Constraint in Contemporary Poetry

Alexander Bell

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of East Anglia, Department of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing

June 2020

Abstract

What is the relationship between formal constraint and the pressures of the social world which poetry interprets, resists and is shaped by? This thesis argues that constraint is a fundamental category in the criticism and practice of contemporary poetry. When poets think about the constraints of writing, they attend to both formal and social determinations. Although this analogy has a long history in poetry, the poets with whom I am concerned are working in the legacy of modernism and Romanticism, where formal innovation began to take on an explicitly political valence. Re-working poetic constraints and conventions was a means for the transformation of life—or else for preserving poetry's distinction from a degraded world. In the twentieth-century, developments in structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis altered and deepened how literary critics and poets saw the relationship between literature (or art more broadly) and society, and between individuals and the forces and discourses which shaped, interpellated, or controlled them. It is my contention that we can see the influence of these developments in the poetics of contemporary writers, whose work engages with the premise of being fundamentally constrained: by language, by racial discourses, by gender, by capitalism, or by generic conventions—and the combination and interaction of all of these. With a variety of tactics and styles, the poets in the study—Lyn Hejinian, Denise Riley, M. NourbeSe Philip, Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson—investigate how poetic constraints might mitigate, replicate or even transform the social constraints which they take as their objects.

Table of Contents

7	Introduction
47	Chapter 1: The Limits of Language Poetry
97	Chapter 2: Medium and Mediality in Anne Carson
135	Chapter 3: "rude sound": Sounding the limits of the law, unlimiting the prosodic sensorium in NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*
179	Chapter 4: "You've always wanted poetry, our slimy harness and soft restraint": Performativity, constraint, and linguistic subjectivity in Lisa Robertson
233	Conclusion
238	Bibliography

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to David Nowell Smith and Jeremy Noel-Tod for their supervision. I am also indebted to those in the graduate school at UEA, and those beyond it, who have patiently read or discussed elements of the thesis with me over the last four years.

Introduction

> We have come to value… *freedom of error*, more and more unequivocally. It is a prerogative of the continuing Romantic imagination, as described by Friedrich Schlegel in reaction to the prevailing analytical and systematic thought of Kant, that we can assert the value of being *almost* right, of having *not* been accurate or comprehensive, of having fallen short, and more generally of being free to celebrate the effects of error in thinking and language… We are unbounded, able to write without any imaginable restriction or reserve, free to avoid all use of speech that seems generally intelligible, and free to research, throughout our instincts and beyond our habits of rational thought, the very depths and impossible base of abstract sensation… We have no alternative but this very freedom.
>
> (Keston Sutherland, "On Bathos")

> Maynard Shelly wrote something about how life without sufficient constraints produces aimlessness, alienation, and boredom. So it is that the constrainingly unconstrained literature of Capital produced aimlessness, alienation, and boredom in me when I try to read it. I am now constrained to abundance, "happiness" or its absence/infirmity.
>
> (Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women*)

> After great pain, a formal feeling comes,
> […]
> The feet, mechanical, go round—
> A wooden way,
> Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
> Regardless grown,
> A quartz contentment, like a stone
>
> (Emily Dickinson, "[After great pain, a formal feeling comes] (372)")

Form is often thematized as being a restrictive constraint: for Pope, beauty in poetry required the orderly bonds of the well-turned couplet; for Wordsworth "'twas a pastime to be bound / Within the sonnet's scanty plot of ground"; Keats muses on the liberties redeemable within constraint in the sonnet "If by dull rhymes our English must be chained"; and of course, for Eliot, "there is no freedom in art".[1] Sometimes what is being restrained is expression, put into form, and thus the compromise of "a formal feeling", "mechanical" and "wooden". If there is an idea of constraint in the adherence to generic or formal conventions, then those conventions will constrain the

[1] William Wordsworth, "Nuns Fret Not Their Convent's Narrow Room", *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1890), p. 129; John Keats, "If by dull rhymes our English must be chained", *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 340; T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 32.

expectations of a reader, "determining how the sequence is to be read and what kind of interpretations may be derived from it."[2] Sometimes literary form itself is considered to be constrained by ideology, and thus constrains reading to be a reproduction of an imaginary relation to the world; contrarily, a formal constraint could be understood to contain poetic language from the ideological contaminations of everyday language use.[3]

If, after modernism, the ideal of systematic and orderly beauty has seemed unattainable or undesirable, shunned in favour of the individualized and unprecedented forms of free verse, my argument in what follows is that a notion of constraint is nevertheless indispensable in poetic art—and is so especially now that the individual freedoms of liberalism appear all the more hollow. This is the implication in my epigraphs from Anne Boyer and Keston Sutherland. Not only are contemporary poets thinking through the aesthetic value of formal restrictions, they are also imagining anew the ways in which poetic form might interact with broader social constraints. I'll venture initially that this attention to constraint is distinct from a conservative formal propriety based in deference to a tradition, and an idea of the innate value of received forms; it differs also from the arbitrary compositional devices and procedural experiments of Oulipo; and finally, it is sceptical of the claims of Language poetics that poetry might rescind the ideology of the aesthetic and achieve freedom in the readerly co-production of meaning. In Sutherland's reading, Romantic freedom prevails at the cost of an irreparable split between thought and feeling, ideas which are unrealizable and conjectures which freely err in their inconsequence. Plainly, a return to classical

---

[2] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1975), p. 161.

[3] See, for an example of the former, Terry Eagleton: literature is one of numerous "discourses, sign-systems and signifying practices" which "produce effects, shape forms of consciousness and unconsciousness, which are closely related to the maintenance or transformation of our existing systems of power", (*Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) p. 183), and more specifically, Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (New York: Methuen & Co, 1983); and of the latter, Derek Attridge's account of formal estrangement in *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), and W. H. Auden, "The Poet and The City", *Massachusetts Review* Vol. 3 No. 3 (1962), pp. 449-474. For more general attention to the affordances of form, see also: Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Andrea Leighton, *On Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

formalism is no remedy; but what notions of constraint in poetry might answer the constraint to abundance that Boyer identifies?

Formal constraints apply to diverse aspects of poetry. They include metrical and other features of prosodic measure; the line and other visual elements of the poem; and procedures governing composition. In all these aspects, constraint furthermore can imply both inventing new formal restrictions and adhering to those with an institutional history. Jeff Hilson's *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2008) shows that there exists a variety of experimentation with the form by linguistically innovative writers from several Anglophone countries. Against William Carlos William's claim that "all sonnets mean the same thing" because their formal organization does not permit original movement, Hilson suggests that the sonnets collected here represent "a radical defamiliarization of the form", which he credits to these poems' "radical formalism": their use of the sonnet form to reflect on poetry's position as and against discourse.[4] In the introduction to *Adventures in Form: A Compendium of Poetic Forms, Rules & Constraints* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2012), Tom Chivers encourages readers to see that "form can be employed as a framework for innovation", citing the "eternal paradox of art" as a negotiation between "the imposition of form and the desire to escape or reinvent".[5] The anthology includes both contemporary revisions of received forms and poems generated from new rules and constraints. In a more conceptual vein, Christian Bök's experiment with "the aesthetic potential of genetics", *The Xenotext: Book 1*, attempts to realize the intentions of pastoral's immortalisation of Nature by looking to biology for his formal constraints: taking poetry out of the hands of the human and entrusting its generation to genetic code of a *D. radiodurans* (a germ able to survive, unchanged, in even the deadliest of environments).[6]

---

[4] Jeff Hilson, "Introduction", *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2008), pp. 14; 15.
[5] Tom Chivers, "Introduction", *Adventures in Form: A Compendium of Poetic Forms, Rules & Constraints* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2012), pp. 9; 10.
[6] Christian Bök, *The Xenotext: Book 1* (Toronto: Coach House, 2015).

But much contemporary investigation of constraint is more than 'purely formal'. Poets are thinking through complicity, and the ways in which poetic constraints embody and transform constraining discourses and functions in the world. In Terrance Hayes' 2018 collection *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, 77 poems take up the strains of racism, police brutality, incarceration and masculinity in black America within the tight space of the sonnet: "I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison / Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame."[7] Keston Sutherland's 2013 collection *The Odes to TL61P* (London: Enitharmon) features blocks of justified prose which he characterises, not as poetry freed from the constraints of generic expectation but, rather, as squeezing and confining analogous to the form of labour into which the worker enters in capitalism.[8] Sutherland's formal exuberance has been much remarked upon,[9] but most saliently, his prosodic control sits against a forceful desire to avoid the consolations of lyric transcendence, with fiercely metrical passages either the means by which, or the features onto which, a radical disjunction encumbers the neatness of the well-wrought poem. His work is part of a tendency in recent writing which insists on the category of Lyric as a necessarily held but thoroughly constrained and contaminated horizon of autonomy. These currents move against the programmes of experimental poetics which had sought to expunge the postures of the expressive subject from the poem as too ideologically compromised; they maintain that the register and repertoire of lyric is necessary, especially for marginalised or culturally non-hegemonic communities. In the introduction to *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, Juliana Spahr resists the habitual 20th century association of lyric with conservative tradition and solipsism, proposing a collection of "lyrics that… are not at all ignorant about [social]

[7] Terrance Hayes, *Ameican Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 11.
[8] Keston Sutherland, "Blocks: Form Since the Crash", a seminar at New York University, 13 November, 2015, recording: https://archive.org/details/BlocksSeminarAtNYU13November2015/Blocks+seminar+at+NYU+13+November+2015.mp3 [accessed 20/04/20].
[9] Cf. Simon Jarvis, "The Poetry of Keston Sutherland", *Chicago Review* 53:1 (Spring 2007), pp. 139-145; John Wilkinson, "Off the Grid", *The Lyric Touch* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), pp. 120-139; Romana Huk, "New British Schools", in *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today*, eds. David Nowell Smith and Abigail Lang, (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 59-78.

structures" and which are interested in their implication with them.[10] While Spahr confesses that her selection focuses "mainly on formal and aesthetic issues",[11] much linguistically innovative UK poetry of the last 20 years has been interested in investigating complicity, giving up the pursuit of exemption or refusal, enjoined in what John Wilkinson calls "a fierce attachment to lyric poetry as a declaratively political practice."[12] These contemporary lyric tendencies involve pressurising—rather than evading—the speaking subject in the poem. They announce a thoroughly constrained sense of lyric: "lyric that is indeed almost intolerably personal, vulnerable, and riven at the very site of writing by over-writings one can't isolate oneself from—be they institutional, political, or global."[13] With a similar attention to the subject in performance, some in the resurgent lyric studies have sought to mark out the distinctiveness of lyric as a mode whose formal and conventional repertoire draws attention to language not only as resistant materiality but also in its involvement in constituting subjectivity through address, figuration and as a condition of temporal experience.[14]

A feature of recent critical attention to constraint has been the formulation of innovative approaches to prosody. Simon Jarvis and Christopher Norris have both made cases for renewed attention to the estrangements of formal patterning as a species of cognition in verse. As well as composing in verse, Jarvis argues that the constraints of verse constitute poetic thinking's difference from the kinds of philosophical propositions that would want to define it: "even where the poet wishes that versification be a merely technical or decorative process, it very often turns out that it, on the contrary, introduces new kinds of thinking unforeseen in the material to be versified."[15] Likewise Norris writes, in a preface to some of his own verse, that "formal

---

[10] Juliana Spahr, *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), p. 11.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[12] Wilkson, "Off the Grid", p. 126.
[13] Huk, "New British Schools", p. 64.
[14] Jonathan Culler, for example, writes, "If we believe language is the medium for the formation of subjectivity, lyric ought to be crucial, as the site where language is linked not only to structures of identification and displacement before the consolidation of subject positions but especially to rhythm and the bodily experience of temporality, on the one hand, and to the formative dwelling in a particular language, on the other." "Why Lyric?", *PMLA* 123.1 (2008), pp. 201-206; 205.
[15] Simon Jarvis, "Bedlam or Parnassus: The Verse Idea", *Metaphilosophy* Vol 43 Nos 1-2 (Jan 2012), pp. 71-81; 74.

requirements, so far from imposing artificial constraints, can in fact serve to extend the poet-thinker's range of conceptual-expressive resources in unexpected, inventive, and revealing ways."[16] This is a pressing imperative now given that "the main thrust of avant-garde poetics over the past few decades has been directed towards an idea of literary language that markedly deemphasises, and sometimes pretty much eliminates, the poetry-prose distinction."[17] Norris is not advocating a return to an essentialist distinction between poetry and prose, but means mainly to draw attention to the resources of metre and rhyme that have been passed over by critical poetics determined to reveal genre's arbitrariness. John Wilkinson points to the psychoanalytic implications of the restrictions of prosody, proposing that the adequation between the poem's rhythm and the performer's constitutes a valuable binding-unbinding analogous to that by which the psyche determines its own limits against and contiguities with the social world.[18]

These resources are also useful for Lisa Robertson, who turns to prosody not only as an analytical tool for a set of objects comprised of certain phonetic and generic techniques, but also as a way to understand how being constituted as a speaking subject involves following and departing from intonational and gestural patterns which are less easily codifiable. Robertson understands a poem as an instance of linguistic performance which disturbs subjectivity's movement between the attitudinal postures which mark its social appearance (an authority of tone, for example) and the technical supports which sustain it (the repetition of certain sounds, syntactical structures, rhythms). That disturbance is what she calls prosody. Emphasising the spoken and embodied aspect of the poem, Robertson's writing directs attention to the prosodic constraints by which spoken language is patterned and the ways in which it departs from such patterns. Poems are imagined as "most temporary membranes" which shelter speakers against "the confinement of identity".[19] In a poem, we understand ourselves improvising in the midst of

[16] Christopher Norris, "Verse Crisis: Mallarmé", *Textual Practice* Vol. 28, No. 4, 557–569; 559.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 559.
[18] John Wilkinson, "Repeatable Evanescence", *Thinking Verse* IV.i (2014), pp. 23-49.
[19] Lisa Robertson, "Untitled Essay", *Nilling* (Toronto: Bookthug, 2012), p. 73.

"profoundly ancient and constantly reinventing protocols—protocols we enliven, figure and transform with our bodies and their words, by beginning."[20] In a recent article, Holly Pester also suggests "mixing prosody as a tradition of technical analysis with prosody understood as a meeting point between the poem and the world" in order to take into account how "the technical form of poetry is conjoint with the contingent manifestations of its social and bodily extensions".[21] These interventions begin to set out the social implications of form. They might be read alongside and against Daniel Tiffany's recent argument that we turn our analytical attention away from form and back to diction in poetry, from which it had strayed after Wordsworth; Tiffany's rehabilitation of diction attempts to recover its patently social derivations and implications as a necessary counterbalance to a lingering high modernist idea of form which sets it entirely apart from social questions.[22]

We should situate intervention's like Pester's and Robertson's within and against a critical tendency which has understood formal constraints to function, at varying levels of mediation, as extensions of social control. Anthony Easthope's treatment of metre in *Poetry as Discourse* is exemplary. For Easthope iambic pentameter in the English poetic tradition is repressive. It is so in two senses: firstly in its hegemony it has excluded from the category of poetry those alternative rhythms which are the preserve of ordinary culture (folk ballads, nursery rhymes, football chants); secondly, and paradoxically, it dissimulates its genesis as artifice and is intelligible in poetic discourse as the natural expression of a cultivated speaker. Both objections make sense in the context of an era of cultural studies for which suspicion of the aesthetic was the presiding orientation. The argument against the hegemony of the pentameter attempts a leftist rehabilitation of Pound's formula, "to break the pentameter, that was the first heave". It has also been made by

---

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[21] Holly Pester, "The Politics of Delivery (Against Poet-Voice)", *The Poetry Review*, 109:2 (2019), https://poetrysociety.org.uk/the-politics-of-delivery-against-poet-voice/ [accessed 06/04/2020].
[22] Daniel Tiffany, "Speaking in Tongues: Poetry and the Residues of Shared Language", *Tupelo Quarterly* 20 (2020), http://www.tupeloquarterly.com/speaking-in-tongues-poetry-and-the-residues-of-shared-language/ [accessed 06/04/2020].

