild,” Zukofsky breaks into a fugue. The fugue’s subject is a line from *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, “Come, shadow, come, and take this shadow up.” The poem “rings a change” on the line. The poem’s words work like the letters in an anagram, and the meaning shifts with the shifts of the parts. Similar to Zukofsky’s other fugues like “A Song of Degrees,” “With a Valentine,” and the poems of *80 Flowers*, the fugue of “Julia’s Wild” plays with a delicate balance. On the one hand, the poem’s alteration of the single original theme shows the crucial importance of syntax to meaning. The content of each line rests on the positioning of the words in that line; thus each of the “Hear her clear mirror” poems (“Song,” “Valentine”) seems to say something different, and that which “comes” and “takes up” shifts in “Julia’s Wild.” On the other hand, this poem—like the other fugues—constantly stands at the edge of nonsense. It approaches music in a way that few poems do, by reducing words to almost meaningless materials and arranging them like notes.

If we look at the fugue poems without valuing music over poetry, however, we find that these poems comment on the nature of music as much as Zukofsky wants music to comment on the nature of poetry. We come to recognize two important aspects of music that correspond to the balancing of meaning and nonsense mentioned above. First, as in “Julia’s Wild,” music (like meaning) relies on difference and syntax. Music is often conceived of as a flow of sounds over time. It has long been classified as a “successive” art because it seems that it is perceived only in time—as time passes, so musical themes unfold. However, a perception of musical themes as simple as “melody” or “here the music begins and here it ends” relies on syntax. Syntax is the ability to perceive one element (of music, speech, etc.) as

before or after another. This perception of temporal proximity in turn relies on the spatialization of memory. Memory places one object, sound, or word before or after another and so perceives that one has taken another's place. If this spatial memory were not engaged while listening to music, one note would so erase another that one could not perceive "music" or "melody" or any organization of sounds. The second point extends from the first. If we use a memory to record in a sort of virtual space, the order of sounds in a piece of music, then music is as material as it is temporal.

"Julia's Wild" (and Zukofsky's other fugue poems) thus calls attention to the spatiality of music by showing the relation between the supposedly "more" material medium of words on a page, and the supposedly less material (more temporal) medium of music. In order to differentiate this kind of poetry, which "rings a change" from a specific set of initial material, from other subgenres of poetry, I will call this kind the "code poem." Code poems are a subgenre of the genre I call "Plastic poems." Plastic poems straddle the aesthetically separate categories of visual art and music by calling attention to the concomitance of space and time (simultaneity and succession).

Code poems are distinct from other subgenres of Plastic poetry, which all work on the reader's mind differently. Code poems mimic DNA in their recombinant structure; they force the reader to decode their patterns; and they bring to light the mnemonic encoding operative in the reader's understanding of syntax. The code poem recombines a limited amount of poetic material to offer multiple messages. Poems with this recombinant quality have been described as "fugues" by Louis Zukofsky (as above), "crystals" by Christian Bök, "anagrams" by Michael Lentz, and "gathas" by Jackson Mac Low. Although these names range from the static-corporeal (crystal) to the dynamic-incorporeal (fugues); from the logical (anagrams) to the spiritual (gathas), all of the poems produced under these titles conform to a single syntactical theorem: spatial memory allows for the perception of temporal differences. These poems are utterly reliant on difference for their content, as well as for the pleasure of their aural and visual arrangement. They thereby rely on the reader's ability to remember what came before, in order to establish a difference with what comes next. The content is as much in this interplay of slight changes, as in the normal seat of content (the meaning of the words). At the most basic level, memory is an inscription of information into the mind—even the basic distinction that *this* is different than *that* requires a mnemonic tracing. Thus, *code poems require spatial encoding*. Concomitant with this spatiality, however, is temporality. One makes spatial traces in time; and it is indeed only the passage of time and emergence of new spaces that reveals difference. Thus, code poems happen within a temporal schema of past-future that must be able to be retraced (future-past) in order to establish the difference between what is being read now, and what was read before. The ability to recognize these temporally situated differences is inherent to all reading, speech, music, etc.; but the code poem highlights this condition of perception by experimenting with it with simple gestures.

The code poem, like musical canons, twists/generates new cadences from one set of original materials. This requires two things, one of which is essentially spatial, and the other of which is essentially spatiotemporal: material and memory. Whether sound or pigment, the materials used for art are *material*. In all art, as in all perception and language, memory figures both spatially and temporally: it organizes space in time and time in space with the barest syntax. In being like music, the code poem points to the materiality of music, and challenges the historical aesthetics that would place the written or material word lower in a hierarchy with respect to the transcendence of temporally flowing music.

Secret Passageways in Memory Palaces: Considering Audience and the Unpredictable Fullness of Language in Multilinear Poetry

John Cage's *Europeras 3* is a 70-minute piece performed by six singers, two pianists, a composite tape of 100 superimposed operas, and 12 electric victrolas. Arias are chosen by the singers and must span the historical period from Gluck to Puccini. The pianists play excerpts from Liszt's *Opera Phantasiën*. Durations of arias vary—each singer sings one aria at a time, all the way through, but each singer will have a different repertoire. Starting points for the arias and the length of time between piano excerpts are chance determined.

The audience perceives a historical time composed of the connotative weight of the materials and the listeners' own individual experiences with those materials (local time; nostalgia; memory). The historical weight of the piece includes the histories of each constituent piece. Each aria and recording has its own history (who sang the aria, who recorded it, when, under what circumstances) as well as its place in a larger History (time period, cultural and fashionable musical "norms"). Historical time/memory passes through the filters of Cage's compositional recontextualization and of local time, or audience perception. Each audience member brings his/her own experience to the piece—knowledge of history, of musical periods, of the operas, of the arias, of the arias' histories, and, more personally, his/her own associations. The audience member's role expands beyond a simple identification of piece fragments and their historical environs to these associations, which may have little to do with the pieces themselves, but nevertheless are a part of the listener's aural perception of the *Europeras*. The audience's perception of the arias—memories, recognition—are key to the "mind noise" that is part of the piece. That an audience member can recall the entire opera and continue it in his/her head after the singer has moved on to another aria does not detract from the piece. Neither does non-recognition take away from the piece. Audience members can "track different parts [strata] at different times," amplify, nullify, combine, and efface sounds (Pritchett).

Cage's *Europeras* encourages the polyphony of the listener's memory—the pun on "Europeras" refers both to the classical knowledge of opera that an informed listener might have, and to the personal mnemonic sounds that *you* bring to *your operas*. With *Europeras*, Cage expands critique of the concept of silence by acknowledging that the listener's mind is not a blank slate or silent auditorium in which a music piece dominates and resonates. Just as no physical auditorium is silent, so the auditorium of one's mind is laced with sounds that may or may not have anything to do with the piece officially audited. Just as a composer cannot fully predict the ambient noises in a physical auditorium, he cannot predict the mnemonic sounds of the listener's mind.

Like the composer, a writer cannot predict the fullness of sonic and imagistic resonance her words create for a reader (or, in the case of a poetry reading, a listener). *Mnemonic resonance is unpredictable*. Without being completely empty vessels, words have a huge range of potential for carrying meaning. I want to describe a few of the effects that this suppleness of language might cause and then discuss how an author might utilize the space of the page in concert with the unpredictable audiovisual performance a poem prompts in a reader's mind.

Before I talk about what I mean by "mnemonic resonance," I would like to talk about what I don't mean. First, I don't just mean the rhetorical ambiguity that poetry often presents. As William Empson writes in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, rhetorical ambiguity "must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation" (235). Empson's ambiguity is strategic and the seven

strategies he outlines each produce one or two meanings that then work in concert with one another toward the author's supposed end. In contrast, I would argue that the world of sound and image conjured by a text often has nothing to do with what the author intended, and it is only by focusing on a set of received, conditioned constraints that the reader might hone in on an interpretation of the text that is along the lines of what the author may have intended.

Secondly, when I use the term "resonance" in "mnemonic resonance," I do not mean it in the strict sense of musical resonance, where a sound is created and reverberates in a fairly predictable way based on the instrument, agent, and acoustics. Newtonian physics is not adequate for describing "resonance" as it occurs in the psyche, as the cause of psychic resonance is often unequal and seemingly unrelated to the mnemonic effect it produces. Rather than Newton, we must look to Proust, whose writing on involuntary memory gives us the tools for understanding how a single simple action might cause an explosion of mnemonic resonance. In the famous "Madeleine" episode of *Swann's Way*, Marcel describes how the taste of a madeleine takes him back to his childhood, when his aunt fed him madeleines that had been moistened in her tea. The taste of his new madeleine blazes a neural passageway that connects him to a world he may have otherwise forgotten. Proust's description of Marcel's experience allows us to see how palpable and far-reaching a mnemonic experience can be when given the right trigger. Just as Marcel could not predict that eating a cookie would trigger the network of interior sights and sounds, bringing back to him an entire environment, we cannot predict—when reading or writing—what words might be the triggers for secret passageways in our organized Memory Palaces.

To reiterate—when I discuss mnemonic resonance I do not mean merely rhetorical ambiguity, which is constrained by received ideas about how to read a text for a certain limited number of oscillations, and in which the object of the language game between reader and writer is for the reader to figure out, or at best "leave in play," the author's meaning. Similarly, I do not mean "resonance" in the musical or scientific sense, in which causes have predictable, if wide-ranging, effects. Rather, the kind of resonance I'm playing with here is a reverberation in the psyche, that vast labyrinth of mnemonic corridors that lead to places one may or may not have ever expected. For resonance might be expected. When I say the word "apple," I might think of a particular apple, or a series of apple-like things I have experienced in my life—my favorite apple memories are linked to an apple. But if the context is changed, if I do not say to myself, "think of an apple," but *find* an apple in a text or in my mouth, the trigger may work differently and link to apples I'd forgotten or even to things that don't seem to have anything to do with apples. Such is the unpredictability of mnemonic resonance. No matter how well you organize your brain, there are always surprises.

Now that I have thrown out the idea of musical resonance insofar as it is related to the physics of playing music and the acoustics of the listening space, I want to reintroduce the idea of sound as a part of mnemonic resonance. With Cage's *Europoras*, the listener hears real sounds that occur in real spacetime. But the listener also hears virtual sounds that his memory produces from the real sonic prompts. These may include the phantom sounds of the continuation of the opera from which a heard aria is excerpted and the polyvocal noises of everyday thought. As a listener, I can never quite concentrate totally on the information conveyed to me, such that I become an empty vessel or interiorized auditorium for the sounds. This is true in poetry readings as well as musical concerts. I have at least two mental metacommentaries, both of which are "voiced," which may address such topics as "am I listening to this correctly?" and "what else does this make me think about?" I also think about the piece itself, "what is going on here?", its historical importance or impact, its aesthetic attributes and triumphs, and the performance, "how is this sound being transmitted to me?" not to mention whatever pops into my head, such as my grocery shopping list, related narrative memories

such as “I remember when I last saw her read...,” and unrelated narrative memories like, “I like my cat.” All of these thoughts are going on at once, although some may creep to the fore for a few seconds at a time, and I would argue that all are sonic. For these mental sounds that are prompted by the exterior sounds, we have a word: “phonomnesis,” or “a sound that is imagined but not actually heard,” a “mental activity that involves internal listening” (Augoyard 85).

I imagine that sonic pieces are more or less escapable, so that when one feels bombarded by a sound, one is either forced to listen *only to that*, or turns away entirely. To compose a piece to which a listener would willingly turn his ear, then, requires the composer to refrain from totally oversaturating the listener. The piece must provide some familiar sonic terrain, a thread that the listener can use to both follow the piece and escape from it. Of course, this is not only relevant to music. When composing a poem, the writer risks losing the reader if the text is too constraining or too loose. To borrow Deleuzian terms, the writer must seek to score his territory without being too rigid or too supple.

It is this provision of a territory that, while already inscribed by the writer, still allows the reader to “play,” that holds both promise and danger for the writer. On the one hand, allowing the reader’s mind to wander gives him room to reinscribe the poetic territory with his own associations, thus making the poem more dear to him, and providing the author with the Holy Grail of Authorship—that is, a Reader to which the text is important. On the other hand, the more space is open for the reader, the more likely that the text will be too nebulous to retain the Reader’s attention, for the Reader’s own life is always more important than the text on the page. One must strike a balance between retaining the reader’s interest by attempting to constrain the web of associations the reader might make, and allowing the reader to “bring his own meaning” to the text, allowing that “his own meaning” might actually have nothing to do with the text.

Turning back to Proust, one of the ways such a balance of power between reader and author might be achieved is by composing a really long text that takes substantial time to read. By “substantial time,” I don’t mean a few days or even a few weeks, but a few months or a few years. By entering in to the author’s life in a text like *In Search of Lost Time*, one spends time in an almost ghostly reenactment of the author’s life. Such a constraint—such an authorial takeover—can be frustrating or elating depending on how much time and effort you want to put into reading such a text. When I read Proust, he controls my life—I begin to think like Marcel, filtering my world through Marcel’s observations. But as a reader I also control Marcel’s life, since I can put down the book at any time. Moreover, I create my own sub- or alterior text, which is the web of associations I form while reading Proust, an example of which might be, “I remember when I was reading Proust, I sat on a couch in the upstairs lobby at the hotel in Louisville with Thom.” And the web of images and sounds that I associate with that particular experience comes to mind, while all the images and sounds that *that* memory triggers also surface. So while Proust controls my life by making me take time to read his book, and by seeming to force me to frame my experiences with regard to the book, the book—which after all is *about* autobiography and involuntary memory—allows me to frolic in the sounds, images, and other sensual memories that arise from associations I have with words, phrases or stories in the text.

This gets slightly more complicated with poetry than it is with a novel (especially a novel read in translation), as poetry is a battleground for aesthetic discussions of whether language is primarily oral or imagistic. This battle is often waged between those who say, “poetry is like music” and those who say, “poetry is like painting.” Because God forbid a poem or a word have *both* sonic and imagistic import, either on the page or in the reader’s mind. I won’t go in to the history of the discussion of any of these issues here—rather I will just state: poetry is sonic and visual, both on the page and in the mind, as all written language is. How, exactly, the text transmits or prompts images and sounds in the

reader's mind, I will leave for another day's discussion. But that one "hears" (virtually, subvocally, phonomnemonically, etc.) sounds when one reads a text and "sees" (in one's mind's eye or just with a visual "sense") images or greater or lesser clarity/complexity should at some level be incontrovertible. I suppose the amount of things that happen to one's senses, thoughts, and memories while reading is precisely what leads to debates about what reading *primarily* does to the reader. But I would like to let the plethora alone, and just say: things that are like sounds and things that are like images float in one's head when one reads a text, and that text is often a determining factor as to what those sounds and images are.

So if we can agree that sounds and images of greater or lesser complexity and "realness" occur in one's head while one reads, then the question is how an author might seek to *direct* those thoughts and images. Again, we can assume that a false step towards *too much control or too little*, regarding the reader, risks failure. And by "failure" I mean that the reader turns away from the text without absorption. For a text is always didactic in this respect—whether it is the "meaning" of the text, its physical occupation of the page, what it portrays or displays, or what it *negatively* conveys or displays, the text seeks to convey a message to the reader. And a text is always to some extent *desperate*: it depends upon the reader to take up its message against the relentless erasure of Time.

In his early essay "Thought's Measure," Charles Bernstein describes the way that thinking (as an activity) suggests myriad approaches to poetic structure. He writes:

"Thinking" as the conceptual basis of literary production suggests the possibilities for leaps, jumps, fissures, repetition, bridges, schisms, colloquialisms, trains of associations, and memory... (63)

In parataxis, a rhetorical device often used by the so-called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets (including Bernstein), the reader is required to make such "leaps" and "jumps" from one sentence to the next. As a rhetorical device, the goal of parataxis is to make the listener make logical leaps and, in such exercise, reinforce the truth of the thought process needed to get from point A to point B. In their use of parataxis, Language poets are rarely rhetorical, in that the meaning of such leaps is rarely as important as the leaping itself, which for these poets has political and social implications. The space between sentences allows for play—for "trains of associations, and memory." Such mental play undermines the rigidity of the reader's expectations of the text, and by inference undermines the rigidity of the way he sees the world.