Kamau Brathwaite in the interest of attuning the ear to different prosodic values in Caribbean poetry.[23] But the point that the pentameter is uniquely a vehicle for ideological coercion should be queried. The notion that metre acts socially draws upon increasing influence of linguistics, which uncontroversially could claim that metre realizes "the codal speech act of putting [the utterer's] text on display as a text, his relation through the poem to an audience."[24] However, Easthope argues that the pentameter has all of the functions of language except the poetic function: it places metrical lines in a classical tradition by alluding to the concept of metrical restraint; it promotes certain forms of expression and thus certain affects; yet it denies its own materiality: "the pentameter would disavow its own metricality and restrain the activity of the signifier… Iambic pentameter works to deny the position of subject of enunciation in favour of that of the subject of the enounced; *it would disclaim the voice speaking the poem in favour of the voice represented in the poem, speaking what it says.* Accordingly pentameter is able to promote representation of someone 'really' speaking."[25] Easthope exemplifies the tendency of this line of critique to reduce readers to dupes incapable of resisting the seductions of the language system. He also gives little importance to the fact that a determining feature of the work of literature is its principle of illusion, by which it "resists being incorporated into the flow of ideology in order to give a determinate representation of it," in Pierre Macherey's formulation.[26]

The artifice of metre is what leads Derek Attridge to define it, contra Easthope, as integral to poetry's defamiliarization effect. For him metre demonstrates its materiality:

> Metrical verse does not represent an approximation to 'the speaking voice', if we understand by that the direct imitation of a specific utterance on a specific occasion: that singleness is exactly what it enables language to escape from. By putting his words into the hands of a pre-existing metrical scheme, an external organising force from which no

[23] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "History of the Voice", *Roots* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993), particularly pp. 264-6.
[24] John Haynes, "Metre and Discourse", in *Language, Discourse and Literature*, eds. Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 273.
[25] Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse*, p. 74. Indeed, it is true that the pentameter is still taught in schools as mimetic of the heartbeat or natural speech—though the ideology of these pedagogical conventions is not a necessary consequence either of the form or of the critical interpretation of prosody, the history of which is notoriously diverse.
[26] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), p. 73.

> syllable can escape, the poet makes a willing surrender of the liberty that is fundamental to ordinary speech, and in so doing exchanges the expressive potential of the individual utterance for that of the literary institution within which his poem takes its place. Metre acknowledges—and enforces—the fact that literary language is not the language of daily discourse, and that the 'meaning' of a literary text is not to be located in some authorially underwritten intention or critically validated interpretation, but in what the text itself does for its readers, or, more accurately, in what its readers are able to do with, and within, the linguistic structures by which it is constituted.[27]

Where I would depart from Attridge is his stressing "the fact that literary language is not the language of daily discourse". Efforts to describe the value of attending to formal constraints which are based solely in a distinct property of poetic language or form are in danger of hypostasizing those forms in ways which contradict the effort to identify and maintain a capacity of language in excess of instrumental use—by, for example, implicitly consenting to an absolutely distinct property of prosaic language which excludes those poetic capacities. To avoid that distinction would mean refraining to set the poetic function of language against its social function: language drawing attention to itself, and away from the pragmatics of its use in social interaction.[28]

Attention to linguistic structure need not confine literature to a hermetic existence apart from the social world. As Tom Jones puts it: "Because language is neither an insignificant nor discrete feature of human life, but to a high degree characteristic of the species and of the intersubjective and institutional worlds people share, poems encourage their writers and readers to think about these intersubjective and institutional worlds in the same kinds of ways as they think about language."[29] Attention to poetic language might mean attention to the ways in which social interactions are mediated by language more generally. One of the ways in which this analogy is thought is through the metaphor of constraint. There are constraints in language: there are constraints in the social structures beyond it. Poetry which thematizes formal constraints makes

---

[27] Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, p. 314.
[28] The risk of such a distinction motivates Simon Jarvis's dialectical account of prosody: his non-methodological prosody attempts to recognize the non-instrumental artifice of language at the same time as always failing to codify that artifice as ultimately formalizable. Therein is prosody's cognition, a cognition which requires the attempt at a methodological prosody and the subsequent grasping of the impossibility of the attempt to succeed on any terms which might precede it. "Prosody as Cognition", *Critical Quarterly* Vol 40 No 4, pp. 3-15.
[29] Tom Jones, *Poetic Language* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2012), p. 2.

their operation subject to investigation and reflection—it tests what scope there is within constraints for variation, improvisation, innovation; how they make us feel time; how they make us sense certain things at the expense of others, or alternatively how they direct our attention to meanings we would not normally sense.

Free Verse and Formal Constraint

These distinctions about the nature of formal constraint are useful to keep in mind when reviewing the history of formal innovation in the 20th century. As varied as they are in their rhetorical and poetic demonstrations, the poetics of free verse are indicative of poets trying to articulate a relationship between formal constraints and a society which they wished to transform. It is in this tradition that constraints of verse, set fast in a tradition of prosody dating back to the sixteenth century, became open to question; and poets began casting around for alternative formal organizations, testing out the idea that constraints entirely immanent to a work might lend aesthetic coherence in the absence of historical conventions. It was also a moment when poetry was animated and public about its social vocation before, as some would have it, turning inward for a century. Given the critical interest in the continuing (after)life of modernism in contemporary advanced poetry, it makes sense to begin to chart a brief history of constraint here.[30]

The advent of free verse in modernism was fundamental in orienting poetry and the critical discourse about it around the question of constraint and its repudiation. While that much is plain, it is also uncontroversial that there is much confusion over where the freedoms of free verse lie. A cursory survey of the legacy of modernism in the later 20th century might lead one to imagine that the composition of free verse was primarily directed at the achievement of individual liberties—particularly in the American context. In Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* we read

[30] Cf. Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of The Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996); *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in Contemporary British Poetry*, eds. David Nowell Smith and Abigail Lang.

Michael Mclure claiming that "The prime purpose of my writing is liberation. (Self-liberation first and hopefully that of the reader.)… Measure, line, etc. is interior and takes an outward shape, is not pre-destined or logical but immediate."[31] Olson's framing is similar: the line comes "from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, […] only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending."[32] The weight of this influence in the UK leads Roy Fisher to have recourse to the personal when explaining his compositional principles: "not having redundant sound, and spare syllables that aren't under the control of *your sense of style or your sense of tension*."[33] While it is easy and probably not wholly incorrect to see these in the context of an American exceptionalism and individualism (even as it reaches back over the Atlantic to Fisher et al., straining against the conservative pieties of post-war British poetry), the emphasis on the individual also serves to place some distance between these later writers and the authoritarian and/or conservative politics of the first generation of modernists. Yet it is important to recall that from the beginning free verse was more than a naïve celebration of individual freedom and placed a firm value on formal constraint.

Ultimately and despite the distinctive politics of its practitioners, what the free verse of Whitman, Laforgue, Mallarmé, Eliot, Pound, and Williams shares is the repudiation of a hypostasized idea of form detached from reality—even if that idea of form was given different meanings. It implied inventing a new idea of formal organization: sometimes apparently centred on the individual; but also with an view to transcending the individual towards a greater, formal, profundity. Depending on whose hands the concept is in, the poetics of free verse either imagine new formal constraints as compensation for a degraded and fractured society, or else attempt to wrest compositional principles from arbitrary conventions by connecting them with the social life

---

[31] Michael Mclure, "Statement on Poetics", *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, ed. Donald Allen (London: Evergreen Books, 1960), p. 423.
[32] Charles Olson, "Projective Verse", *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 242.
[33] Roy Fisher, interviewed by John Tranter, 29 March 1989, http://jacketmagazine.com/01/fisher-iv.html, [accessed 06/04/2020], my emphasis.

of language. These formal concerns accommodate different political articulations, and they are insulated from immediate political application—no formal organization no matter how much it constitutes an estrangement from accepted usage has political effects without the understanding of its readers.

From an American perspective, free verse begins with Whitman.[34] Whitman's long, end-stopped verses follow no metrical principle, eschew rhyme, and avoid elevated poetic diction. Continued deference to these features of verse were, for Whitman, indicative of a poetic and cultural conventionality that could not respond to the altered conditions and character of the new, specifically American, world.

In his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman justifies his innovation in verse style as a form of modesty and simplicity, an unconcern with artifice, "ornament" and "fluency".[35] "The best singer is not the one who has the most lithe and powerful organ . . . the pleasure of poems is not in them that take the handsomest measure and similes and sound." He celebrates the character of the United States as it is manifest in "common people" and finds in this cultural milieu "unrhymed poetry" which he will imitate in his verse. In this democratizing principle his justifications are similar to Wordsworth's celebration of "the real language of men" in *Lyrical Ballads*—with Whitman affirming "the residence of the poetic in outdoor people"—yet Whitman rejects the pentameter and rhyme entirely, departing even from the trappings of popular forms which Wordsworth defended for the charm and familiar pleasure they afforded, in favour of an older, biblical anaphoric style which had largely escaped codification in the English poetic tradition.[36] Here the prophetic voice of the poet was central, a principle of near infinite vision which refrained from condensation or concentration. There is freedom here, of subject matter,

[34] It should be noted that Pound and Eliot did not understand the 19th century poet to be informing their prosodic innovations, and were equivocal in their appraisals of him—even as Whitman clearly shares with subsequent free versifiers the contestation over the essential principles of poetry, or the will to include within the category material which is not ordered by conventional numerical prosodies.

[35] Walt Whitman, "Preface to *Leaves of Grass*", *Poetry Foundation* (2009 [1855]), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69391/from-preface-to-leaves-of-grass-first-edition [accessed 07/12/20], np. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from this text.

[36] William Wordsworth, "Preface 1800 Version", (*Lyrical Ballads*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2005 [1800]), p. 287.

diction, and the undiscriminating attention afforded to prose. Of course, for this reason many of Whitman's contemporaries found the formal freedom of his "barbaric yawp" to come at the expense of its belonging to the category of poetry.[37]

Plainly, however, Whitman's lines remain lines, and thus retain one of the constraints which unambiguously determines verse, and if it no longer unambiguously determines poetry, certainly did until the 20th century. The difference is that Whitman's lines are not determined by an abstract metrical principle, but informed by their 'content'. Just as every individual harbours a poet, every prosaic detail of the world constitutes an "unrhymed poetry", so too every line harbours its own prosody. The form of the lines, and the aggregate form of the poems, are determined by their content—not necessarily the subjects being described, but the culture of which they are a part, to which belong specific linguistic expressions, names, cadences, etc.: the idiom. In this sense Whitman's poetry retains a fundamental constraint of verse—the line—even as it subjects the line to a newly discovered "organic" principle of organization. This vision of freedom is based in subjecting the existing conventions of the poetic tradition, whose authority Whitman borrows even as he heroically moves on from them, to a negotiation with the empirical. In this he anticipates the more radical challenges to prosodic values from the modernists I will go on to discuss, in particular the overcoming of classical form by an immanent principle of formalisation.[38]

The origins of free verse in French poetry also emerge from a restlessness with the perceived formality and rigours of a verse tradition. Introducing the symbolists, Arthur Symonds describes the efforts of poets like Jules Laforgue "to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority", by writing such that "the regular beat of verse is broken."[39] Turning inwards, free verse shares the psychologistic justifications attributed to other modernist literary innovations. As Clive Scott writes, "One of the original justifications for the

[37] Charles Hartman argues that in much of the reaction against free verse, "the prosodic theorists were defending civilisation itself", based in a metonymy connecting metre, verse, poetry, culture, and (European) civilization. *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 6.
[38] See in particular the arguments I summarize from Andrew Crozier below.
[39] Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co, 1958), p. 8.

adoption of *vers libre* was its inimitability, its resistance to abstraction and systematization; thus it could theoretically mould itself to the uniqueness of a personality, a psyche, a mood."[40] The resistance to abstraction would realise the uniqueness not only of the poet, but also the reader in the moment of performance. Without the assurance of the alexandrine, the reader was forced to make choices regarding pronunciation and rhythm in reading which deference to a classical metrical tradition would have determined for them.

The emphasis on individual authenticity and on the speech situation, however, is qualified by Mallarmé, whose opposition to inherited standards would not be rectified by turning to the dynamisms of speech, which had become nothing more than a medium of easy commerce. A new measure was required in order that verse remain distinct from speech; that the "order innate in the book of verse" be discovered in "isolation from speech" and from the communicative expressions of the author.[41] Like the mysterious meanings which the sounds of words carry ("*ombre*" "is opaque", "*ténèbres*" is "not very dark"), the rhythms of poetry indicate an order beyond the individual's whim: "to believe, seriously, that every individual possesses a new prosody in his very breath… is a joke."[42] Mallarmé's philosophically inflected concern for measure attempts a rapprochement between the contingencies of language's outward shapes and an ideal form which exceeds them. The perceptible elements of language become, for Mallarmé, evidence of a silent truth that discourse cannot speak, but can only give the measure of. [43] The stakes of innovating verse constraints in Mallarmé link the individual's speech and the ontological implications of poetry as a measure of human being.

---

[40] Clive Scott, *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 254.
[41] Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crise de Vers", *Divigations,* trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), pp. 208; 211.
[42] *Ibid,* p. 206
[43] According to Julia Kristeva, this incommensurability signals the irruption of the pre-symbolic semiotic unconscious—a disruption of language which is antithetical to its ordering. See *Revolution in Poetic Language* trans. Margaret Waller, where drive is "checked by the constraints of biological and social structures" including language, emerging only as "discontinuities" in formal or symbolic language. In *The Kristeva Reader* ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) p. 96. Kristeva makes rhythm "indifferent to language" (97), but it could be better to say that rhythm is a transposition between different aspects of language and, though it may not be fully representable, does not therefore disrupt, undermine or entirely liberate the psyche from language as system of conventional meanings.