In paratactical poetry, the spaces between thoughts force the reader to re enact the author's thought process, making the reader reread the steps of the author's memory, revitalizing the poet's own synaptic connections. We can see this in Louis Zukofsky's long poem *Bottom: On Shakespeare*. *Bottom* presents both microcosmic and macrocosmic parataxis. On the sentential or microscopic level, two sentences are sometimes juxtaposed without clear causal relation. On the textual or macroscopic level, the book is composed of chapters organized by Zukofsky's musings on Shakespeare organized alphabetically by topic—the text is not organized in a narrative or causal sequence. When reading *Bottom*, one is challenged to recreate the "jumps, fissures, ... and memor[ies]" that occur in Zukofsky's thought as he responds to Shakespeare. The reader becomes a living golem for the author, with his thoughts taken up by the activity of jumping from one of the author's thoughts to the next. The synaptic connections are so busy making these leaps that little activity "outside the text" can occur.

The sounds and images of the readers own thoughts will, of course, intrude. The reader brings new thoughts, new contexts, and a new body of knowledge to the text and can make mistakes, so the

duplication of the author's thought process can never occur perfectly. If the text can be seen as the architectural blueprint of the author's memory palace, the reader as engineer may misread the plans, or may intentionally or unintentionally introduce new rooms and passageways.

Thus, poems that require the reader to do work, to skip space, to make connections, can force the reader to inhabit the same memory-palaces as the author, and they can thus preserve the author's thoughts and intentions. But these spaces also endanger the author because they allow more space to open for interpretation. Thus, the author must strike a balance, as Cage does in *Europeras*, between guiding the reader toward an understanding of the piece and allowing the reader's unpredictable mnemonic resonance to play a part in the production of the text. Like a score, a text conveys information for the reader to "perform" "in his head"—that is, the reader performs the work "in his head" by translating the text into subvocal sounds and mental images. But like a score, the text cannot predict what happens *between* the codified spaces. Thus like the "silent" space of an auditorium during a musical performance, the reader's mind is never silent. By inference, the blank page of a text, like the blank spaces between staves on a musical score, is never really "blank."

Augoyard, Jean-François and Henry Torgue. *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*. Thanks to Steve Evans for this reference, which came out of a discussion with him and others about the proper term to discuss non-verbal, possibly non-linguistic mental sound that results from textual stimulation.

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The Woven Thing: Cecilia Vicuña's *Paralinguistic Poetics*

Cecilia Vicuña's short film *cloud-net* combines the predominant themes of her installation art, poetry, documentary films, performances, and object and ritual making. The film takes place on South Finer Pier outside New York City. It begins in silence with a medium shot of large threads moving up and down. The camera moves to a close-up of hands, and then to a mid-shot of the three young women who control the threads' movements. The camera looks at each woman's contribution to the large woven structure, focusing on one at a time and then on each one's interaction with the others. Each woman dances with the thread and then moves her skein up and down in a dance with the other two women. The film often reverses motion, but in *cloud-net* the motion seems to reflect the repetition of the interweaving threads. Passersby are viewable in the background. A close-up of two hands making string figures with the thread and then throwing it into the water moves to a mid-shot of the skeins catching on the ruins of docks and on garbage. As the film ends, typed minimal phrases and words accompany the main narrative, making the film into an illustration for the poem on screen, and the poem into the first verbal narrative for the actions. The closing titles place the work within the "sixth extinction period" on Earth.

Vicuña's use of wool threads comes from her heritage as a Chilean. A "vicuña" in the mountains of Chile is a woolly animal, like a llama, whose wool is prized for its softness. Vicuña is interested in the animal because its name is the same as hers and because the Chilean word for "to weave" is the same as the word for "language." Amerindian tribes outside Santiago record thoughts not through writing but through knots: women who, while weaving, invent new ways of tying knots, tie a string around a small doll and throw her into the river to preserve the sacred nature of the new way of recording (Vicuña, "Words within Words"). In her book *Unravelling Words & the Weaving of Water*, Vicuña observes that many words that name sacred languages are derived from weaving terminology (Cf. pg. 10).

For Vicuña, weaving is not merely a process for making cloth, but a sacred ritual that represents a record of social memory. By making a film about weaving, Vicuña designates a specific time and space (South Finer Pier, 1998) as sacred. The creation of a ritual object (the woven thing) is a process of naming and delineating a space as special, although the Pier is not usually considered a sacred place.

Vicuña uses young female performers. In doing so, she acknowledges the role of women as cloth-makers in South American culture, where they could weave and take care of children at the same time.

Being perishable, the textiles themselves at best only provide fragmentary evidence about women's lives, but materials and metaphors of weaving do inform... both childbearing and food. "Weaving (resulting in cloth) and parturition (resulting in babies) both display women's generative capability. Tzutujil Maya use anatomical terms for loom parts (i.e., head, bottom, ribs, heart, umbilical cord), indicating that weaving is... equivalent to giving birth..." (de Zegher 19)

Like these fertile child bearers who clothe and feed their families, *cloud-net's* beautiful, sexually mature young women symbolize Vicuña's ideal South American women. Vicuña is also interested in the woman as receiver: she says that a woman is "like an ear" in that she is the sexual receiver (Vicuña, "Words within Words"). By likening the woman's body to the ear, Vicuña includes structuralist metaphors. The woman's vagina receives the penis as an ear receives a message; the woman is, by analogy, the ultimate audience. Vicuña's weavers not only make the cloth, a symbol of regeneration,

fertility, and language, but they are also the audience of their own work because, as women, they are receivers as well as creators.

Another major theme in *cloud-net*, which Vicuña's exhibition catalog and the film's text highlight, is the relatively new effect of the Internet on American culture. In an interview with David Levi Strauss, Vicuña says:

...I began the poem of *cloud-net* with the line "hanging by a thread, the web says..."—to play again with the forgotten association between the World Wide Web and the web of life. For someone like me, "www" is "weaving, weaving, weaving." Other fragments of the poem continue to play with certain capitalist ideas such as "net worth," proposing a new form of reading it, as the worth of the net itself. The image became an action, a performance, a video, and a poem that continue to be transformed as it is performed, and will eventually become a book and a website. In other words, an image of the net going back to the net. (19)

Vicuña's use of phrases like "net worth," which recalls "network" (even "network" is now a computer term as, Strauss points out, is the word "digital," which formerly referred to one's "digits" or fingers) places the film as an anthropological document. Although many of Vicuña's artistic themes hail back to native Chilean culture, the Internet stands out as a modern theme, a re-weaving of the terms Vicuña uses to recall Amerindian life. Vicuña does not make a judgment on the Internet's presence in modern culture, only juxtaposes the new uses of words with old ones in order to make an anthropological statement about the relation of weaving in our culture (internet, network, digital, net worth) to weaving in ancient Chile (nets, hands, wool, ritual) through the catalysts of language and ritualized motion as things that *name* or demarcate important cultural traits.

Cloud-net is an identity/biography video like Vicuña's earlier works (*Maria Santiago* and *What is Poetry to You?*) and videos such as *Tongues Untied*, but it is much more compressed. It has no voiceover and no interviews, so it is not an oral narrative, though it is a documentary—all of the action occurs in eight minutes and are all filmed in a relatively linear way. There is a story: there are three women weaving a net. Towards the end of the film text begins to explain the meaning of the earlier images, and much of the meaning is sociopolitical and directly related to Vicuña's own life, though she does not appear in the film. The film is also a "city space" film in that the skyline of New York is constantly visible and the weaving of the net is a demarcation of smaller spaces inside the boundaries of the threads. The image of the net against the skyline draws attention to the nature of the city-space by showing that we all occupy spaces inside a larger, organic whole. The net shows a cosmic unity divided into squares bound by language (the woven thing).