In Anglophone poetry, the polemical case for free verse made by Pound initially did emphasise individual authenticity: "a man's rhythm must be interpretive, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable."[44] Pound counterposes the freedom from constraint by way of "musical" composition to the rigidities of "the metronome" which are supposed to obtain in metrical composition.[45] His appeal to music links both the prosodic contours of the poem and deeper, unrepresentable rhythm, neither of which is simply internal to the individual but represent the mimetic correspondence of an emotional "complex". Yet Pound was adamant that free verse not imply "lack of rhythmical construction and intensity."[46] The freedom from metre motivated a search for modes of rhythmical organization other than the numerical model of the pentameter, but importantly, modes which were linked to general social truths.[47] For Eliot especially this meant the acknowledgement that there is "something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself."[48]

Eliot's caveat regarding free verse is well-known: while he would not slavishly adhere to the pentameter, nor would he be tempted to put his lot in with the solipsistic freedoms of liberal individualism, and thus insisted that the "ghost of some simple metre" menaced the new non-metrical verse.[49] For Eliot this has a political valence: "…the decay of intricate formal patterns has nothing to do with the advent of *vers libre*. It had set in long before. Only in a closely-knit and

---

[44] Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect", *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 9.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[46] Pound, "Letter to Harriet Monroe, January 1915", *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 50. Michael Golston argues that Pound's ideas about "absolute rhythm" were not simply a formal concern, but are indicative of wider preoccupations with scientific approaches to rhythm which can be linked to his thinking on national belonging and race: "Pound's interest in the relationship of the rhythms of language to geography and genealogy and hence to race dovetails later with his sympathy for certain of the most unsavory aspects of fascist ideology, as well as with [founder of experimental phonetics abbé Pierre-Jean] Rousselot's idea that rhythm is an "image" of the "body and soul, muscles and spirit" ... The recovery of "organic" bodily and sociopolitical rhythms through the agency of poetic rhythms becomes the formal project of the Cantos beginning as early as the Pisans and culminating in Thrones." *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science: Pound, Yeats, Williams, and Modern Sciences of Rhythm* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 70.
[47] Though Eliot doubts the need for "an elaborate system of prosody", ("Reflections", 33) he intends to forestall poetry from further investigating the complex metrics of Victorian versifiers, rather than to dismiss the relevance of prosody altogether.
[48] Eliot, "The Function of Criticism", *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 68.
[49] Eliot, "Reflections on *Vers Libre*", *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, p. 34.

homogeneous society, where many men are at work on the same problems, such a society as those which produced the Greek chorus, the Elizabethan lyric, and the Troubadour canzone, will the development of such forms ever be carried to perfection."[50] The absence of meaningful prosodic complexity is not only a question of technique for Eliot but a social problem. It will not be remedied by the invention of new metres nor by the eschewal of formal patterning, but by the reunification of art and social life. Only then will the innovation or mastery of the individual talent against the constraints of regular forms be meaningfully analogous to the individual's freedoms within an organic social totality. Thus Eliot sets out to make his free verse responsive to vernacular usage without abandoning the shadow of tradition, either unheard metres lurking in the wings, or else in passages of archaic diction and formal regularity; culminating in the "easy commerce of the old and new" in *Four Quartets*.

Though famously at odds with Eliot, William Carlos Williams also understood prosody to have a social vocation. It was imperative for him "to seek… a new measure… that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living."[51] William's rhythmic impulse comes not from a deep time but an attunement to the present: "the rhythmic unit usually came to me in a lyric outburst."[52] But this does not imply the rectitude of personal intuition: the notion of measure derived from American speech restrains the purely personal. Whereas Eliot seeks to reconcile the contingent with an impersonal tradition, Williams situates the personal against the idiom, and is interested in the transformative interaction of the two.[53] Williams's prosody clearly dislocates speech rhythms from syntax and meaning as they are construed in

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
[51] William Carlos Williams, "The Poem as a Field of Action", (1948) https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69393/the-poem-as-a-field-of-action [accessed 20/04/20].
[52] William Carlos Williams, *I wanted to write a poem: the autobiography of the works of a poet,* ed. Edith Heal (New York: New Directions, 1978), p. 15.
[53] Mary Ellen Solt, "William Carlos Williams: Idiom and Structure", *The Massachusetts Review* Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter, 1962), pp. 304-318; 306.

normal speech and heightens their distinctions. He sets the lyric outburst against the social idiom, each constraining the other.[54]

These negotiations between constraint and freedom in free verse prosody can be understood to constitute its poetic function: a formal estrangement that makes its aesthetic meanings shareable. For, although modernist free verse heeds the guiding light of a philosophical defence of experience against abstract rationalism led by Nietzsche, Bergson and James, it nevertheless retains an investment in poetry's cognitive capacities closely allied with its provision of form. What ensues are paradoxical attempts to pursue intuitive, contingent and irregular rhythms on one hand while appealing to classical notions of form on the other. This is part of a larger modernist tendency in which estrangements alter the categories of experience which they seek to clarify. Daniel Katz has explained how modernism's expatriate impulse deconstructed the indigeneity it sought to specify through a "dialectical re-encounter with the 'homeland'";[55] this operation is manifest formally, as attempts to construct formal constraints based on undiscovered aspects of identity unsettle the identities to be secured or reinvigorated—national belonging is, in Pound and Eliot, mediated through rhythms constructed from foreign and polyglot materials whose experience is not immediate but unfamiliar. These new constraints are beyond mastery, with poets grasping after them in the dark, unable to make it cohere. They radically defamiliarize even the most intimate and habitual linguistic materials. In a sense the force of their constraint derives not from the prescription of regularity, but the way in which they are beyond easy use and transparent knowledge. This is one reason why the term constraint remains valuable even if it applies to elements of language and composition which are still difficult to perceive as formal.

The idea that constraints might query and enliven what we mean by form is pursued by Andrew Crozier. Making a case for free verse in the UK during the formally conservative 1970s,

---

[54] As Rosmary Gates argues, Williams prosody found "a way to work his own felt rhythms against the natural rhythmic unit". "Forging an American Poetry from Speech Rhythms: Williams after Whitman", *Poetics Today*, Vol. 8, No. 3/4 (1987), pp. 503-527; 526.

[55] Daniel Katz, *American Modernism's Expatriate Scene: The Labour of Translation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 5.

Crozier's (recently published) thesis *Free Verse as Formal Restraint* seeks to "cast some light on the *prima facie* case that free verse, in abandoning metre, has abandoned the principle of restraint upon which this depends."[56] Crozier's defence of free verse is pitched against those conservative critics (including Eliot) who would argue that form has a moral value in constraining a prior, excessive or temporary, feeling. Yvor Winters is the typical adversary: "the creation of a form is nothing more nor less than the act of evaluating and shaping (that is, controlling) a given experience."[57] Crozier argues that free verse implies not only new principles of formal organization, but a different idea of what form is. Loosed from the notion of an ideal form that is the objective property of a certain linguistic configuration, this account of prosodic form intends only a description of the movement of thinking reflecting on the constraints of its verbal medium; that is, the shapes and times of language.

Crozier contends that "alternative non-metrical structures" can account for form without Winters's dualism between experience and classical form: he draws on the objectivist idea that words "can carry morals and structures appropriate to themselves."[58] The politics of this contention is that language, as social practice, is capable of formalizing itself (that is, reflecting on its shape and its capacity to shape thought) without the imposition of patterns divined from outside experience.[59]

Opponents of free verse spent much energy arguing against it on the basis that it lacked coherence; but they made the mistake of equating an aesthetic value with the property of empirical

---

[56] Andrew Crozier, *Free Verse as Formal Restraint: an alternative to metrical conventions in twentieth century poetic structure* ed. Ian Brinton (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2015), p. 13. Crozier's account draws on 20th century developments in linguistics, anthropology and process philosophy.

[57] Yvor Winters, *In Defence of Reason* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1960), p. 21.

[58] Crozier, *Free Verse as Formal Restraint*, p. 31.

[59] Thus, while H. T. Kirby-Smith makes a case for the prosodic intelligibility of free verse in *The Origins of Free Verse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), where he goes wrong, I think, is to designate the freedoms of modernist formal innovation as essentially negative: "all attempts to discover or invent an internally consistent scansion or form for free verse are misguided, except to the extent that certain kinds of free verse partially preserve scansions from the tradition that they are departing from" (xii)—it is correct that attempts to determine a definitive scansion for free verse miss the point, but for Kirby-Smith this implies the rectitude of the metrical tradition as part of the "linguistic inheritance" which he understands postmodern American free verse to have willingly turned its back on in "an attempt to replace a shareable metric with an indefinable authenticity or personal utterance." (274) His argument with this amnesiac American tendency therefore downplays the various politics of establishing new prosodic values in language.

objects or formal organizations. Crozier argues that metrical discourse's valuation of equivalence and symmetry passes over those aspects of language practice not amenable to "technical or objectively verifiable evidence."[60] Thinking ahead to the chapter on NourbeSe Philip's book *Zong!*, I will unfold some implications of these disagreements over prosodic constraints—specifically, how elements of prosody might be derived from such a non-empirically verifiable but political distinction as that between noise and speech. What is important to keep in mind is that Crozier's argument is not against the concept of formal organization, and the alternative phonological properties from which he derives its means of organization still constitute what J. H. Prynne calls "constraining patterns of coherence".[61]

These modernist ideas continue to invoke constraint yet are motivated by a desire that formal constraints cease to be isolatable and measurable as objects of knowledge distinct from everyday life (and, thus, distinct from, because apprehended by, cognition). At base is an idea that subjective experience (for example, in the experience of rhythm) might be made public by becoming formal. Whether or not free verse is metrical is therefore less of a pressing question than what prosody means. Without denying that there is a phenomenological distinction between the reading of free and metrical verse, we could say that it is not metre but an understanding of prosody as a scientific theory against which the poetics of free verse are oriented (even if the early free-versifiers do not make this explicit).[62] At the same time, as much as they pressurise formal constraint, these modernist poetics often smuggle back in the notion of a presiding ideal form deriving its authority from either cultural constitution or the autonomous individual psyche. This dynamic creates much of the fraught but productive energy in modernist writing, where the social project is shown up by a politics of form which it cannot control.

---

[60] Crozier, p. 45.
[61] Crozier, p. 214.
[62] Correcting this misapprehension, Jarvis encourages us to see that prosody was always "a tradition not susceptible to exhaustive description (and this not as a contingent defect but as central to the peculiar kind of implicit cognition which the prosodic sense really is)." "Prosody as Cognition", p. 4.

Postmodern Constraints

After modernism, experiments with constraints begin to disown that there might be a necessary relationship between formal constraints and the life of society.[63] Symptomatic of this view is Auden's specification in "The Poet and The City" that the poem represents an organization distinct from that of society—a totalitarian order which only works if the poem is kept apart from daily life. He thus sets the formal work of poetic language apart from the routinized "necessarily impersonal" labour of social production: the poet "has to accept the divorce in his art between the gratuitous and the utile as a fact" and thereby redress the "impersonal pressures of modern society" by striving to "acquire and preserve a face of his own."[64] The poem's form preserves the person of the poet from society.

Where Auden turned from the impersonal pressures of society to the poem, subsequent experiments with constraints exacerbate impersonality and at the same time the freedom of the poem from heteronomy. With Oulipo, the employment of constraint is explicitly playful and inquisitive—but also indicates a challenge to the category of poetry and the expressive ideology with which it was associated. Jacques Roubaud, a member almost from the group's inception, explains that the concern with constraint arises from a dissatisfaction with the freedoms of free verse which he equates with an impulse to individual creative freedoms lacking a concept of literary genesis:

> "Asserting one's freedom" in art makes sense only referentially—it is an act of destroying traditional artistic methods. After these crises of freedom—they are often creative and enriching in their opposition to the fossilized relics of tradition—it finds sustenance only in a parrot-like repetition of the original gesture, a self-parody that immediately becomes

[63] In chapter 1 I discuss Michael Golston's assessment that postmodern poetry locates its allegorical impulse in form rather than content; the current that I trace here is consistent with this, understanding the use of constraints to be politically or aesthetically emancipatory. If normal poetic form is an allegory of unthinking recapitulation of social directives, then these poetics understand their forms to replace or thematize those directives. That being said, as my discussion of Modernism indicates, formal allegories are surely just as salient in those works as in the postmodern writing. Cf. *Poetic Machinations: Allegory, Surrealism, and Postmodern Poetic Form* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[64] W. H. Auden, "The Poet and The City", *Massachusetts Review* Vol. 3 No. 3 (1962), pp. 459; 463.

> irrelevant. One then finds oneself confronted with an increasingly weak, sad, and bitter involvement with the unconscious leavings of tradition.[65]

Oulipo experiments dispense with the control of the author, and thus often with the expressive notion of the poem as the record of a person thinking and speaking.[66] The group also explicitly shift the focus from literature as a set of existing works to the conditions behind the work—potential literature. "The aim of Oulipo is to invent (or reinvent) restrictions of a formal nature (*contraintes*) and propose them to enthusiasts interested in composing literature."[67] Their focus on group formation and the rules of membership make the process of literary production primary. Ambiguity surrounding the aesthetic judgements of writers negotiating between precedent and innovation is minimized, and the group takes literally the idea of literature as an institution, demonstrating and delighting in the institutionalization of rules often measuring the success of a work by its description of the constraints which generated it.

Constraint is derived here from the calculus of a predetermined program rather than from the mediating sense of the poet balancing the fine perception of fleeting individual rhythms with the deeper and broader rhythms of society. There is common cause with the championing of process by conceptual poets: Craig Dworkin opposes procedural composition to "familiar strategies of authorial control."[68] Distinct from the modernist questioning of the social nature and substance of formal constraint, the Oulipian *contrainte* is an unambiguous but arbitrarily formulated generative rule—Harry Matthews glosses various translations including constraint, restriction, restrictive form: "all these expressions denote the strict and clearly definable rule, method, procedure or structure that generates every work that can be properly called Oulipian."[69]

---

[65] Jacques Roubaud, "Introduction", *Oulipo Compendium*, eds. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 2011), p. 41.
[66] Oulipo's enlisting constraints as a form of impersonal control supplants Donald Davie's opposition between those modern poets who risked negotiating with language's more unmanageable qualities and those who valued the poet's assertion of control, directing rhetorical vigour and plain-spoken diction towards communication with an ideal reader or audience. *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1955).
[67] Roubaud, "Introduction", *Oulipo Compendium*, pp. 38-9.
[68] Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. xliii.
[69] "*Contrainte*", *Oulipo Compendium*, p. 131.

The definitive nature of these constraints, and the implication that the only serious employment of constraint in literary production is towards the ends of achieving "the freedom of difficulty mastered",[70] leads Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young to argue that this kind of constraint-based work is masculinist. In a paper which ironically adopts a lipogramatic constraint absenting the letter "r", they write:

> We did not feel this wok that uses constaint was ielevant, not to men no to women. We did not want to dismiss it. When we liked this wok by men we saw the eteat into constaint as an attempt by men to avoid pepetuating bougeois pivilege, to make fun of the omantic nacissistic tadition, of all that tadition of fomalism. But at othe moments we ween't so sue that this was eally a feminist, antiacist self-investigation. While this wok diectly avoided emotional and pesonal expessiveness, it was mostly engaged with conceptual inventiveness, not an especially adical move post the tun of the centuy.[71]

They charge that procedural works

> tended to mock athe than build. They tended to invade and cut down athe than connect. They tended to say that thee wasn't oom in the oom fo the body… We could think of things we wanted to constain, whee a pocess of constaint might be useful. We wanted to constain the wa on Iraq fo instance. But when it came to the body, we felt we needed moe addition and less constaint. We needed moe options. It seemed as if in thity o thity-five yeas thee had been some change, some change aound cultual politics even though last week at a eading we head a man ead poems witten in the style of Sappho, inseting the names of bay aea female poets whee Sappho inseted the names Anaktoria or Atthis, but eally not enough change on a govenmental level. Abotion was still at isk. Family values still set ou politics.

The manifesto makes a direct link between constraint in the social world and constraint in poetry, arguing for a poetics of addition, rather than restriction, when it comes to the body—but it is not clear why there is any necessary connection between formal constraint and restriction of the body. For example, formal constraints might bring the body into play, drawing attention to the space between text and performance.[72] Their conceptualisation of the feminine appears to recapitulate

---

[70] Roubaud, "Introduction", p. 41.
[71] Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, "Foulipo", talk for CalArts Noulipo Conference, Fall 2005, http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/foulipo.html; see also Philip Terry's editorial introduction in *The Penguin Book of Oulipo* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. xxviii.
[72] This is the project of the performance writing of Caroline Bergvall.

the association of women's writing with excess, looseness, the body, the social, and proliferation against the austerity, rationality and intellectual concern of the masculine.