Vicuña claims no influences for her filmmaking other than "watching the BBC cameramen" as they shot *Maria Santiago*, a short BBC documentary about Vicuña's aesthetics as they are shaped by her exile from Chile. In *Maria Santiago* Vicuña describes her paintings and wanders the streets of Britain. She also makes small religious figures, called *precarios*, out of natural objects (rocks, sticks, thread) while discussing the atrocities of the political regime in 1970s Chile. She narrates the film and appears in it. In *What is Poetry to You?* Vicuña interviews people on the streets of Santiago, Chile about how they feel about poetry. Many of them confuse the word for "poetry" with the word for "police" and speak of poetry's power to reunite communities and free people from the drudgery of their everyday lives. Vicuña's main role in the film is as the interviewer—the interviewees are empowered by their ability to speak. There is a tension between poetry and its social context—the most profound answer to Vicuña's question comes from a prostitute, and street performers who redefine the poetry of the tango

are sought out by the police and unappreciated by passersby. Although *cloud-net* is visually quite different from the two earlier films, and although Vicuña neither appears nor talks in it, its sociopolitical context is similar to the earlier works. Passersby can respond freely to the work (they stare and keep their distance, but they are empowered even in their silence). The weavers, who are the film's protagonists, are women, the ultimate receivers and creators (according to Vicuña, as discussed above). Natural objects (pure wool yarn) are primary, even ritualistic, and Vicuña emphasizes the return of the natural to the natural by throwing the thread into the river below. *Cloud-net* is a more mature realization of Vicuña's search for a democratic and gender-equal spirit and oneness with the Earth than the previous films, which merely point out or include such issues rather than fully embodying them.

Vicuña conceived *cloud-net* as a further experiment with the mystical element of the natural and the creation of sacred spaces through minimal ritual actions. Vicuña's connection to Chilean natives dramatically informs her work. The invasion of the Europeans into Chile marked the decline of the vicuña and the use of its wool in weaving:

The strong fibers of her wool (with a molecular structure that provides the best defense against the cold) long provided warmth and wealth, before the Spaniards replaced ecologically balanced native herds of domesticated llamas and alpacas, wild vicuñas and guanacos, with cattle and sheep whose cloven feet and habit of uprooting vegetation eroded the terrain and made its people poor. (In the Chilean vernacular, "*no tengo lana*"—I have no wool—still means "I have no money.") (Lippard 7)

Weaving as a sacred, naturalistic act, jeopardized by the intrusion of Europeans, is all the more important as a cultural throwback to Vicuña, who lives in New York in exile after the revolutions of 1970s Chile. By using weaving as the ritual action in *cloud-net*, Vicuña reclaims the sacred space of Chilean natives in the bustling, noisy, modern environment of New York. On the macroscopic level, Vicuña reclaims the *ability to create* sacred spaces through ritual. She acknowledges the importance of the recognition of the natural object by weaving with skeins of pure wool and explaining, in the film's last frames, that *cloud-net* was made during the earth's "sixth extinction period." The organic nature of her tools reminds one that not all objects are made of steel and concrete—that in the hills of Chile wild vicuñas still produce wool. When the threads tangle, drop into the water, and float amid garbage, viewers see the relationship of modern manmade objects (the pier itself, the trash) to ancient natural ones (the wool). Vicuña's time-limited ritual recognizes not only the endangered status of Chilean native culture and the vicuña, but also the proximity of the modern world to an abyss where ritualized connections with nature are no longer possible.

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Eliot's Postwar Revision of the Indian "Da" Myth

In his essay "'Ganga was sunken...': T.S. Eliot's Use of India," Harish Trivedi muses:

Many critics have pointed to the puzzling fact that the original order in which the three injunctions occur in the Sanskrit, "*Damyata, Datta, Dayadhvam* ", has been reshuffled by Eliot to become "*Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata* ", but as we do not have even a persuasive surmise much less a reasonable explanation as to why he should have done so, there is... some reason to suspect a little private trick on Eliot's part, a harmless little pedantic joke. (49)

Trivedi observes that Eliot has changed the order of the commands that Prajapati the Creator gives to the gods, the humans, and the demons respectively. In the traditional myth, Prajapati says "Da" three times, meaning a different thing each time. To the gods he says "Da" signifying "Damyata" (control yourselves); to the humans he commands "datta" (give), and the demons he says "dayadhvam" (be compassionate) (50-51). In the following, I would like to offer a "persuasive surmise" as to why Eliot has switched the order of these words.

Trivedi refers to a complaint Conrad Aiken launches against *The Wasteland*: "...Mr. Eliot replies that he wants them not merely to mean those particular things, but also to mean them in a particular way—that is, to be remembered in connection with a [sic] Upanishad" (53). Aiken inadvertently points to a possible explanation for why Eliot has placed these "particular" three words "in a particular way" in reference to the Indian myth. If we revise the myth so that Prajapati (presumably the speaker—although the speaker in *The Wasteland* shifts so often that it is difficult to pin down) addresses gods, humans, and demons in their traditional order, but changes the order of the messages, then we might argue that Eliot figures Prajapati telling the gods "datta" (give), humans "dayadhvam" (be compassionate), and demons "damyata" (control yourselves).

That Eliot's "reshuffling" of the "da" commands is more than "a harmless little pedantic joke" becomes more convincing when seen within two contexts. First, Eliot (though living in Britain) is American, writing against the background of American poetry. If we compare Eliot's "da" tale to the poems of Stephen Crane, which often comment on the dubious behaviors of men, gods, and demons, then we see that Eliot is participating in a conversation of myth-making (and reinvention) in American poetry. This collage of elements of different cultures' myths might be seen as an answer to a second context, the post-war moment. Writing after "The Great War," Eliot, like Crane after the American Civil War, seeks a new order in which such catastrophes could be avoided. Prajapati's initial command has not brought peace, so Eliot reconfigures the instructions, asking the gods to be benevolent, men to be compassionate, and demons to restrain themselves.

Trivedi, Harish., "'Ganga was sunken...': T.S. Eliot's Use of India" in *The Fire and the Rose: New Essays on T.S. Eliot*, eds. Vinod Sena and Rajiva Verma (Oxford University Press 1992). 49-53

Queering the Female Muse in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

In their groundbreaking book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence in order to imagine a feminine version, which they term "anxiety of authorship." Bloom sees literary history as a series of struggles between male authors and their literary forefathers and inspiration as the male poet's (sexualized) domination of the female muse. This Freudian model of literary inheritance leads Gilbert and Gubar to pose a series of questions: "Where, then, does the female poet fit in? Does she want to annihilate a 'forefather' or a 'foremother'? What if she can find no models, no precursors? Does she have a muse, and what is its sex?" (47). Christina Rossetti's long poem "Goblin Market" offers some interesting answers to these questions. However, Gilbert and Gubar's own treatment of "Goblin Market" in *Madwoman* explores issues of sexual desire and religious redemption, echoing Rossetti's biography. Although "Goblin Market" may usefully be read as Rossetti's autobiographical confession of heterosexual desire before her turn to the nunnery, it also provides a neat allegory for female literary heritage and inspiration in the nineteenth century.

Although Laura, one of the poem's heroines, knows better than to enter the goblin marketplace, she is easily led astray by an artistic desire to observe. While her sister Lizzie "cover[s] up her eyes" (line 50) and "thrust[s] a dimpled finger / In each ear" (67-68), Laura "[pricks] up her golden head" (41) and excitedly tells Lizzie to "Look" (54). Lizzie shuts her eyes and runs away while Laura dallies (69) and listens, taking in the spectacle of the market.

Noting Laura's vulnerability, the goblins approach her with their wares. Like Eden's first inhabitants, Laura's desire for empirical knowledge persuades her to take the fruit, although she has been warned of the consequences. However, having never participated in the goblin market economy, Laura first struggles to find a method of payment. She has "no coin" (116) but must barter with "a golden curl" (125) of her hair, a gesture which marks her as a woman and a sexual being. To participate in the male-dominated goblin market, Laura must give a piece of herself. She is not equipped with the currency of the land, having been forbidden to enter it at all. Once this seemingly small violation has occurred, Laura is free to experience all the joys of goblin fruit. In the society of these productive "men" Laura has paid a gendered price for her privilege of observation and participation.