While Spahr and Young delivered their manifesto to a conference on Oulipo, by implicating their North American colleagues they make it clear that their argument is as much with Language poetry, another movement which has been charged with avoiding the politics of gender and abiding a purely intellectual concern with form. While Language poetry's politicized poetics celebrated readerly freedom, that freedom is won by positioning language against the social world and language users.

The poetics of Language is centred around an insistence on the arbitrary nature of language derived from post-structuralism. Bruce Andrews sets out the project as "a political writing practice that unveils and demystifies the creation & sharing of meaning. That problematicizes the ideological nature of any apparent coherence between signified & referent, between signified & signifier (for example, by composing words around axes other than grammar/pointing function--)."[73] The discovery of the materiality of language, language's productivity in referring only to itself, is set against the ideological coercions which underwrite signification and enforce the transparency of language: "an assembly line to deliver meaning of certain kinds"; "mechanisms of social control".[74]

Underlying this poetics is an analogy between language use and labour. It assumes that the reader/language user is coerced into using language whose constituents are invisible like those of the commodity form. Interrupting these relations of production—syntactical structures—words will appear in their materiality as powers which can be directed to ends other than the closure of signification—the commodity. By interrupting the naturalizing codes of reference, especially the generic conventions which determine poetry as a situation of address, the illusion of the speaking subject is revealed as an imaginary investment in the representation of speech by writing; Andrews

[73] Bruce Andrews, "Writing Social Work and Political Practice", *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 135.
[74] *Ibid.*, pp. 135; 136.

speaks of the illusion of reference erotically with a Lacanian inflection, a "*delay* between word and referent [which] teases us… Coitus interruptus."[75] The aim is to shatter this delay and thereby undo the "commodity fetish in language".[76] The language-user can then create new, non-referential meanings at the immediacy of the textual surface from the "inward shapes of language": "bring your own context".[77] Of course, as is implicit in Fredric Jameson's cursory appraisal of Language poetry and Oulipo in *Postmodernism*, this poetics is strikingly consistent with the post-Fordist model of pro-sumption where, rather than being subordinated to the machine-like production line, dispersed individuals produce value by harnessing their own linguistic and cognitive capacities: crowd-sourcing, advertising, the speech-acts underpinning financial speculation, etc.[78]

Where modernism's politics of constraint attempted to reckon with and extend language's social function, compositional constraints for Language poetics are only valuable in so far as they inhibit the functioning of habitual writing and reading practices understood as alienated processes of exchange: they unveil, reveal, and demystify. By replacing conventional usages with organizations of language determined by invented constraints (for example by using a formula or number to determine the number of sentences in a particular section, in Silliman's *Tjanting* (1981), or Hejinian's *My Life* (1980)), the reader is supposed to realise their role in creating meaning in the absence of intelligible conventions. They will be drawn to deviations from the norms of linguistic usage and thereby liberate repressed libidinal flows. Andrews: "writing is actually constitutive of these underlying libidinal flows; it is the desire for meaning"; "ideologies and fixed meanings can be… opposed by… a political writing practice that unveils demystifies [sic] the creation and sharing of meaning"; by deviating from conventional constraints (narrative; poetic forms; syntax),

[75] Bruce Andrews, "Text and Context", *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, p. 33.
[76] Ron Silliman, "Disappearance of the word, appearance of the world", *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, p. 126.
[77] Andrews, "Text and Context", pp. 32; 33.
[78] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2009 [1991]), pp. 28-31; 146-7.

a new writing could "create conditions under which the productivity of worlds and syllables and linguistic form-making can be felt, and given aesthetic presence."[79]

But the only way in which this can be considered political is if language is understood as a fixed structure or system which the individual can alter by harnessing libidinal energies which apparently do not derive from language as a structure even if they are "within language". Thus Andrews: "MAIN OPPOSITION: between acceptance of rules… OR stress on individual choices & disruptions & deviations (flows) & perspectives to the point where signs appear recognizably conventional."[80] As Tom Jones writes, "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetics posits an individual psychic energy within language that, by poeticising, deviates, and thereby alters the fabric of the language system (conceived of as discrete from use and users) for other users."[81] This poetics, which would subvert structures by confronting them with their repressed lack, therefore makes the mistake of hypostasizing structure and opposing it to individual freedom of creative energy.

The attention of more recent linguistic theories and poetics has tended to be on language as social praxis. The politicized poetics of writers of colour, women and queer writers, in particular, have been oriented towards articulations of social subjectivity in language—even as they question the naturalness of those subjectivities. It is difficult to reconcile these aims with the particular theoretical conclusions Language poetry drew—the critique of reference and the revelation of language's materiality to the stupefied passive consumer of transparent absorptive language. As David Marriot has argued, Language poetry's critique of reference disavows the situation of speech and thereby devalues the concerns of the marginalised with representation and address.[82] It also minimizes the salience of prosody and its implications, beyond textual patterning, in the pragmatics of the speech situation.[83]

---

[79] Andrews, "Writing Social Work and Political Practice", pp. 135-136.
[80] Andrews, "Encyclopedia", *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, p. 246.
[81] Jones, *Poetic Language*, p. 125.
[82] "Signs taken for signifiers: Language Writing, Fetishism and Disavowal", in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. Romana Huk (Middeltown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 338-346.
[83] That being said, to register these criticisms is not to deny that Language writing's attempts to inflect poetic theory with Marxism were historically influential in the development of avant-garde poetics.

Constraints and the Aesthetic Regime of Art

The foregoing narrative sets the scene for the poets I discuss in this study. I hope to have given a broad prehistory of the political valences attached to formal constraints, all of which inform the contemporary work under discussion. If there is a line of thought to be made clear, it is that the postmodernist disillusion with the modes of aesthetic coherence of modernism and Romanticism ends up fetishizing a kind of immediacy: a relation between the reader and the work is sought which would be free from the ideological coercions involved with the attribution of intrinsic values to previous forms of poetic organisation and constraint (that narrative is to be elaborated more fully, and complicated, in chapter 1). The material constituents of the writing are revealed for what they are, with the poetics of disjunction and artifice inhibiting the closure of any attempt to narrativize them. The reader is then free to see the material and use it as they please, and subsequently to become conscious of their unalienated participation in the production of meaning. This libertarian poetics does without a conception of aesthetic mediation, the way in which we make sense of sensing, that is, the institutions that govern our interaction with the work; the poetics of Language have therefore been criticised for imagining its free reader as exactly the kind of unconstrained, negatively free liberal individual which its poetic strategies were supposed to expunge from the work itself. It fits a postmodern relativism whereby we 'know' all of the structures that determine us, but that epistemological purview is devalued as we become aware of the unnaturalness and contingency of any vision of reality, and therefore are free to disregard them. In the postmodern, art no longer yearns for unification in the face of atomization; it has accepted atomization as the only condition there is.

Accompanying this disillusionment with the value of aesthetic totalization are styles of fracture and irresolution which reject formal coherence, employed for their "resistance to mainstream ideology", operating through "undecidability", and through "reveal[ing] the limits of

a 'natural' or 'organic' concept of poetry".[84] Yet these aesthetic styles could be seen to be analogous to the atomizing social reorganizations of Thatcher and Regan in the 1980s. Andrew Duncan notes a "loss of external reference….loss of validation from other people…loss of social tone in which things can be said."[85] In the context of the dissolution of community, mediating forms appeared more urgent: Duncan identifies a "new wave of the late 1980s [which] represents a return to syntax and verse movement, as opposed to the endless stop-start of parataxis."[86]

My aim here is not to endorse either of these developments as definitive precursors to the poetry in this study, but to set them in the context of disputed understandings of the aesthetic as a site of constraint. I suggest that we situate these debates around poetic constraint within a broader contestation of the aesthetic. By the aesthetic I mean a sphere of artistic production and also a field of political contest over the perceptible. The avant-garde's eventual institutionalisation as a repertoire of styles in postmodernism, and its accompanying theoretical discourse, might appear to dispense with "the aesthetic". In many cases, breaking from ideological constraint has been understood to be synonymous with breaking with the aesthetic. On other hand, the rehabilitation of the aesthetic sees it as a necessary constraint, mediation, on experience. However, I propose that we understand the aesthetic as a historical regime of intelligibility, within which all of these developments continue to operate. Jacques Rancière gives us a context for both of these evaluations of the aesthetic: in his terms it is a contingent "distribution of the sensible" rather than as a category of sensations, cognitions or objects. On one hand, postmodern art and its contemporary theorizations respond to an idea of the aesthetic as an exclusive domain, whose fiction of autonomy conceals a deep complicity with and determination by the ideologies of contemporary social relations. On the other hand there is an attempt to rehabilitate the aesthetic as a democratic and reparative activity of thinking and feeling. In fact, both of these versions of

---

[84] See the introduction to *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Paul Hoover (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), pp. xxv; xxxix; xxxvi.
[85] Andrew Duncan, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003), p. 321.
[86] *Ibid.*, p. 334.

and solutions to so-called aesthetic ideology are compatible with a post-Kantian aesthetic regime of art whose condition is the navigation of autonomy and heteronomy, or freedom and constraint.

Characterized both by the free play of the imagination and the discipline of the understanding which arrogates it to a universal community of sense, the aesthetic has justified libertarian and conservative systems of value. Under the influence of cultural studies, Marxism and post-structuralism, any categorical definition of the aesthetic came under suspicion. Critics and artists have shared an anti-aesthetic tendency, eschewing what was understood to be either an irredeemably compromised regime for defending and inculcating an anti-democratic ideology or else, relatedly, an excessive and socially unconcerned art for art's sake. A distinction is then installed between a conservative defence of the aesthetic as a privileged category for the maintenance of an ordered and homogeneous community, and a negative freedom from the ideological contaminations of aesthetic ideology. The refining difficulty of, say, Geoffrey Hill, against the easy nominalism of flarf. Here, the seductive errors of the aesthetic are imagined as being unavoidable. The model is of a discursive structure so coherent that in order to be liberated from it the only recourse is utter rejection. For Raymond Williams the autonomous ideal of aesthetic response cannot escape its historical conditions, a bourgeois liberalism in which formal equality disguises material inequality:

> Historically, the definition of 'aesthetic' response is an affirmation of 'creative imagination', of certain meanings and values which a dominant social system reduced and even tried to exclude…This must be remembered even as we add, necessarily, that the form of this protest, within definite social and historical conditions, led almost inevitably to new kinds of privileged instrumentality and specialized commodity.[87]

This framing leads to a cultural politics which essentially proposes to exacerbate the distinction between cultural meanings and historical conditions; this is evident in the post-structuralist

[87] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 151.

underpinnings of Language poetry, and, as Audrey Wasser shows, deconstruction, which could only imagine the production of difference as an absolute break.[88]

In contrast to these anti-aesthetics pitched against and inheriting the legacy of a certain nineteenth century aesthetic discourse, other visions of the aesthetic try to recover it as a condition for social reflection (to revive another nineteenth century legacy of aesthetic education). Instead of eschewal or rupture with the aesthetic as an exhaustively constraining conservative or anti-social institution, they posit the possibility of a democratic aesthetic in which a negotiation between freedom and constraint, or innovation and institution, is bound up with social life—and thus, not only with its preservation (by the cultivation of desirable sensibilities), but also with its transformation (by reflecting on and altering the ways in which we sense and talk about the world). Isobel Armstrong's *Radical Aesthetic* therefore proposed that "the components of aesthetic life are those that are already embedded in the processes and practices of consciousness—playing and dreaming, thinking and feeling. Or, put another way, ceaseless mediation endows language-making and symbol-making, thought, and the life of affect, with creative and cognitive life. These processes—experiences that keep us alive—are common to everyone, common to what the early Marx called species being."[89]

To periodize these discussions of the aesthetic, and the ways in which they imagine freedom and (implicitly or explicitly) constraint, I turn to Jacques Rancière. Rancière shows what is common to both versions of the aesthetic—the cognitive and affective freedoms transcending the determination of dominant social relations, and the realm of artistic productions symptomatic of those social relations. Historicizing the aesthetic regime of art, he finds it to be a discourse on art originating in the nineteenth century which dramatizes the contradictions of capitalist

---

[88] That Derrida "relies on a concept of freedom that is construed negatively as a freedom from constraint" is "predicated on a prior totalization", *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism and the Production of Literary Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 64: the new work can only emerge as the negation of the world, an ostensible rejection of the Romantic aesthetic of a totality of particulars, which instead emphasises a "nondialectical, utterly nonrecuperable negativity" as all that which exceeds unification. (p. 57)

[89] Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 2-3.

equality—neither escaping from them nor leaving their representations unaltered. Democratizing the senses, extending equality to all objects and subjects yet submitting everything to the equivalences of value, art in the aesthetic regime stages the noncoincidence between things and what can be said about them by constantly opening new zones of experience to intelligibility and articulation, extending the apparently settled matter of who and what can be counted. The aesthetic regime of art is not a question of the representation of a particular content to viewers/readers. It implies a new distribution of the sensible, a relation between sensing and the meanings we make of it.[90] Because it is not opposed to politics—because it takes into account the aspects of politics to do with sensing and telling stories about sensing, and the many ways in which, from the nineteenth century, politics was imagined to occur through art's reframing of a common world—this idea of an aesthetic regime encompasses both the repudiation and the rehabilitation of the aesthetic, in that they both imply it does politics by other means.

In Rancière's account of the aesthetic, rather than being a category based in the formulation of a particular thinker—Kant or Schiller—it is a narrative "plot…that reframes the division of the forms of our experience."[91] The aesthetic regime is a plot, the staging of a particular relationship between perceptions and their meanings: "there exists a specific sensible experience that holds the promise of both a new world of art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely the aesthetic." The aesthetic is not a quality of objects but a discourse about them which contradicts the discourse of their instrumentality: these objects can be experienced autonomously, by anyone and everyone, without being put to determinate ends. Aesthetic experience is also an experience of heterogeneity, the sensing of difference which extends the sensorium and puts the subject beyond themselves. The extension of the sensorium not only dis-places the subject, it also extends to any and all objects and parts of life: it is therefore not strictly autonomous, and is engaged in imagining the transformation of life. As such, the aesthetic regime is a regime of contradiction: it

[90] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 12-19.
[91] Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its outcomes", *Dissensus*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 123.

is the "emplotment of an *and*, the same knot binding together autonomy and heteronomy."[92] It represents the capacity to sense freely, regardless of how one's position is determined within a social order. With this capacity each person might "[build] up a new sensible world in the given one"—neither breaking with nor affirming the given world. Neither constrained nor unconstrained, the aesthetic regime institutes a "new kind of equality" by severing the link between what can be seen and what can be said about it.[93]

Even with this brief theorization, it becomes possible to see how arguments which posit that form's truth is the mode of production by which it is constrained at however many levels of mediation are themselves operating within and yet foreclosing the possibilities of the aesthetic regime. They present imaginative resolutions to the contradiction of the *and*, adopting the interpretive posture of rational disenchantment yet requiring the extension of the aesthetic sensorium such that forms become the bearers of secret social truths.[94] The relatively straightforward relation that critics like Eagleton see between the production of aesthetic form and the reproduction of ideological resolution and affirmation is echoed in certain persistent assertions of the politics of poetic form derived from the polemics of Language poetry, which can thus imagine only the dissolution of form and the realization of a truer sensible order as valuable. For Rancière, the different politics of aesthetics—conservative or revolutionary—reside in the various resolutions to the contradictions of the aesthetic; yet, importantly, when these resolutions become absolutized, aesthetic art loses its potential to prefigure social emancipation as an experience of dissensus—a disordering and disjunction of identities and the perceptions and capacities associated with them.