Upon coming home, Laura is upbraided by her sister for staying out so late and endangering herself. Laura is reminded, and the reader first learns, of another young woman who strayed into the goblin market. First satiated by the wares, the ill-fated Jeanie withered and died when cut off from the supply. Jeanie's story now serves to scare other women from attempting to taste the knowledge the goblin men offer. Laura is not easily deterred. She tells Lizzie of the remarkable tastes, smells, and textures of the fruit. Her thirst for knowledge and her artist's taste for observation overpower Lizzie's scare tactics.

The following night, Laura finds herself locked out of the goblin world. She can no longer hear and see them as they come to sell their wares:

Listening ever, but not catching
The customary cry,

...

Not for all her watching

Once discerning even one goblin

(230-236)

Her heightened senses now blocked, Laura turns “as cold as stone” (253), “gone deaf and blind” (259). That night she “sat up in a passionate yearning / and gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept” (266-267) but even this passionate response soon subsides to depression:

... When the noon waxed bright
Her hair grew thin and grey;
She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
To swift decay and burn
Her fire away.

(276-281)

Without the exotic elements the goblins provide, Laura is un-stimulated and uninspired. She attempts to create such fruits alone, planting a “kernel-stone” kept from her expedition and watering it with her tears. Her desire is not enough; she is banned from the goblin world, her creativity stifled. Eventually, even her desire wanes: she “sat down listless in the chimney-nook / And would not eat” (297-298). Worried about her sister, Lizzie comes to realize that she must obtain the goblin fruit. “And for the first time in her life / [she] began to listen and look” (327-328). Since observant Laura, the natural artist, is blocked, her devoted sister must take up the reins and become her eyes and ears.

The goblins treat Lizzie with the same gendered disrespect with which they treated Laura; they “hugged her and kissed her: / Squeezed and caressed her” (348-349). But Lizzie will not participate in the market on the men’s terms; she tries to give them money for their fruit and take it home, rather than trade feminine tokens for it and enjoy it at their table. As they try to convince her to stay with them and eat their fruit, she resists them, thinking of the warnings Jeanie and Laura have provided by example. Her resistance angers the goblin men, who “called her proud, /cross-grained, uncivil” (374-375) and eventually resort to violence:

Though the goblins cuffed and caught her,
Coaxed and fought her,
Bullied and besought her,
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,
Kicked and knocked her,
Mauled and mocked her,
Lizzie uttered not a word;
Would not open lip from lip
Lest they should cram a mouthful in

(424-432)

Like sexist men confronted by strong women, the goblins use psychological and physical abuse to try to tear down their “foe.” Lizzie’s resistance is sexualized: she “would not open lip from lip” for them. “At last the evil people / Worn out by her resistance,” give Lizzie back the coin she tried to pay and disappear.

Lizzie rushes home, elated: she has escaped the goblin men and is covered with fruit juice. She can restore her sister's senses without compromising her own. She pleads with Laura to "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices" (468) and Laura "kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth" (488). Although the sisters usually sleep together "Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Locked together in one nest" (197-198), their interaction on this night becomes much more passionate, as Lizzie passes the inspirational powers of the fruit to her sister. Laura goes into fits, "Writhing as one possessed" (492). Her heart rate speeds up; she feels as if she is racing or flying; she is freed from the goblin men's spell. Her consumption of her sister's juices is richer than the memory of the passion she felt eating goblin fruit:

Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked at her heart,
Met the fire smouldering there
And overbore its lesser flame

(503-505)

The pleasurable task accomplished, Lizzie climaxes and falls into "la petite mort": "It is death or is it life? / Life out of death" (519-520). After a feverish sleep, Laura is recalled to life: she "awoke as from a dream, / Laughed in the innocent old way" (533-534), liberated by her sister from the goblin economy in which she could not fully participate. For Laura, to take the goblin fruit was to be robbed and never satiated; to collude with her sister in the creative and sexualized act represented here by eating fruit is deeply satisfying and sustaining.

The fable-like poem ends with a simple moral. When Laura and Lizzie grow up and raise their own daughters, Laura bids the little ones to

cling together,
"For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands."

(557-563)

In the face of "wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men" (549) and other threats, Laura argues that the bond of sisterhood can preserve one against one's enemies—which are here coded "male" (and no longer even referred to as "goblins" but are merely "men" in general). But the moral is not simply about female alliance in the face of adversity. The final line preserves the poem from being a parable of a minor group fighting a major one. Not only when one is forlorn, lost, or weak, but also when one "stands" fully capable, can one rely on and be empowered by the presence of one's sister.

Reading the poem parallel to Rossetti's biography, critics have compared Laura's desire for the goblin fruits to Rossetti's sexual desire and her message of sisterhood to Rossetti's flight to the nunnery, and it is certainly possible to read the poem in terms of the dangers and thrills of heterosexual desire. Rather than tending toward an asexual, holy atmosphere, however, Laura's turn to sisterhood is overtly sexual. The description of Laura's climactic release with Lizzie might be likened to a religious awakening, but it is also a stirringly accurate description of a female orgasm. It is not just a rescue missions: it is

pleasurable. Lizzie and Laura are happy and proud of themselves for tricking the goblins and regaining control of their desire by establishing their own pleasure economy, sans goblin men.

The sisters' step towards reappropriating sexual pleasure might also be read as a guide to or ironic account of how female authors might encounter their muses. The male author's encounter with his muse is, as I mentioned in the beginning of this essay, an act of sexual dominance. He is creative because he takes his muse by force, as the productive goblin men in Rossetti's poem take their payment by force. As a figure for the female artist, Laura must invent a new way of interacting with the creative community: she is outlawed from the goblin market as Rossetti was banned from her brother's group of male writers and artists. At first, Laura tries to play on the goblins' court by their rules, but it proves impossible for a woman to enter the economy as it stands without being violated. Then, Laura attempts to grow her own fruit. As it is hard for an artist to work in isolation, so it is impossible for Laura to grow fruit by herself. She must participate in *a* market to sustain herself and to produce fruit. Finally, when all seems lost, Lizzie—who is just another woman, Laura's sister, and not a muse in the ethereal sense—performs the muse-function for her sister. She brings creative energies and lets Laura consume them, restoring Laura's artist's senses without violating herself. Lizzie and Laura provide a new model for female authorship by positing how non-celestial women can provide support and inspiration for each other, sidestepping the creative economy as staged and controlled by men.

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Returning to Old Haunts: “The Soul’s Travelling” in *Mrs. Dalloway*

I want to show how Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem “The Soul’s Travelling” might productively be read as a source text for *Mrs. Dalloway*. Virginia Woolf’s literary relationship to Elizabeth Barrett Browning has been well established, first by Woolf in her own criticism and fiction and later by scholars seeking to narrate a continuous tradition of women writing. Among other connections, Woolf’s essay on “Aurora Leigh” is a standard critical text in the field. Woolf’s novel and “The Soul’s Travelling” share themes and plot material, especially when we look at the opening sequence of *Mrs. Dalloway* (this sequence, up to p. 22 in the Harcourt edition, is like a single filmic take, and is cut when Rezia and Septimus enter Regent’s Park). Browning’s poem provides one pillar of the potential argument that Woolf crosses Septimus’ death with Clarissa’s (in a surrealist fashion), producing an after-party of ghosts.

In “The Soul’s Travelling,” Browning uses the folktale of the soul visiting various localities in order to cover a wide range of material, from the basest urban life to the holiest heavenly existence. In an editorial footnote to Bryan J. Jones’s article, “Traditions and Superstitions collected at Kilcurry, County Louth, Ireland,” W.B. Yeats writes:

Mr. Jones... refers to a note in Morris’ *Saga Library*, vol. ii, *The Saga of the Ere-Dwellers*, p. 282, where the translator says: “To this day the belief exists in Ireland that the spirit of the dead visits all localities on earth where the person has been, before it passes to its final destination. This journey is supposed to take a miraculously short time.” (123)

Yeats comments on the folklore Jones gathered in Kilcurry, where he recorded Thomas Curtis’s tale: “Directly a man’s spirit leaves his body it has to travel over all the ground he traveled over while alive, and during this time it is visible” (121). The “remarkably short time” immediately reminds one of Clarissa’s day of travels and the theme of afterlife in *Mrs. Dalloway*, but this is an easier commute when we take “The Soul’s Travelling” as a way station. At the end of Browning’s poem, the soul arrives safely in heaven; in *Mrs. Dalloway* the final resting place of the soul is left undetermined. Both works employ the trope of a soul patrolling its “old haunts” before it reaches oblivion. Manipulating the framework Browning erects, Woolf reuses much of her material, situating *Mrs. Dalloway* as both a reading of and a response to “The Soul’s Travelling.”

Browning’s poem makes its first reference to the myth of the soul’s whirlwind tour with its title. “The Soul’s Travelling” can be interpreted metaphorically, but I would argue that Browning gives us many cues for reading her traveling soul literally, as the disembodied spirit that Jones describes. The first indication is the word “dwell,” the second word of the poem. “Dwell” can mean “to live” (or “to reside”), but it is also a verb frequently used to predicate souls post-mortem. Souls inhabit, haunt, and dwell within bodies and houses. The fundamental human heartbeat regulates the second line, setting the metrical rhythm for lines two and three. Line four presents an “unsunned” river—a subtle reference to the underground river Styx. Browning connects the image of humanity in the streets (lines 2-3) to the morbid river (4-6) with “the *flow* of souls” (8). Like the “turbulent” (11) currents of a river, the water-clear souls of humanity flow through the riverbed of which the city streets are the bottom (the “u” shape of the riverbed will recur in stanzas 7-8). Browning superimposes at least four images: the dark, “unsunned” river Styx takes up the darkness (massiveness, density) of “the great humanity which beats / Its life along the stony streets” (2-3). The dense image of madding crowds flowing through city streets is then suddenly stripped of color and density and we are faced with a translucent “flow of souls” (8) in contrast to the voluminous bodies that Browning has established in the first half of the stanza. These

“infinite” (9) souls are “prest and pent” and “turbulent” when contained in their human vessels, as a fast-flowing river seems to push wildly against its banks. The stanza concludes with a couplet that establishes Browning’s sublime fear of God: God’s “plummet” is “great” (14) but it makes an “awful sound” (13); it “surprises” us but it makes us “tremble” (12).

As the first twenty pages of *Mrs. Dalloway* give the reader the sense of seeing one long, filmic take at the beginning of a movie, Browning’s first stanza also feels like an overture. A musical overture sets up the motifs of the story to follow, and Browning’s first fourteen lines work the same way. She will continue to weave together images of “great humanity” and “stony streets,” the river and the sound of water, and the soul’s entrapment in the body. Woolf begins with the same themes in the first three pages of *Mrs. Dalloway*. She describes “people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge” (4) and the sound of the breeze “like the flap of a wave” at Bourton (3). She introduces the problem of what happens to one after death through Clarissa’s mental meandering from the memory “when millions of things had utterly vanished!” of Peter’s “sayings” to the tolling of Big Ben, to the exclamation, “...she loved... life; London; this moment of June” (4).

In the second stanza, as on the second page of Woolf’s novel, the speaker steps into the crowded city streets. This stanza seems to be Woolf’s model for Clarissa’s morning experience in London. Browning begins with “the rich man’s carriage” (16) which passes “the beggar” (17) “too fast for charity,” Woolf gives her privileged person’s carriage mechanical problems, forcing the mysterious inhabitant to drape the carriage window to avoid the adoring looks of the impoverished crowd. Woolf’s crowd suspects that this mysterious rich person is royalty, which turns this traveler’s avoidance tactics into a humorous political sketch. Like Browning’s “rich man,” Woolf’s character strives to avoid the crowd of rough humanity, but he is hampered by a flat tire.

Browning’s miserable city-folk are nearly the same people as Woolf’s, but the speaker in *Mrs. Dalloway* sees a greater variety of socio-economic circumstances. In lines 24-26 Browning comments on infant mortality:

The cry of the babe unheard of its mother
Though it lie on her breast, while she thinks of the other
Laid yesterday where it will not wake...

The unhappy child cannot distract its mother from her own misery. The preceding lines contrast rich and poor people in pairs: the “rich man” (16) versus “the beggar” (17); the “poor man” (18) versus “the lady” (20). Line 22 presents “the business-men” who are met by the mother (24), implying that infant mortality is a consequence of poverty. Woolf’s parallel character is Sarah Bletchley (19), but Woolf’s social ladder has more rungs. Sarah is not “the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps” (4), but has a flat with a fireplace (“fender”) in Pimlico, a fashionable district of London that also hosted poorhouses. In *Mrs. Dalloway* the varied social strata all are subsumed by the greatness of the royal family. People from all socio-economic backgrounds wait to see the celebrity in the carriage. In Browning, the rich-poor foils will cross under God (see stanzas 11-12, described below), but in the meantime the “young queen” answers English poverty and pride with the vapid innocent impotence of the upper class. Alluding to Browning’s poem, Woolf implies that British royalty have a God complex: they are removed from humanity, capable of deciding who lives and who dies (World War I has just ended), and superior to all classes of people.

From the “flower-girl” (27) to the “cabman” (31), from the “lawyers in Westminster Hall” (36) to the organ grinder (40-44) and the “young queen” (63), Browning’s characters inhabit Woolf’s London. A

significant difference between the two texts, however, is that Browning's street scene surrounds a funeral train (45-49). The funeral march to the "grave" (60) is perhaps the reason that "the bells ring out" (61) like the chiming of Big Ben in *Mrs. Dalloway*: "First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air" (4). The allusion to Browning gives Woolf's clock a morbid tone (it tolls for thee) and highlights the reference to leaden coffins. The parallels between the texts continue in Browning's third and fourth stanzas, where she describes "The blue sky covering thee [O crowned city] like God's great pity" (82) as a "vast unbroken circle" (85). Although Woolf's narrative does not contain a funeral train, the similarities between the texts reinforce the deathly overtones of Woolf's "irrevocable" hours and "leaden circles."

Stanza five of Browning's poem is a universalizing interlude. She first points out that all human bodies contain "Spirits, though the flesh be by" (105). She argues that our souls can "hearken and espy / without either" ear or eye (108-109), describing a non-empirical method for sensing reality through one's spirit. Here Browning reinforces that her speaker can have the experiences the poem describes with or without a body. Browning seems to leave the question of whether the speaker has a body ambiguous; but that the speaker has a soul is indubitable.

The speaker's soul flies from the city to the country in stanza six. There is further evidence that Browning's soul is free of its mortal cage:

My body which yet hears no sound,
For now another sound, another
Vision, my soul's senses have—

(116-118)

The fact that the speaker's body does not hear the "street-thunder" (115) or the sea by which she now sits, together with the mournful word "yet" (116), implies that the body is dead, but the soul experiences the world in a new disembodied way. The image here is of a ghost traveling quickly—it "passeth" (15), with connotations of death—as in a dream where one flies over city and countryside. Browning's traveling soul arrives at the seashore (in Woolf, Browning's seashore becomes Bourton). Stanza seven through nine describe an unusual topography that supports my claim that the speaker's soul is disembodied. The "grassy niche / hollowed in a seaside hill" (127-28) is innocent enough as a "cavelike nook" (136), but it soon becomes a treacherous hole with "banks too steep / to be overbrowsed by the sheep" (150-51). One first imagines a shallow, grassy indentation in the earth, but it deepens as the poem progresses from a "niche" to a "cave" and finally to a steep-banked shaft. I would argue that the steep banks are not "o'erbrowsed by the sheep" because they are too steep to grow grass. The niche ("a place of refuge" for a specific individual, according to the OED) is an empty grave. Browning uses the word "grave" in line 163 to describe the sound of the sea "lamenting," (164) bordering the seashore gravesite with mourning waves. The beautiful couplet ending stanza nine reinforces the post-mortem separation of body and soul:

And as [the silences] touch your soul, they borrow
Both of its grandeur and its sorrow,
That deathly odour which the clay
Leaves on its deathlessness away.