Ultimately, Rancière's aesthetic regime serves to frame the explorations of constraint in poetry in my study, which investigate formal constraints as sites of contestation, both continuous

---

[92] *Ibid.*, p. 124.
[93] Jacques Rancière, "Afterword", in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 280; 283.
[94] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its outcomes", p. 135.

with and differing from social life. Where postmodernism might seem to do away with the aesthetic by emphasising radical alterity or singularity, the poetics which I elaborate can be understood in light of aesthetic negotiations and contradictions around constraints in view of establishing and disputing a common sense.

Constraint and contemporary advanced poetries

Constraint is a fundamental category in contemporary advanced poetries. Firstly, as we have seen, it holds together social and formal questions. Constraints include metrico-rhythmic patterns, generative procedure, generic formulas and forms, and the resistances and affordances of the linguistic medium. Each of these is socially mediated: they are not inherent to poetry and they are dependent for their intelligibility on being reiterated and circulated. That also means that they are capable of being re-interpreted and redeployed. As such we can heed John Wilkinson's caution about "confusing stale prosody with social restrictiveness", avoiding the temptation to posit either "the poet's exceptionalism" or "his instrumentality".[95] Writers use the constraints of their materials to think about social constraints, often in ways which test the limits of that distinction. Secondly, with constraint as a central category, poetry can be understood to enable us to think about acting dynamically within constraint. To think about how constitutive constraints are still capable of generating improvisational or novel possibilities accords with contemporary theories of performative agency, postmarxist theories which understand desire to be infrastructural, rather than that which escapes structure, and a dialectical materialism in which human practice is collective and therefore requires as its condition social relations constituting ties that bind individuals to one another (which of course need not be capitalistic).[96] In each of the foregoing

[95] Wilkinson, "Off the grid", p. 134.

[96] Judith Butler, defines gender as "a practice of improvisation within a field of constraint", *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1; Deleuze and Guattari: "when subjects, individuals, or groups act manifestly counter to their class interests—when they rally to the interests and ideals of a class that their own objective situation should lead them to combat—it is not enough to say: they were fooled, the masses have been fooled. It is not an ideological problem, a problem of failing to recognize, or of being subject to, an illusion. It is a problem of desire, *and desire is part of the infrastructure*." *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 126; Marx: "it is only when man's object becomes a *human* object that man does not lose himself in that object.

examples, freedom is articulated within external constraints, so that the expressive, psychic, or productive capacities of human beings are exercised in anticipation of their manifestation for a collective—rather than being the preserve of individual agents whose freedom exists before and against their social world.

To study the history of form and how it is seen to be constrained is not to reveal the relationship of form to content, or aesthetic imagination to social relations, but the various imaginative conceptions for this relationship. It is a relationship that consists in maintaining a separation between art and life and insisting at the same time on the permeability of that separation, such that "aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*… [the] knot binding together autonomy and heteronomy."[97] Looking at the various attitudes to formal constraint in poetry shows us how the dialectic between the sharing of available forms and the making of new forms has been configured as structuring resistance or acquiescence; and thus the variety of ways in which poetry conceives its relation to totality. The axis between spontaneity and constraint in form is the imaginative ground for poetry's resistances, contiguities and differences from social life.

In the first chapter, "The limits of language poetry", I situate Language poetics in the context of theories of form as an epiphenomenon of social relations, focusing in particular on Fredric Jameson's account in *Postmodernism*. There, Jameson sets out the distinction between modernist poetics, which relied on a confidence in the poetic subjectivity to construct a totality—even if an ultimately abortive construction—in means more or less mediated and constrained, and postmodernism sceptical both of subjectivity and totalization. In the 70s and 80s the tenability of the subject position from which constraint could be employed or resisted comes under scrutiny both as a result of post-structuralism's anti-essentialist positions and the contemporary political

---

This is only possible when it becomes a *social* object for him and when he himself becomes a social being for himself, just as society becomes a being for him in this object." *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 352.

[97] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its outcomes", p. 124.

discourse. Around this time, formal innovation begins to work against the idea of subjectivity that secures and naturalizes the identity of the liberal individual. This happens in English-language experimental poetry on both sides of the Atlantic, and I'll outline two tendencies which both pivot on the idea of a consistent poetic subjectivity—that includes, by extension the conception of the poem as a unity of expression, however difficultly mediated or constructed, by the poet—as an ideological constraint to be broken. First, I consider Language poetry and read a section of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* in order to frame the problem of surpassing subjective expression and the solution(s) offered by this American current: the valuation of artifice, formal incompletion and arbitrariness. I look in detail at how the freedom from ideological determination sought by Language poetry required the work to cohere around constraints which were purely formal. A countervailing impulse resists formalisation altogether, imagining form to always be exceeded by a notion of life which the poem cannot adequate. Form is counterposed to social determinations; on the other hand, form is undone by the failure of aesthetic totalization or universality. Then I suggest that a different understanding of poetic form, traced through British late modernist writers and a materialist aesthetics in response to post-structuralism, whose terms help us get beyond the negative engagement with aesthetic form that limits the critical model. With these terms, I read Denise Riley's "Wherever you are, be somewhere else" as it struggles with negating the 'I' by which the poem is constrained to address its audience; and ultimately finds some consolation in the overdetermined constraints of lyric subjectivity.

While constraint is evidently a salient category in explicitly political poetries, it is also useful for approaching the capacities of poetry's verbal medium. The next chapter takes issue with the contemporary critical discourse around hybridity, particularly the way in which it presents contemporary writing to be freed of all conventional, generic, and even medium-specific constraints. That discourse suggests a "consensus" poetry in which formal innovation is embraced but without the concomitant attack on artistic autonomy or individual authorship as creative activity; indeed, without the negative character of the avant-garde. With not unremarkable ubiquity

in poetry anthologies of the last fifteen to twenty years, the figure of hybrid or compromise shows up. This writing takes the formal innovations of the avant-garde up to and including the Language poets' focus on the artifice of language and the noncoincidence between mind and word, as so many "verbal strategies" whose efficacy is dulled by the fact that they are, as Brian M. Reed notes, "regularized and reified" into a "signature style".[98] In the midst of this proliferating grab-bag of quotable strategies, I argue for retraining the focus on the effects derived from the constraints of the verbal medium: a medium which is always, in a sense, hybrid, because it cannot be entirely isolated from its social function. My argument is not, therefore, for a reconsideration of high modernist medium specificity; but for a broader conceptualisation of medium-specific constraints. The chapter focuses on the work of Anne Carson, who is often received under the rubric of postmodern hybridity. I argue for medium as a useful category of analysis: a way to insist on language as a medium which conditions perceptions and their articulation; but which is also pliable, with the capacity to be worked as a medium; which enables hybrid sensations; conditions the experience of temporality; and also adds to how we can understand the 'naturalness' of language, our way of dwelling and experiencing in it; and also the way in which it can, in spite of its social nature, remain opaque and foreign. Rather than fitting Carson's work into a familiar narrative tracing the emergence of postmodernism's unbound textuality, this chapter finds that Carson looks to resources of her verbal medium as a bulwark against what Rosalind Krauss calls "the deadening embrace of the general" in contemporary art. It is by articulating the constraints of her linguistic medium, rather than leaving them behind, that Carson introduces difference in her work. Medium emerges as itself a hybrid concept, encompassing apparatuses of mediation; conventions; and the mediality or impart-ability (Benjamin) of language as a social practice. I chart these aspects of medium in *Nox* and *Autobiography of Red*, focusing not only on medium as a physical substrate, but also ekphrasis and translation, recurring elements in Carson's work concerned with mediality: the

[98] Brian M. Reed, *Nobody's Business: 21st Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 36.

means of representation, address, figuration and communication. The non-referential aspects of poetry's medium can then be grasped as elements in constituting subjectivity and intersubjectivity, as well as presenting expressive possibilities.

In the next chapter, I consider how these linguistic constraints are the site of political contestation over the value of expression. I turn to M. NourbeSe Philip's book *Zong!*, a work with a clear affinity with Language poetry's critique of representation and totalization which yet strives for the social dynamic afforded by lyric's mediations: giving voice, memorialization, the pleasures of communal song. I outline *Zong!*'s double poetics: on one hand, it exerts a negative force on language understood to embody social constraint, radically fragmenting the text it takes as its appropriative source. This is the 1781 record of a judgement on a claim of insurance, in which the owners of the slave ship *Zong* sought remuneration for over a hundred malnourished slaves thrown overboard in a bid to claim their underwritten value. Philip's book does violence to that text, refusing the consolation of narrative and pointing up that the same archival language from which we receive testimony to the event is complicit in the denial of the humanity of the African people sold into slavery. On the other hand, the poem demonstrates a pleasure in prosodic innovation and linguistic performance, allying itself with the Caribbean poetic tradition which expands and redefines the aims and scope of modernist formal strategies. It seeks to accomplish the impossible task of repair to represent and to voice the stories of the Africans who were killed; and to wrest something like beauty from the name of that ship and what it stands for by the conjuring of linguistic transformations: adding an exclamation mark, making the name into a cry, a shout, a song, a moan, a demand. The demand is that art institute, by representing a community, a kind of justice. That justice is achieved in some sense in the poem by an expansion of the prosodic sensorium: the poem's rhythms become measured by phonetic and graphemic material inadmissible to the Standard English in which the administration of slavery is carried out. Here my reading combines the thought of Édouard Glissant, Brathwaite and Rancière, in order to think through how the effort to establish a new prosody can make us aware of the borders of what

counts as human speech, what speaking is capable of articulating a demand and insinuating a wrong, and what speaking is unheard and beneath apprehension. While Brathwaite insists on the importance of founding an alternative prosodic tradition for Caribbean poetry to speak back to and from beyond the colonizing empires, Glissant makes a virtue of linguistic opacity: he rejects the premise of universal visibility—a consensual framing of a common world—which he sees as central to the European project and the kind of representational violence Philip is concerned with. His thinking of opacity sees it not as formal intransitivity but as constitutive of creolisation, the "willed effort towards consciousness itself that produces community" in a historical situation of unrootedness. Like Glissant, Rancière rejects the horizon of consensus, with an understanding of politics as disagreement, whose conditions are an aesthetic dissensus. In this reading, social constraints and their formal mediation do not just become visible, nor are they replaced by the institution of formal autonomy bounded by the poem's diction; rather, they make up the material and vehicle for the poem's technique. This represents a fundamentally different understanding of the politics of aesthetics, which finds emancipatory capacity in the expansion of a sensorium rather than in the realization of the truth of appearances or the positing of a utopian community.

The final chapter zeroes in more closely on language as a social practice. It considers how certain instances of language use, familiar, quotidian, and regularized might nevertheless contain the potential for invention. I look to the work of Lisa Robertson, whose writing is attentive to organizations of language and gesture in which the unthought constraints and protocols which govern verbal conduct can become objects of pleasurable identifications and expanded perception. Robertson is a poet who has consistently and sophisticatedly thought through the implications of performativity in language. While performativity is by now a familiar concept in theories of structure and agency, I clarify the stakes of performativity by showing its relation to temporality, the way in which an utterance implies both potentiality and act. The temporality of performance is integral for Robertson, key to the double life by which thought can live inconspicuously, distinct from its official institutionalisations. Robertson is distinctive in that, while she is critical of the

confinements of gendered identity—the postures which one is constrained to reiterate and by which one becomes intelligible as a subject—she searches for agency within, rather than before or beyond, these constraints. Far from a post-feminist capitulation, her effort involves detaching the gestures, expressions and rhetoric which have historically underwritten gendered subjectivity from the hierarchical order of value in which they are bound up. Prosody is for Robertson the category of this enlivening potentiality, where the contours of speaking become sensible as evidence of a history of collective expressive capacity. Those contours and constraints are not revealed and disavowed in favour of an unfettered, a priori self-constituting energy, but change their function or modality once we become aware of them, generating new possibilities within even hackneyed speech. A critical instance of this modal shift is the pronoun, the instance in which speaking subjects are constituted in language. The pronoun belongs to language as a structure; yet its condition of possibility is activation in the present of discourse. That dual possibility means that the utterer can occupy a position at once identifying with a history of prior usages and innovating and altering that history. Robertson's poetry plays on this linguistic capacity, occupying and altering historically constrained conventions of utterance—the rhetorical codes of pastoral, for instance—as well as invented constraints which restrict expressions of subjectivity to rationalised protocols—alphabetical indexing. Reading these techniques in *The Weather* and *Cinema of the Present*, I discuss how they are not simply methods of estrangement and ironization, but constitute an expansion of the sensorium which affords times and figures of subjectivity linked to a capacity for sensing and speaking otherwise foreclosed. Robertson's writing provokes us to think about the embodied animation of institutionalised techniques; highlighting the capacities of the speaker, it is befitting of a humanist materialism which avoids construing subjectivity as overly determined or else derived from the unconstrained agency of the individual.

Compared to the kind of hyper-critical negativity of poetry concerned above all with complicity, the poets I have chosen to focus on might seem to be optimistic. But lest they are taken simply to

be returning to an idea of lyric transcendence, or the exemptions of Language poetry, it is important to give a hearing to the senses of constraint articulated in their work. If nothing else this will show that their work is not complacent and is still involved with the poetic interrogation of freedoms more and less specious or substantial, sceptical of false consolations.

The Limits of Language Poetry

Postmodern Form

A historical narrative of formal innovation might be inclined to locate a profound break with the advent of postmodernism. For much modernist work, the poetics of the fragment sought from the fragmentary or particular a newly reconstructed totality. This totality could be found in the unity of the artwork, in which local disjunctions could be reconciled. If there was any political potential in the work it was its capacity to analogise unalienated labour in aesthetic experience. This aesthetic idealism is no longer available in late capitalism, for Frederic Jameson, not least because "the very experience of art itself today is alienated and made 'other' and inaccessible to too many people to serve as a useful vehicle for their imaginative experience";[1] and also because the free play of the aesthetic "may also no longer mean very much as a reminder and an alternative experience in a situation in which leisure is as commodified as work."[2] For Jameson the postmodern artwork, and indeed the postmodern subject, cannot organise or pattern experience according to the old codes. Any faith in the particularity of aesthetic experience is lost, and thus the codes that had been understood to organize it—unity, totality, autonomy, organicism and expression—cannot be relied upon to ground a 'politics' of poetic form; that is, as ways of imagining the relationship of aesthetic form to social relations. Spontaneity and innovation begin to guard against unity and totality, which become a constraint; and with them, the imagined idealist ideological mystifications of the aesthetic. Thus, as I will elaborate below, the political vocation of experimental poetry comes to be seen as largely coincident with the diagnostic critical position adopted after Raymond Williams:[3] not to be taken in—absorbed, in Charles Bernstein's

[1] Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 147.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] William's critique of the aesthetic is tempered: on one hand, he understands it as a "powerful and often forbidding system of abstraction in which the concept of 'literature' becomes actively ideological"; but on the other hand, he suggests "historically, the definition of 'aesthetic' response is an affirmation of 'creative imagination', of certain meanings and values which a dominant social system reduced and even tried to exclude…This must be remembered

language[4]—by the ideological claims on aesthetic experience. Michael Golston argues that the characteristic of postmodern poetry is the projection of "the allegorical impulse… from the poem's narrative level, where it has been traditionally located, into its formal and linguistic features."[5] For much avant-garde and experimental poetry of the period, therefore, any instance of coherence in form is viewed with suspicion, as a naïve reproduction of the social logics it seeks to repudiate. Emphasis on disjunction, where form cannot hold, serves to allegorise a break with poetry's determination by social conditions. What this misses, and I will return to this later in the chapter, is an alternative account of form that sees its unfolding organisation and unification not as an abstraction, deformation or second order derivation, but an extension, development, modification, and variation of thinking. This confusion underwrites the valuation of open form as *de facto* political.