(173-76)

These bittersweet lines describe the mark that the experience of mortal life leaves on the soul. The speaker appreciates the “silences” (168) of the natural world because they provide “meditative” (171) access to the soul. On the one hand, such access could not be appreciated if the soul had *not* been inaccessibly bound by the “finite” (10-11). On the other hand, the body must have been transcended for the soul to struggle, as it does in line 177, with the concomitant “thrill” (169) and shame of being forever stained by the clay (human flesh) of its mortal vessel. To *leave* a stain upon the soul, the body must be gone.

The bodiless state of the traveling soul is further reinforced by Browning’s description of the seashore in stanza eight. She writes:

Do not think—though at your feet
The cliff’s disrupt—you shall behold
The line where earth and ocean meet;
You sit too much above to view
The solemn confluence of the two:

(152-56)

Browning sets up a duality, earth and ocean, which corresponds to the body-soul, mortal-immortal dichotomies. The speaker warns that the reader will not *see* the border between earth and ocean, body and soul, mortal life and immortal life, but he must “believe in earth’s communion / Albeit you witness not the union” (165-66). The references to the Eucharist (“believe,” “communion,” “union”) are undeniable: “for... Browning the central Christian fact is the Incarnation, the link between humanity and...God” (Mermin 70). Browning compares experience of hearing the sea on the shore, but not seeing it, to the experience of taking communion without seeing God and to dying without feeling the separation of the soul from the body.

Woolf also uses ocean imagery as a repository for the mysterious and eternal:

So on a summer’s day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying “that is all” more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. (39-40)

Woolf is less fastidious than Browning in separating body and soul. Her “vessel” floats in the water complete with its “heart” and soul. Clarissa indulges in Bourton’s seashore and in the city’s street “banks” (“The surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound,” 18); she imagines herself as a “diver” as she stands “on the threshold of her drawing room” (30); she sees the human condition as “a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship” (77); Peter, too, calls Clarissa’s socialite soul “fish-like” (161). If the sea is mysterious and eternal, we all nonetheless move through it, some of us more athletically than others—Clarissa is a fish, a diver, a mermaid, while Peter sees illusory mermaids and hears sirens (57) and Septimus is a “drowned sailor on a rock” (69); see also drowning imagery in his death scene, beginning 139). Woolf’s speaker, unlike Browning’s, fully experiences the sea, hears the waves, and sees the shore. Vastness, not holiness, provides the sense of mystery.

In stanza ten, the relaxing soul is made restless by “the city’s moan” (180), which “haunts” it “with humanity” (182). Even while lamenting her dissatisfaction with “fair, fair Nature” (189), the speaker appreciates gregarious urban life. She chides herself for needing a “shepherd”—a companion to share her experience of Nature (186)—but she compares her own experience of Nature to being left “vacant and defiled / And wailing like a soft-kissed child, / Kissed soft against his will” (193-95). Although the speaker feels that she should appreciate Nature’s “workings glorious” (191), she misses human companionship. Her love for her fellow mortals leads to an Augustinian confession in stanza eleven. “Confidingly” (198) she “cries” (197) that humankind does not fully appreciate the “beauty” (205) of God’s “broad universe” (203) because one is always concerned with the fact of one’s own mortality. One’s time on earth is limited, which can often lead one, Browning confesses, to being inattentive to sublime things like Nature.

Thou knowest, Thou who art so prodigal
Of beauty, we are oft but stricken deer
Expiring in the woods, that care for none
Of those delightful flowers they die upon.

(205-208)

We are always already stricken deer; we begin to die as soon as we are conceived. Browning’s speaker feels a stronger bond with other mortals than with God because she shares their condition (“by the finite prest and pent,” 10). She feels guilty for her preference and begs God to “call [our souls] back” (213) to purify them. She dreams that at His feet, even the holiest soul will hang up his traveling shoes to be at peace with the Lord: “...the archangel, raising / Unto thy face his full ecstatic gazing, / Forgets the rush and rapture of his wings” (224-226).

Browning’s poem is twelve stanzas, which is the same number of hours of daylight in mid-June and connects smoothly with Woolf’s obsession with clocks tolling out the irrevocable hours in *Mrs. Dalloway*. However, Woolf’s traveling soul halts at the equivalent of Browning’s tenth stanza. Woolf’s avatar does not confess a sinful love for her fellow mortals; on the contrary, she revels in it:

For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can’t be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (4)

Through Clarissa, Woolf seems to be saying that mortals love the very fragility of their lives—“creating it every moment afresh,” dwelling in its “uproar.” The mortal love of “life... *this* moment” (my emphasis) is exhilarating, *and* “Heaven... knows” it. There is no reason for Clarissa to confess “what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.”

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“Each time unique, the end of the world”: Shelley’s Apocalyptic “Ode to the West Wind”

Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” has often been read as an apocalyptic vision. I want to take a slightly different approach to the term “apocalyptic” in order to analyze the poem as a work of mourning in the tradition of Milton’s “Lycidas.” As a poetic epigraph for the following discussion of mortality, I take the title of Jacques Derrida’s collection of epitaphs, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (*The Work of Mourning*), which translates to, “Each time unique, the end of the world.” I will argue that it is this unique apocalypse of individual mortality that Shelley describes in “Ode to the West Wind.”

In using “apocalypse” to denote the finality of death for the individual, I refer to Derrida’s sense of the ends of unique worlds, which can be traced through *The Work of Mourning*. The editors of the English translation clarify in their Introduction:

In “each death” there is an end of the world, the phrase “each death” suggesting that the end of the world can come more than once.... The world, the whole world, is lost, and then, impossibly, the catastrophe is repeated....Derrida recalls how “death takes from us not only some particular life within the world...but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up in a both finite and infinite—mortally infinite—way” (107, 15).

Derrida’s larger sense of the apocalyptic “to come” may be kept in the back of the reader’s mind, but “apocalyptic visions” in the tradition of the New Testament or William Blake, which focus on regeneration rather than the end of the world, should be thought of in contrast to my reading. Thus, I disagree with viewpoints like Steven Goldsmith’s in *Unbuilding Jerusalem*, where although he *defines* apocalypse as “history...come to an end,” he nevertheless thinks of the apocalyptic vision as one of reform and renewal. This misunderstanding or denial of the finality of the Day of Judgment predicted in Revelations is pervasive in readings of “apocalyptic visions,” but if we stick closely to Shelley’s pronounced atheism we see the implications of mortality more clearly. The Day of Judgment brings the End of Time, as the day of one’s individual death brings the end of time for the individual.

The events of Shelley’s life at the time of writing “Ode to the West Wind” are relevant for seeing the poem as a lament for lost worlds and worlds that will be lost. Critics have acknowledged the importance of the poem’s setting. Shelley wrote “West Wind” in October 1819, while in Florence, Italy. Shelley describes the time and place of writing:

This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning particular to the Cisalpine region. (Shelley 298)

Shelley’s note is published alongside the poem in most editions, indicating that it is ubiquitously considered a critical amendment to the poem. However, Shelley’s circumstances in Florence in October, 1819, range beyond a particular dark and stormy night. In June 1819, in Rome, Shelley’s oldest and only surviving child, William, died. In July 1819, from Florence, he writes to T.L.P.: “We still remain, and shall remain nearly two months longer, at Livorno. Our house is a melancholy one...”

(Letter XX). In fact, the Shelleys remained in Florence until late January 1820, with Mary Shelley giving birth in November to a son, Percy. At the point of Percy's birth, Mary and Shelley had lost three children: a daughter born prematurely in 1815, Clara (1817-1818), and William (1816-1819). Shelley had also lost custody of his two children by his first wife, Harriet, in 1917. From William's death to the Percy's birth, Mary Shelley occupied a state of deep depression. Shelley's primary occupations in these months were writing and taking care of his wife; although his own grief is barely mentioned in his letters, his wife's sufferings are often cited. Thus, the acclaimed scientific precision of the wind describe in the Ode is based on Shelley's real spatiotemporal location, but one must also acknowledge his psycho-emotional location at the time of writing. Although "Ode to the West Wind" can productively be read as a scientific or political poem, I read it as an "overflow of powerful feelings" written in the period of uncertainty between William's death and Percy's birth.