It is worth reiterating Jameson's account here. Centrally, he notes a tendency towards linguistic schizophrenia. The argument is as follows: meaning is constituted not by reference between signifier and a referent in the world, but as a "meaning-effect" of the relation between signifiers; an "objective mirage".[6] This relation, this signifying chain, breaks down in postmodernity: normally language would secure temporal continuity and unification (differentiating and relating past-present-future through individual identity); but postmodern texts leave us with "a rubble of…unrelated signifiers".[7] We cannot organize a coherent experience, a narrative structure, an identity, around them. This experience is that of the death of the subject

even as we add, necessarily, that the form of this protest, within definite social and historical conditions, led almost inevitably to new kinds of privileged instrumentality and specialized commodity." (151). *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) Joseph North gives an account of the influence and prominence of cultural materialism's diagnostic attitude after Williams, as well as suggesting an alternative lineage of aesthetic thinking in I. A. Richards and Williams which he finds newly relevant in the era of "postcritique". *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017) See also *Critique and Postcritique*, eds. Rita Felski and Elisabeth Anker, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

[4] It should be pointed out that Bernstein himself, at least by the point of publishing "Artifice of Absorption", is not identical with the position I elaborate via other Language writers below—that is, "Artifice" sees absorption as a "neutral facility" and thus is consistent with the kind of attention to form I discuss later.

[5] Golston, *Poetic Machinations*, p. 6.

[6] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 26.

[7] *Ibid.*

through which meanings were mediated. The decentred subject also gives way to a decentred artwork: the work is no longer projected wholesale from the interiority of a pre-existing subject. The work is "no longer unified or organic";[8] and what's more, Jameson identifies a positive or even euphoric affect with this schizophrenic condition: a "hallucinatory exhilaration."[9]

While Jameson holds out, briefly, the possibility for "positive" formal developments which might engender "new and original way[s] of thinking and perceiving", for the most part his diagnosis of postmodern art is sceptical.[10] The employment of formal constraint, and the adherence to recognizable aesthetic forms, is then only a knowing nod to the loss of depth and becoming surface of our historical categories. Or else, the experience of the work is available only beyond the limits of its form—that is, beyond the aesthetic. This "takes the form of an impossible imperative to achieve that new mutation in what can perhaps no longer be called consciousness"—Jameson gives the example of Nam June Paik's video installations which ask us to process more stimuli than we could ever hope to assimilate;[11] elsewhere he alludes to the postmodern work's solicitation of "radical difference", unrealizable in the work itself—one thinks of the postmodern sublime, or the work said to confront us with an ethical impossibility.

In light of this pessimistic evaluation, those abreast of Language poetry, one of the examples of postmodern cultural production Jameson uses to illustrate this schizophrenic analogy, have taken exception. The point of contention is whether Language poetry should be considered as symptomatic of late capitalism or not. George Hartley takes issue with Jameson because he reads Language poetry as symptomatic rather than as an example of "the most interesting postmodernist works" which contain a "positive conception" of the relationship between individuals and their social conditions which would constitute a "new and original way of thinking and perceiving". Instead, Hartley proposes we read Language poetics as critique, "the structure of

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

the poem itself can be seen as a metaphor for the historical processes"; it constitutes an "unveiling" that "*foreground*[s] our social relations".[12] Unfortunately, Hartley's defence of Language poetics does not suggest how it constitutes "an original way of thinking and perceiving"; in fact, it only recapitulates the posture of demystification that imagines the aesthetic as epiphenomenal to everyday life, and the blockage of the smooth consumption of aesthetic experience as politically revelatory.

Jameson's analysis bears extending. The disagreement between Hartley and Jameson can be resolved if we understand their positions as two sides of the same coin: cultural production is related through various mediations to social production more generally, and it is either unknowingly symptomatic of this relation (Jameson) or else it acknowledges the relation and displays to its consumers how it is thereby constrained (Hartley *et al.*). There is a third position, which is that of Jameson's proposed politically useful new way of thinking and perceiving, where the experience of the work of art produces new subjectivities, presumably not subordinated in the same way to the ideological determinations of ordinary life. This third position requires a belief in the capacity of aesthetic forms—that they might be a viable, and not suspect, way of organising experience—that I think escapes the previous two. A final point is that, as well as inaugurating politically useful cognitive transformations, aesthetic forms are also active elements in another aspect of politics: processes of self-identification and -articulation. Although Language poetry's disavowal of the subject precludes this possibility, in the last part of this chapter, and in several subsequent chapters, I'll elaborate how formal constraints participate in these kind of political disputations, showing them to go beyond either reproducing or repudiating ideology. In what follows, I will read these positions into Language poetics, and then discuss Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* to understand how they are articulated, in ways which are often contradictory and overdetermined by an imaginative conception of the relationship between formal constraint and social relations.

---

[12] George Hartley, "Jameson's Perelman: Reification and the Material Signifier", *Poetics Journal Digital Archive*, pp. 685-697; pp. 696; 693; 696.

Postmodern Form in Language Poetry

In the canonical statements of Silliman, Bernstein, Perelman and Andrews, Language poetry expresses a two-fold aim with regard to form: to expand form to include social information by removing any mediation; while at the same time to highlight the artifice of form (its role in mediation), and thus to frustrate any totalization or closure.

As I discuss in the introduction, modernist poetics relied on a confidence in poetic expression to construct a totality—even if an ultimately abortive construction—in means more or less mediated and constrained. While modernists break with prior formal constraints, they do so in the name of another positive formal manifestation: an authentic voice (in the case of Olson, Williams), constraint on bases other than metre in free verse (Pound, Eliot, Crozier). Constraint and poetic form in these cases is part of poetic technique in order to engage, and not deceive, the reader. But in the 70s and 80s the tenability of the subject position from which constraint could be employed or resisted comes under scrutiny both as a result of post-structuralism's anti-essentialist positions and the contemporary political discourse.

Around this time, formal innovation begins to work against the idea of subjectivity that secures and naturalizes the identity of the liberal individual. This happens in English-language experimental poetry on both sides of the Atlantic, and I'll outline two tendencies which both pivot on the idea of a consistent poetic subjectivity—that includes, by extension the conception of the poem as a unity of expression, however difficultly mediated or constructed, by the poet—as an ideological constraint to be broken. First, I'll consider Language poetry and read a section of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* in order to frame the problem of surpassing ideologically constrained formal mediations and the solution(s) offered by this American current: the valuation of artifice, formal incompletion and arbitrariness. I think through how far these accord with the three positions derived from Jameson, above, concluding that even as an idea of form as an intersubjective activity begins to emerge, it is contradicted by another notion of form as an object to be exposed, on

which Language poetry's critique is based. Then I suggest that a different understanding of poetic form, traced through British late modernists and an alternative response to post-structuralism, whose terms help us get beyond the negative engagement with form that limits the critical model. With these terms, I read Denise Riley's "Wherever you are, be somewhere else" as it struggles with negating the conventions by which the poem is constrained to address its audience. Ultimately, I read Riley's poem for the way in which it finds a measure of solace in the multitude of constraints by which the poetic subject is overdetermined. Riley's solution, to ironize lyric conventions rather than break them open, looks forward to the work of Lisa Robertson, who is the subject of a later chapter.

Language poetry sets out that its formal innovation works against not only received forms, but habitual language use—what Ron Silliman calls "the tyranny of the signified".[13] The target is the assumption of the transparency of language, its ability to designate a referent. Rather than attempting to reclaim or reorient language damaged by a tendency to abstraction and an uncritical reproduction of tradition by inventing new forms, as the modernists did, Language poetry distrusts any notion of formal completion and emphasizes the partiality of any putting into form. Form becomes an imposition, against which the self-conscious or "activist" poet and poem will reassert form's provisionality.[14] An immediate link is assumed between poetry and politics; implicit is the view that all aesthetics is idealist—it deals in universals and abstractions—and that activist poetics is materialist because it shows this up. In doing so it makes poetic form itself an obfuscation and a constraint on consciousness, so that the thrust of its revolutionary experimentalism is couched in terms of the destruction of any naturalism in language use that might make it add up to something more than the sum of its parts.

[13] Ron Silliman, "The New Sentence", *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987), p. 93.
[14] Charles Bernstein, "Living Tissue/Dead Ideas", *Social Text*, No. 16 (Winter, 1986-1987), p. 129.

It is in this sense that Language poetry has been understood to be fundamentally anti-formal. Not because it does not believe its poetics involves putting into form—this is unavoidable—but because it understands 'formalism' to be a particular relationship between a poem's structure or organizing principles and the work itself. That relationship is a unity, even a causality, between form and the work; what Jonathan Culler defines as the "expectation of totality or coherence" which is the fundamental convention of lyric poetry.[15] In Culler's structuralism, even anything which is not contiguous with an assumed whole can be interpreted as diverging for a reason (gaps are given "meaning as gaps") or any gaps are speculatively "filled in" by the reader, who completes the whole.[16] In either case, effects of meaning are understood to be immanent to the text, whose constituent parts are subordinated to concepts at higher levels of abstraction. One of these formal effects is the "lyric subject": "the poetic persona is a construct, a function of the language of the poem, but it none the less fulfils the unifying role of the individual subject, and even poems which make it difficult to construct a poetic persona rely for their effects on the fact that the reader will try to construct an enunciative posture."[17] Meaning is produced, in this estimation, in the attempt to overcome distance and impersonality.

For Language poetry this model of the relationship between meaning and form is problematic. Firstly, it contains too neatly ideas within their presentation: formal effects, no matter how estranging, can always be resolved under a unifying concept—there seems to be no room for divergence. Secondly, it naturalizes a relationship between formal organization and meaning which fails to acknowledge the abstraction being made to get from one to the other. In answer to the first problem, the poetics of Language proposes a theory of openness and excess. Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure" defines the "open text," as one in which "all the elements of the work are maximally excited… because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) [the] argument that they

[15] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 170.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 171.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 170.

have taken into the dimension of the work."[18] For Hejinian, and other Language writers, this openness is secured by a particular formal organization—or, rather, the excessiveness of the text to any formal organization: "the conjunction of form with radical openness may be what can offer a version of the 'paradise' for which writing often yearns—a flowering focus on a distinct infinity."[19]

With an acknowledged debt to post-structuralism, Hejinian favours writing which "guards against" completion.[20] At the same time—as evidenced by that ambiguous phrase "distinct infinity"—this excessiveness is contained in form, as any act of writing is a putting into form. The aim is to produce a form which both contains everything and which points up its own incompletion or incontinence. Hejinian claims that "in making form distinct, [poetic language] opens—makes variousness and multiplicity and possibility articulate and clear."[21] Form represents to us the gap between language and the world, and thus is an engine for desire in language—the desire to close that gap. At the same time, form is itself desirable: it represents a desire for language, its infinitude, the endless metonymic chain of signifiers. Rather than counterposing desire to symbolic language, in the way I show Bruce Andrews does in the introduction, and also as Cixous and Kristeva do, Hejinian avers: "The desire that is stirred by language is located most interestingly within language itself—as a desire to say, a desire to create the subject by saying and as a pervasive doubt very like jealously that springs from the impossibility of fulfilling these yearnings."[22] These two positions distinguish a desire to say, and a desire to say something determinate. For Hejinian, the generative desire to say is accessible only with the failure of the determinate form of utterance: form's inadequacy, its inability to close the gap between language and the world, is the necessary spur to thinking.

---

[18] Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure", *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 43.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 56.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Formal openness, therefore, is achieved by frustrating abstraction, emphasising linguistic materiality. As such, Language poetry counters the naturalized abstractions of Culler's "effects of meaning" with a notion of linguistic materiality which cannot be got beyond: language altered so that it does not yield meaning that would add up to a totality.

There are two points here: disjunctive or syntactically irregular writing is, in Bernstein's phrase, "antiabsorptive": "for such/writers, the project is to wake/us from the hypnosis of absorption."[23] The second point is about the consequence of the breaking of the absorptive spell, abandoning the use of "transparency, causal / unity";[24] this is where the political claim is made, that we are awoken from our absorption in aesthetic form to the reality of social relations (Bernstein distances himself from or at least complicates this claim in his later writing, but Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten and Steve McCaffery make a representative sample of those holding the position). Making this argument for a kind of anti-formalism in "The New Sentence", Ron Silliman sees the goal of Language-centred writing as the resistance to primary syllogism—the unification of utterances under the sign of "higher" meaning, whether that be emotion, selfhood, logical argument or else any other abstract continuity not contained in the syntax of the sentence.[25] The New Sentence agitates against writing's parts being joined up by anything other than their material contiguities. The sentence, as the fundamental unit, is employed to prevent totalization, or the construction of argument. Silliman argues that "the sentence is in some sense a primary unit of language"; but its concrete existence is elided by linguistic theories which see through it to understand language abstractly, through "successively broader groups of referentiality."[26] In fact, sentences integrate parts into wholes through their syntax, and for Silliman, understanding how sentences work gives us a demystified understanding of how parts are related to a totality. Silliman's politically inflected linguistics will argue for an expansive and

[23] Charles Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption", *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 54.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[25] Silliman, "The New Sentence", pp. 63-93.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 65; p. 73.

unalienated comprehension of this relation: sentence units are successive; they do not add up without the "presumption on behalf of the reader" which make various units into a "tidy little narrative".[27]

Hejinian provides an example of how the New Sentence might work to resist abstraction. "The real adversary of my determination was determinism, regulating and limiting the range and degree of difference between things of one day and things of the next. I got it from Darwin, Freud, and Marx. Not fragments but metonymy. Duration. Language makes tracks." (*My Life*, 49) The invocation of the names of theorists encourages a systematic reading, a readerly "presumption" that connects the concepts of "determinism", psychological "determination" or will, and biological impulse ("regulating and limiting"), in the first sentence, as corresponding to "Darwin, Freud, and Marx" in the next sentence. Marxism's historical determinism, Freud and Darwin's discovery of drives which determine behaviour, all imply forces in excess of determination as free will. But the third sentence seems to be advising us not to pursue this operation of deriving commonality in fragments from a regulating idea, but to consider "metonymy", a syntactic operation. At this point, the language might be seen to be short circuiting the systematic impulse: "determination" turns metonymically to "determinism", and the polysemy of "determine" cannot be reduced to a single meaning; "things of one day and things of the next" are related by anaphora, within the sentence, referring back, limiting the range of difference by eliding the second "day"; from this perspective, syntactic organization, a process of "duration", regulates the availability of concepts which can only be subsequently identified extensively by abstract thinking and reading: "Language makes tracks". Following them, you, reading, come after.