"Ode to the West Wind" alludes to a tradition of mourning poetry that includes Dante, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Milton. The metrical scheme is "terza rima," echoing Dante's *Divine Comedy*, while the poem's content has only two parts of Dante's tripartite schema: Shelley descends into Hell and rises to Purgatory, but no Heavenly plateaus await to comfort him. The poem's five stanzas denote an abridgement to Dante's structure: the Spring that may come is deferred to a nonexistent sixth stanza. In contrast, too, to Dante's vision of heaven, Shelley models his rhyme scheme on the Shakespearean sonnet, reminding one of Shakespeare's ruminations on Time's destruction of both natural and manmade forms. Shelley's cyclical Nature imagery echoes "earth's diurnal course" from Wordsworth's "A slumber did my spirit seal" (7), and his "Destroyer and Preserver" (14) answers to the "power" that "kindle[s] and retrain[s]" in "Three years she grew" (11-12). Unlike Wordsworth's cycles, however, Shelley's does not close. He ends the poem in mid-cycle, where the return of spring is in question.

Like his later poem "Adonais," Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" responds to Milton's elegy for Edward King, "Lycidas." Like "Lycidas," the larger portion of "Ode to the West Wind" is comprised of false starts. The first three stanzas characterize address and characterize the wind; stanzas two and three begin "Thou" (15, 29) and then list characteristics and characteristic actions of the wind. It is only in stanza four that something begins to happen between the speaker and the wind, as he pleads for it to overpower him as it has dominated the leaves, clouds, and oceans of the previous stanzas. In stanza five, as in Milton's stanza two, we see that the poem grieves not only for the ostensible or implied corpse (Edward King in "Lycidas" and perhaps William in "Ode to the West Wind"), but also for the speaker himself. Milton writes,

So may some gentle Muse
With lucky words favor my destined urn,
And as he passes turn,
And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud.

(19-22)

Milton envisions his future burial, imbedding a eulogy for himself into a mourning poem for a friend. Shelley makes a similar move. The first three stanzas of "Ode to the West Wind" contain images of burial. The "winged seeds" are "Each like a corpse within its grave" (7-8); the "closing night" is "the dome of a vast sepulchre" (24-25); ruins are "all overgrown with azure moss and flowers" like untended graves (35). The speaker is "chained and bowed" by mortality in stanza four (55) and mounted on a pyre in stanza five (65-67). Like Milton's eulogizer, Shelley's hopes to be remembered after death, pleading that his "words" like the ashes of his burnt body "scatter... / ...among mankind" (66-67). Shelley uses the poem as a vehicle to convey himself to a future over which he has no control:

“can Spring be far behind?” (70). It may be completely out of reach for the speaker, whose time on earth is as limited and unpredictable as a fallen leaf’s.

Shelley heightens a sense of foreboding by writing “slow” lines. The heavy-footed march toward the future is delayed by adjectives that imply death, confinement or burial, and stasis, such as “unseen” (2), “pestilence-stricken” (5), “dark wintry” (6), “dreaming” (10), “decaying” (16), “tangled” (17), “spread” (18), etc. The meanings of these words reinforce the melancholia of the poem on one level. On a second level, their sounds are frequently, as Reuven Tsur describes in *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*, “long, high, [and] dark” (5). The repetition of “consonant clusters” (5) and /o/ sounds reinforces these sensations of elongated darkness. Tsur quotes Benjamin Hrushovski’s argument that

A sound combination is grasped as expressive of the tone, mood, or some general quality of meaning. Here, an abstraction from the sound pattern (i.e. some kind of tone or “quality” of the sounds is parallel to an abstraction from the meaning of the words (tone, mood, etc.).
(2)

Shelley’s lines are thus elongated on two levels. First, he uses morbid and tangled imagery to bind the reader to the poem’s melancholic message. Second, he uses consonant clusters and /o/ sounds to stretch the time of reading. These tandem effects can be seen in all of the stanzas, but for brevity I will annotate the first three lines of stanza two. Here italicized words have a melancholic *meaning* and bold phonemes have melancholic **sounds** according to Tsur’s definitions.

Thou on whose **stream**, *mid* the **steep sky**’s *commotion*,
Loose clouds like earth’s *decaying* leaves are **shed**,
Shook from the *tangled* **boughs of** Heaven and **Ocean**,

A similar analysis can be exercised on each line. Shelley’s use of both imagistic and sonic melancholia gives the reader no relief from the dark mood the poem expresses.

Because the first and last stanzas seem to indicate that Nature is both “Destroyer and Preserver,” murderer and mother, Shelley’s poem is often read as optimistic. Henry S. Pancoast argues in an early explication:

...The West Wind has a double significance for the poet...It ends the Summer, but it also brings in the Spring. During the early part of February, the conquerer of Summer returns to conquer Winter; it comes to bring life as, a few months earlier, it has brought death. (98)

Pancoast’s reading is still taken as an accurate one, but he reads a half-filled glass as half-full. Shelley’s glass is being emptied, and seems to be more of a progenitor of Stephen Crane’s atheistic poetry (“A man said to the universe”) than an inheritor of the hopeful Christian message of Milton (“Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new,” “Lycidas” 194). Pancoast derives his optimism from two sources: stanza one’s ambiguous “Destroyer and Preserver” and the poem’s final line, “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (70). Shelley’s final line cannot be taken out of context. In the preceding two stanzas the speaker pleads with the Wind to “bear” (43), “lift” (53), and “drive” (63) him, to “make [him its] lyre” (57), and make him “pant beneath [its] power” (45). The speaker asks the Wind to dominate him; he wants to lose agency (46) in order to be made to feel (“I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” 54). Numbed like an earthly element (43-45), the speaker longs for the Wind to “quicken” (64) his feelings by tossing him as it tosses leaves, clouds, and water. The poem’s final line is enjambed and must be read with the preceding line: “O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far

behind?" (69-70). The question is not rhetorical, as Pancoast reads it. For the speaker of the poem to suddenly have the authority to ask a rhetorical question in which he promises himself Spring would be a major tonal shift from the previous twenty-six lines in which he subjugates himself to the Wind, giving up the power to predict or control his future. The speaker pleads with the wind to assure him that a future awaits him, but he hurls his desperate question into a void that cannot answer. The question is not rhetorical; it is unanswered.

The winter that "comes" can be more reliably compared to Derrida's concept of the to-come (*arriver*) than to a Judeo-Christian promise of everlasting life. The future is unpredictable, and is as likely to be good as it is to be bad. For mortals, the only predictable element is mortality. In Pancoast's reading as in readings of the poem as political, everlasting life comes in cycles. As the wind, the year, the tree leaves, the flowers, political reform, and the speaker's creativity are reborn, so too can the speaker be revived. A key refutation arises in lines 55-56, where Shelley points out, "A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / One too like thee: tameless, swift, and proud." The speaker is *like* the wind in that his character is "tameless" and "proud." However, also like the wind, the speaker's life is "swift." This points to an essential dissimilarity between the speaker and his addressee. He is *unlike* the wind in that he is "chained" by "a heavy weight of hours." Where the wind revives yearly, the speaker's mortality binds him to a non-cyclical existence. As the punctuation of the poem's final line indicates, the speaker may not see the coming spring.

With "Ode to the West Wind" Shelley seems to be participating in the elegiac tradition, but he brings a radical atheist viewpoint to the table. Abridging the familiar Christian trinity to the pentagram, Shelley situates his elegy against the void of final death. His own recent experiences with death may have led to the emotional numbness he describes in stanza four, as well as to his appreciation of the unanswerable question with which he dares to end the poem. Having watched many of his loved ones die, Shelley knows that the pretty spring promised in stanza one is contingent: spring does not come for the dead.

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