Highlighting the material or concrete units of the sentence aims to prevent or put into relief the work of abstraction. With this is the idea that any syntagmatic construction of a consistent subject is to be avoided. Openness is in staying at the level of the unit, being conscious of the

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 77

syllogistic operation. This is why the sentence becomes the horizon of meaning: Silliman argues for the expansion of the sentence so that everything can be comprehended at its level of meaning, rather than at the "higher" syllogistic levels of meaning: "sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity".[28] Making sentences thus expansive also means making poetic form move within this horizon: "Here poetic form has moved into the interiors of prose," and is therefore no longer registered at an abstract higher level than the content (while, apparently, historically recognizable elements of poetic form do enforce this separability—an assumption which will be disputed in the second part of this chapter).[29]

To conceive literary form thus is to posit it as an ideological reproduction of social form. In Bernstein's estimation Language poetry is said to act against this by the "acknowledgement of its ideological construction in its textual practice," working to "make apparent controlling social signification systems" to the extent that it "can provide models of ideological critique more radical than otherwise available."[30] For Hejinian's part, she argues that the open text "thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification."[31] In this case the literary work is understood as related straightforwardly to the economic base, either perpetuating or resisting dominant ideological "tendencies" that reproduce and authorise existing relations of production.

However, Hejinian is interesting in that while she appears to accept the definition of traditional literary form as perpetuating ideologies of control and limitation, and thus the idea that form is an object to be revealed, she holds out the possibility of the transformation of these constraints rather than merely their exposure—as I have mentioned above, there is an idea that formal language might be generative, where "form is not a fixture but an activity."[32] As such, she alludes to a positive account of formal experience as developing our capacities for thought and

[28] Silliman, "The New Sentence", pp. 87; 91.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 89.
[30] Bernstein, "Living Tissues", pp. 132-3.
[31] Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure", p. 43.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

feeling, not because of freedom from, but through formal constraints: "Repetition, conventionally used to unify a text or harmonize its parts, as if returning melody to the tonic, instead [in Hejinian's poetry] challenges our inclination to isolate, identify, and limit the burden of meaning given to an event (the sentence or line)."[33] The antipathy to limiting the burden of meaning given to an event is manifest in a "fear of personality" (*My Life*, 80), the latter being underwritten by "a sense of definition (different from that of description, which is a kind of storytelling or recounting, numerical, a list of colours) [which] develops as one's sense of possibility, of the range of what one might do or experience, closes with the years." (*My Life*, 78) Formally open storytelling might then establish a new correspondence between inner-life (personality) and society against the closure of possibility that comes with the habitually secured sense of a consistent and continuous self.

My Life

In the next part of the chapter, I'll turn to Hejinian's *My Life*, to see how the book's new sentences work in practice. In *My Life*, Hejinian subjects autobiography to the principles of anti-absorptive artifice in order to resist the ideological constraints by which it is understood as the representation of a prior consciousness. On the one hand this leaves us with a notion of autobiography as something that happens in and only in language; on the other hand, there remains a drive to autobiography without the mediation of traditional forms, an autobiography that would be open and closer to the world, and thus verisimilar in this respect. The former is a problematization, by formalization, of the autobiographical impulse and its drive to representation. The latter appeals to that very impulse, as something which might be fulfilled in the plenitude of textuality. These oscillating positions present a contemporary iteration of the double-bind set out in Paul de Man's "Autobiography as Defacement", collected in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* published five years before

[33] *Ibid*., p. 44.

My Life.[34] De Man argues that autobiography represents the "impossibility of closure and of totalization… of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions."[35]

Can one continue to give an account of oneself while resisting the constraints of representation? Or is the idea of interiority always a limitation, always motivated to present coherence at the expense of thorough engagement with the world: "Here I refer to irrelevance, that rigidity that never intrudes. Hence, repetitions free from all ambition." (3) Hejinian's poem thinks through how the rigid limit that separates irrelevant external detail from a habitual and ideologically motivated self-presentation might be crossed, the distance filled in, by a kind of flat inclusivity; repetitions of phrases and arbitrary formal construction (each poem a paragraph of forty-five sentences) make the attribution of an argument or sentiment to a particular constellation of words difficult—phrases reappear in new and unexpected contexts between sections, and each paragraph yields an instability between its sense being determined by a logic of argumentation, or else by its arbitrary formal construction. The expansiveness which the poem wants to bequeath to its sentences—their not being limited in meaning by being assigned to a consistent and pre-given persona or concept—is underpinned by the idea that "both subjectivity and objectivity are outdated filling systems." (85) Neither imaginative freedom nor objective necessity fill in the gaps between language and the world.

Hejinian's employment of constraint in *My Life* spans the gap between these two positions: poetry as confessional, autobiographical and sincere, and as artificial, formal, depersonalized. The procedure which limits the number of sentences in each poem or section, and the number of sections, is arbitrary in relation to the content, in that the poems' length is not determined by a 'complete' treatment of the subject at hand; but this constraint is also not artificial at all, and immediately personal: the number of sentences and poems is Hejinian's age at the time of writing (37 for the first edition; 45 for the revised addition, from which I take the section below). The

[34] Paul De Man, "Autobiography as Defacement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); first published in *MLN* Vol 94, no. 5, Comparative Literature (Dec., 1979), pp. 919-930.
[35] De Man, "Autobiography as Defacement", p. 922.

writing employs difficult new sentences, but it also gives way to moments of prose that seem to follow along a logical argument, almost narrative. The book's "healthy dialectic between poetry and prose" (64) spans obfuscation and disjunction as well as confession and the sincere transmission of meaning. The various aphoristic phrases which appear throughout the book, including in the epigraph or heading for each section—"a pause, a rose, something on paper" (3)—are interspersed with what seem to be commonplace adages of the construction "see lighting, wait for thunder" or "pretty is as pretty does." (3) In part, this is another level at which the book opens out form, resisting the limitation which accompanies generic expectation, the distinction between poetry and prose, and between high and low forms. The poem is in fact replete with what appear to be self-consciously mundane or stereotypical reflections and remembrances of middle-class life, pets, vacations, horse riding, children: "We had taken the kids to the park, to get them 'out from underfoot,' and my friend said, 'There's no sense in moving out of that little apartment because even if I had a forty-room house, it would just be thirty-nine empty rooms and me and the kids in the kitchen.'" (58) Because of this, the book could be read, and indeed has been by Marjorie Perloff, as being less about autobiography than "the archetypal life of a young American girl": "*My Life,* it seems, is not 'mine' at all; the emphasis in any case is on writing itself, on the 'life' lived by words, phrases, clause, and sentences, endowed with the possibility of entering upon new relationships."[36] Craig Dworkin, too, finds in the poem an "indeterminate citationality" so that the voice "loses its origin."[37] Yet given the doubleness of the poem's formal constraint, it seems to do more than accentuate formal artifice and formal organization predicated on absence or deferral; it seems to do more than say: all language is poetry, but only because writing is orphaned from any subjects. It simultaneously thinks about formal organization in two ways: as affirmative plenitude of textuality and as the deceptive difference between truth and appearances.

---

[36] Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*, p. 225.
[37] Craig Dworkin, "Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork, Writing and Lyn Hejinian's "My Life", *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 58-81; p. 63.

I quote a passage from the book at length below, before engaging with its terms and some of the ideas it suggests, in order to draw out these two attitudes to form:

> The sincere, rotund figure comes upright as usual, bobbing, because "bottom heavy with culture." Rubber life. And hostile to the novel. I was coming home from a late literary event and heard a commotion at the corner 7-Eleven (consciousness and poetry). "Do you know what middle-class people expect from poetry?" said Parshchikov later in Moscow, "a glimpse of eternity." There is more trilling trigonometry in trees—that description of discipline. A somewhat pleasant-looking policeman, communications unit in hand, was calling in for help with an abusive drink in front of the store, and a few minutes later (I lingered to see) a policewoman turned up in response, swinging her dark club from a thong as she jumped from the car, its door open even before the car had stopped, then she sauntered over in a change of pace, as if she intended to face down the drunk, hooting in complaint, on whom she suddenly clapped cuffs, before she flipped him, whipped off her belt, and tied his feet. Words (unlikeness and discipline)—there are no unresisted rhythms in one. We had taken the horses and gone riding for five days into the mountains around the High Lakes. But perceptions are more accurate in threes. A hammer and a mower without suburbs, incomplete. The second day we reached the crest on a series of switchbacks through glacial debris (cooking pots swinging on cords, the sun shifting from my left arm to my right) and ahead of us lay a steep descent (treetops in the immediate foreground) down which the horses began delicately to plunge (our fate hung on their feet). *My lives* on a shelf by Trotsky, George Sand. This was 1979, the year in which I was reading Montaigne. I had begun to expect someone to die. That is why I am disappointed now that so-and-so has accepted a view of poetry that sees it as international, generous, and gentlemanly. The very young murderer, her picture in the paper, had made a mistake (but there are no mistakes). When I think of such magnitude as if seduced I panic compulsively, just as years before I lay on the grass and was grasped by infinity. If there's nothing out the windows, look at books. To concentrate, as now, wanting to compress into a sentence whose words are a reflection of the sky in a blue lake in the Black Buttes that otherwise extensive or expansive stubbornness to which I have already referred, I hold my breath. Then, when the neighbour's dog, his name is Wilbur, barks vehemently, even hysterically, at midday next door, I am told that our mail has already arrived. Thirty-nine years later than a moment yellow. Green. A paragraph is a time and place, not a syntactic unit. We stood watching circles in the light beside the lake, while in the last sunlight flew a mob of tiny bugs, like motes of dust, doubt, or the code of the trees. More and more lake is contained by the stone thrown into it. The voices of the daughter, the other, and the mother of the mother are heard in the background, and to their scattered bodies go. So quoted, coded. Things are different but not separate, thoughts are discontinuous but not unmotivated (like a rose without pause). Both children as teens achieved height, and their interests exercised intensity. The first I knew of such was when he wrote to the heads of state of all the independent island nations, of which the eight-square-mile phosphate-famous Nauru is one. As for we who "love to be astonished," I was territorial at their nativity. Jameson speaks of a "collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity," and I put pen to page scrupulously and write, "I prefer the realm of Necessity." I think of a Franz Kline as saturated structure. So at times I stick to principles of incommensurability yet press to make relevant without melancholy even unlikely comparisons. Painters are much happier than writers, so my father said, after he himself had switched (which is why I was able to move his typewriter to my room when I was ten, which was like painting then). After any visit to a museum at home I impulsively haul out my paints and never anticipate disappointment. After every election I vow never to vote

> again. I listen to the night ticking of the creek as it turns its little stones (eternal time—reversal). Then kitchenward I disappear, into the steaming clatter, the aroma of asparagus and turkey—or is it curry? I cannot close my ears, I have no ear lids. Society has no fringe. But for the moment a particular static at the surface of the windowpane allows charge but prevents exchange. Remarkable scratches, nicks, notches, intervene. But as I've said before, I am nearsighted, and there are many figures in this scene which might form different scenes. (82-84)

The poem (similarly with the others in the book) meditates on the act of subjective mediation in retrieving the past and putting experience into form; the transformations enacted and relations entered into by the 'I' observing, the "I [who] was territorial", who "linger[s] to see" and delineates a "foreground" and "background", who "code[s]" the "scene"; the 'I' here establishes a boundary between interior and exterior, acting "impulsively" or else subject to an external "expansive stubbornness"; but it is also an 'I' that tries not to impose limitations, to take into account that "things are different but not separate, thoughts are discontinuous but not unmotivated."

The section begins with the invocation of a "sincere rotund figure" whose response to an unknown impingement on their person is to "[come] upright as usual", a habitual repetition which is characterised as "bobbing"; if from this we understand a description of the elasticity of "rubber life" it seems to reach an equilibrium, perhaps between "culture" and whatever culture isn't. It is significant as well that the final description of the "sincere rotund figure" is not a direct observation of reality but is delivered as a quotation, which might indicate that the third sentence's "hostility to the novel" intends a suspicion of creative innovation in cultural production, instead linking culture with a kind of habitual repetition of understanding. That hostility to the novel might also proscribe our reading of the "sincere rotund figure" as a new character in the narrative, instead noting the recurrence of the word "bobbing" which is employed in a simile on the first page of *My Life* to refer to someone who "bobbed like my toy plastic bird on the edge of its glass." (3) Already a moment of undecidability, for the sincere figure could be either the bird, the person compared to the bird, or someone as yet unnamed. "A word is a bottomless pit." (3)

Perhaps we can come upright as usual by reading this episode within its immediate context. Once we read of the conversation with "Parshchikov", Russian contemporary of the Language poets who acknowledges a shared political motivation,[38] then "hostility to the novel" also evokes the realist novel's regime of meaning and the particular correspondences that it assumes between personality or inner life and society; how they might secure a universal relationship between "consciousness and poetry" and the tableau of daily life in the witnessing of a scene of "commotion at the corner 7-Eleven". Between realist narrative and "poetry", it seems we can read in two ways here: either by positing relations with the immediate context and reading only at the level of poetic artifice, bearing no relation to the external world, or else by following a realist logic of narrative progression in which a self may be discontinuous in the immediate context but over the course of the whole book relates to a continuous interior consciousness for whom these incidents are discontinuous expressions—Culler's teleological expectation of totality with we "make sense of gaps" in meaning.[39] In each case we mobilize a different concept of the subject: either as artificial constructedness in repeated and recognizable forms of cultural production (in which case the self is absent); or else a realist subject, a self consisting in a series of engagements with the external world, for whom there exists significance in the quotidian, whose truths are mediated by transparent language. Given that *My Life* yields neither of these regimes of meaning consistently, might it suggest poetry as a form of compromise between aesthetic artifice and social life?[40]

Indeed, we see a version of this compromise figured in the following sentence: "there is more trilling trigonometry in trees—that description of discipline." The sentence articulates a correspondence between expression, the "trilling" of song or poetry, nature, and extensive measurement. But is this a natural harmony between understanding and creativity, the disciplines

[38] See *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry,* eds. Kent Johnson and Steven M. Ashby (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992)
[39] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 171.
[40] A caveat here: rhetorically I am suggesting that the "realist narrative" pole of this dichotomy is the means by which a poem would aspire to participate in social language use; however, what will emerge over the course of this reading and the subsequent section of the chapter is that this opposition itself is problematical, so that Jameson's, and the Language writer's opposition between (schizophrenic/metonymic) artifice and language use as (ideologically constrained) social praxis becomes untenable.

of mathematics and poetry? Is the fact that there is "more trilling trigonometry in trees" meant to make the phrase comparative to the "glimpse of eternity" desired by the bourgeois expectation of poetry, or do the contiguous but discontinuous sentences frustrate comparison even as they evoke universality? The alliterative patterning of these words suggests an agreement between the onomatopoeic justifications of the nature of language and the natural ratios of trigonometry. But this, or "that", is one "description of discipline" which suggests that there exists another description that says otherwise. If putting into form is not the harmonious instantiation of the law that nature gives, but instead a kind of arbitrary discipline from without, form becomes complicit with violence. The observation of the natural law shades into the violence of the policewoman against the drunk as she "tied his feet": here the "trilling" harmony of natural expression becomes the drunk "hooting in complaint", an "abusive" version of the organic sonority in the previous sentence, subdued by the discipline of description.

What exists before the violence imposed by the discipline of description in this "view of poetry"? We continue to think about violence and poetry when we read about "words" as "unlikeness and discipline". The imposition of words provokes resistance: "there are no unresisted rhythms in one"—but resisted by whom, if not the "one" disciplined into existence by description? In this scene of ideological interpellation, from whence comes the feeling of "unlikeness" in being designated? How does the "one" who resists relate to the "we" of the next sentence, or the "I" of the last, both of which are self-assured?

The relatively straightforward description of horse-riding offers an uncomplicated example of personal expression, the recollection of perception. But that "perception is more accurate in threes", and the subsequent triangulation of "hammer", "mower" and "suburbs" introduces the notion that making an account always goes beyond the division between interior and exterior, subject and object. My perception of the constellation hammer, mower, suburbs is gendered—the tools of the weekend DIYer—yet the inflection of these two objects as such is apparent in so far as the concept "suburbs" contextualises a particular configuration of the family, and establishes

the context of capitalist society which eliminates even as it calls up the connotations of the hammer and sickle. In making this description I have already gone beyond the hammer, mower and suburbs to some notion of the traces of social relations that these words bear with them—yet this interpretive activity seems to point up that perception is no more accurate in threes, in fact it is just as incomplete. What if I resist this urge to reduce the meanings of words to the objective status of the world outside them? Because these objects are appearing devoid of context and without continuity with the sentences around them, perhaps they should be read as they are—as words which are the material constituents of the sentence. If this is the case, then the objects hammer and mower are not in fact determined by their status as commodities and the underlying relations of production. This is David Huntsperger's estimation of the book, such that "the world in *My Life* is not reducible to class relations, and the objects in the world are not reducible to the commodity form."[41] Words resist discipline, might seem to resist their determination by objective social relations. What would poetic language amount to if this was the case? Another "view of poetry" would see it as enabling the kind of delicate transportation between the individual and their surroundings, the "shifting" of perspective ("series of switchbacks") which the horses undertake, their feet recalling the tied feet of the drunk, yet this time prosthetic to the human: "(our fate hung on their feet)". Formal estrangement becomes socially useful: a subject-object dialectic in which our fate requires negation in their (poetic) feet.[42]

The following sentences develop the matrix now established between autobiography, realism, objectivity and artifice. Again, violence contaminates the bourgeois view of poetry as "international, generous, and gentlemanly", followed as it is by the fate of the "very young murderer" whose picturing in the paper is contemporary with her nomination as a murderer, and her sentencing as such: "there are no mistakes". This is a vision of representation and nomination as determination and determinism. But what of the possibility of another relation with the world:

---

[41] David Huntsperger, *Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry* (London: Palgrave, 2010), p. 158.
[42] Another caveat: theoretically, then, formal estrangement is therefore not unconstrained by social relations, but already participates in intersubjective discourse—'I', 'you'; 'our', 'their'.

being "grasped by infinity," "as if seduced" by something outside of identity? Can reading be like this, if we "look at books" in the same way that we would want to look "out the windows" and regard the world: not reading books, but looking at them as material? In this sense regarding the world might be like compressing the external world "into a sentence whose words are a reflection of the sky in a blue lake": the expansiveness of this sentence lets us read it either as describing the possibility of writing as a second order reflection (the words are a *reflection*), but also writing whose words *are* the "reflection of the sky in a blue lake in the Black Buttes". But the sentence also is a compression, a "concentrate", which suggests that although it might preserve something essential, it does this by a process of omission: there remains "that otherwise extensive or expansive stubbornness to which I have already referred". We are not just thinking about the loss of conceptual completeness in the compression into a sentence; we are also directed physically outside the sentence "to [that] which I have already referred" at the same time as we read that the sentence compresses what is beyond it. Perhaps then, if we want to think about the completeness of the sentence we can think not of the sentence as performing a kind of discipline on what is expansive and extensive (not yielding to the law of breath, for example—"I hold my breath"[43]) but transforming it into something intensive. Getting the world into the sentence is then not a matter of making the sentence mimetic of the blue lake in its specific location, but creating a non-harmonious complex between qualities: the sensuous patterning of the "b" sound in "blue lake," "Black Buttes" and "stubbornness", the conceptual metonymy between "sky"-"blue"-"lake"-"Black Buttes", colours—including the "yellow" and "green" in subsequent sentences. This is the sentence participating in and constituting "a time and place, not a syntactic unit"; or indeed, in a multitude of times and places: the remembered scene, the intertextual memory (within *My Life*), the present of reading. In reading this way, I am doing more than simply "looking" at words as material: my looking is mediated through conventions of reading, poetic conventions which

[43] One could note as well that the syntactically and ideationally complex idea being put forward by this sentence is at once deflated by the use of the cliché within which it is enclosed, "to concentrate, I hold my breath"—another sense in which the text's argument undermines itself.

remind me to attend to sound patterning and conceptual repetitions; and also the Romantic ideology of poetry's vocation to close the gap between the word and the world, to be that "dark / Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles / Discordant elements, makes them cling together / In one society."[44]

There are contradictory tendencies: on one hand, the world is objectified as linguistic artifice, so that syntax makes the world: "Language becomes so objectified that it is different from whatever you know or say." (85) On the other hand, the world exceeds the sentence, and continues to resist linguistic objectification. "Then, when the neighbor's dog, his name is Wilbur, barks vehemently, even hysterically, at midday next door, I am told that our mail has already arrived." How does this sentence put together a coloured moment without containing all of it in syntax, subjecting it to hypotactical ordering? The temporality of the syntax (when x, then y) is contradicted by the temporality of the sense, in which the delivery has already happened. In a similar way, "then" at the beginning of the sentence might indicate a moment in time succeeding the previous sentence: "I hold my breath. Then..." As such, the paragraph works as a time and place that follows a linear succession in syntax. Yet the same sentence contains another time and place, given the paratactic structure of the entire book, in which episodes or phrases are chopped up and shuffled around, appearing across poems. This episode of the dog barking, for example, becomes less sanguine if it is considered in relation to an earlier instance in which the dog barking was "guarding the house" from a "burglar". (76-77) This is another meaning, another time and place, that the sentence carries—not at the level of reference, but as the memory of a historical usage of this form of words. The dog barking is a metonymic sign, not definitively or linearly linked to a single state of affairs.

How this relation exists—between language and its objects—without linearity or causality, is crucial to the poem. It is like how "more and more of the lake is contained by the stone thrown

[44] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (London: Penguin, 1995), Book I (1850), ln 341-4.

into it." This is an obscure containment, in the same way that the sound of the sea is contained in that of a few waves. "Thus things are different but not separate, thoughts are discontinuous but not unmotivated (like a rose without a pause)." Does a sentence contain eternal time, infinity, "without pause" in an instance by this kind of obscure perception? Is any act of perceiving an obscure experience of infinity? "I listen to the night ticking of the creek as it turns its little stones (eternal time—reversal)."

Hejinian's expansive sentences continue to muse on their implication in, and their potential for subverting, finitude, or formalization. "I cannot close my ears, I have no ear lids. Society has no fringe." The poem is suspicious of representation, of a conception of writing as seeing or even painting, which seems a habitual expectation: "After any visit to a museum at home I impulsively haul out my paints and never anticipate disappointment." But if not through the subject and the conventions of reading it entails, then what is the criterion of selection, of making an account, of cutting into the eternal? In *My Life* re-membering by putting into form tries to partake in limitlessness: when the poem imagines "memory a separation from infinity" (76), it significantly omits the ontic verb: memory, of which "the present is a member", (100) does not have a distinct existence. Perhaps this is how an obscure perception is contained, without constraint or discipline, without putting into form which ties the feet of expansiveness, "the overwhelming vastness and uncertainty of the world."[45] The poem suggests intensity without equivalence or abstraction: "But for the moment a particular static at the surface of the windowpane allows charge but prevents exchange." It seems, though, that this "charge" can only be got at negatively, as "remarkable scratches, nicks, notches, intervene" in the picturing or writing of any instance; disjunctions and interruptions by which we realize "the… inadequacy of the language that appears to describe, discuss, or disclose [the world]."[46] The final sentence closes with another image charged with the possibility inherent in the failure of seeing, and the sentence, as containment: "But as I've said

[45] Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure", p. 49.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

before, I am nearsighted, and there are many figures in this scene which might form different scenes."

Following the poem's complex of ideas and forms, as I've done, can lead to a sense of any attempt at synthesis as deceptive—not least my own necessarily incomplete work in synthesizing the various threads, which recall and look forward to phrases beyond the individual poem which are put into different articulations and configurations elsewhere in the book. The sense that we can only apprehend form provisionally is somewhat belied by the tendency in criticism of Language poetry to read the poems as statements on provisionality, thus limiting by a theory of openness the poems' semantic openness: open form then becomes the instantiation of unalienated labour, or else metonymy and parataxis as compositional procedures, instead of narrative structure, become "means to the production of an objectivist text" which "highlight[s] the uncommodifiable substantiality of language and objects."[47] The failure of formal artifice to be directed to any transactional ends, to produce a statement about the world, is paradoxically understood as a truer mimesis. Along these lines, *My Life* is read as an indication of the "unassimilable flow" of consciousness: "why ought poetry to draw from consciousness only that which is easy to objectify, clear, and discernible, when the 'subjective stream' offers so many instances of unclarity."[48] The disorganisation of the poem comes to symbolize or present the disorganization of subjective experience, as in Carla Harryman's reading of Hejinian based on William James's *Principles of Psychology* (a reading which suggests a modernist, rather than postmodernist, affinity).

The failure of form to adequate experience is a common idea in other Language poetry: Harryman's *Vice*, from which the quotation in Hejinian above is taken ("…bottom heavy with culture"), also contains the sentiment with which the Hejinian poem ends: "This is what happened but it could have been something else. // something else was there."[49] The something else seems

---

[47] Huntsperger, pp. 162-3.
[48] Carla Harryman, "Rules and Restraints in Women's Experimental Writing" in *We Who Love To Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*, eds. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue (Tuscaloosa, AB: University of Alabama Press, 2002), pp. 121; 120.
[49] Carla Harryman, *Vice*, (Elmwood, CT: Potes and Poets, 1987), p. 47.

to only be accessible through the conspicuous elevation of "artifice": metonymy is valued over fragments because it is an operation at the level of surface: "she spread her fingers as she spoke, talking of artifice". (*My Life,* 49) It spreads to fill in the gaps, but only by being insubstantial, or by pointing up the falseness of what was taken for substance. Harryman's critique of poetic subjectivity and voice makes this explicit: "I am an indication of what occurs around me."[50] "I have no identity."[51]

This conception of form as involved in undermining naturalized categories of understanding—as being *only* form—is derived from the Russian formalists, whose conception of form is essentially negative, existing for the purpose of defamiliarizing and making strange.[52] In "Art as Technique", Victor Shklovsky writes that "the technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception."[53] In this estimation, form consists in an ongoing deferral, an "essential drift" of writing's play of difference, its non-correspondence with its manifestations in meaning.[54] Literary self-reflexivity stands in opposition to the social institutions of language, such that any engagement with form as such is "to reduce its strangeness, and to draw upon supplementary conventions which enable it, as we say, to speak to us."[55] This is essentially what underlies Dworkin's and Perloff's readings of the book, where form's artifice, its play as surface, is valued; where "the deferral of completion […] is essentially erotic."[56] Comparing *My Life* to the "patchwork architecture" of a quilt, Dworkin finds this dynamic of deferral in that "local disjunctions are exchanged for large-scale coherence, even if that larger integrity is constantly frustrated by the opposite tendency—fragments which cohere

---

[50] Carla Harryman, "Toy Boats", *Poetics Journal Online Archive* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2014), p. 666
[51] Carla Harryman, *The Middle* (San Francisco, CA: Gaz, 1983), p. 144.
[52] But see Tom Jones, *Poetic Language*, pp. 5-6, for the distinction between the formalist Shklovsky and the structuralist Mukařovsky, who is concerned with the "interrelation of linguistic and literary systems with all other adjoining or otherwise relevant human systems".
[53] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), p. 22.
[54] Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context", *Limited INC* (Evanston IL: Northwestern UP, 1988), p.9.
[55] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 134.
[56] Dworkin, "Penelope Reworking the Twill", p. 78.

locally but do not always seem to fit well into their context."[57] Meaning is generated negatively by non-coherence and frustration, and this interpretation relies on form being unveiled as an artificial constraint, such that it sets into relief the disjunction between the "radical artifice" of the "rigid overall frame" and the amorphous consciousness that it would contain.[58]

Yet *My Life* also articulates another conception of form, where phrasal and phonic patterning work like "adhesive noises" to link as many things as possible together. (69) We could think back to the meaningful symmetry between language and the world suggested by the "trilling trigonometry in trees". Here it is the experience of form's infinite activity that offers a utopian limitlessness, linking anything with everything in a dynamic flatness/fullness: "the trend of my theory may sometimes run utopianward in reality." (86) Elsewhere, Hejinian has written that "syntax and movement are more important to me than vocabulary."[59] This movement is secured at the expense of the conception of poetry as organised by the ordered expression of a voice (voice being understood by the Language poets as a metonym for subject prior to utterance); but paradoxically it also relies on the remainder of something beyond this formal ubiquity, a "stubbornness" that cannot be contained or constrained by its framing. "There are adhesive noises, these are flakes." (69) And this stubbornness—these flakes that refuse to stick—invokes a different regime of poetic meaning, that of vocabulary, of fitting the right word to the thing, of the separation between image and appearance and truth. "Patterns promote an outward likeness, between little white silences." (63) It is this contradiction, formal dynamism undermined by the illusory containment of form, which permits both the affirmation of artifice and its critique.

Thus, while one aspect of *My Life* does turn on its revelation of formal artifice as distinct from the world, there is another aspect in which the proliferations of meanings achieved by formal estrangement reinvigorates poetry's social vocation. Hejinian claims that "a poem is not an isolated

---

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 69.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[59] Hejinian, "Line", *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 133.

autonomous rarefied aesthetic object";[60] and while she also argues that Language poetry "disclose[s] [the] world view (and ideology)" of the naturalness of this conception of the aesthetic, she expresses the desire that once the reading experience is "freed from the limits of the singular 'I'" it will be evident that "aesthetic discovery is congruent with social discovery."[61] Yet to be freed from the confines of the 'I' is achievable in this poetics only by avoiding the scene of the first person's utterance, by insisting on its fictional inscription as writing and textuality, a formalization of experience that is distinct from it.

My Life can be seen to aspire to the realization of a kind of dispersed subjectivity[62] in the many images of achieved activities without an agent or perceiver, self-effacements which index, in Huntsperger's terms, "the residue of human activity without specifically representing any one person."[63] "In the trunk prepared for earthquake, water" (87); "The canoe ducks the willow branch, the paddle fingers the water." (68) "The windows were open and the morning air was, by the smell of lilac and some darker flowering shrub, filled with the brown and chirping trills of birds." (62) Most literally here, the book maintains the shadow of the idea of a subject—as it does, obviously, in its title. There is a sense that subjectivity is not abandoned entirely. It is a means of maintaining continuity; the 'I' functions as a placeholder that helps in the activity of "filling" in the gaps ("not fragments but metonymy").

We might find with Jameson, then, that "the former work of art… has now turned out to be a text, whose reading proceeds by differentiation rather than by unification." [64] For Jameson, this means that formal constraints lose meaning: "theories of difference… have tended to stress disjunction to the point at which the materials of the text, including its words and sentences, tend

---

[60] Hejinian, "Barbarism", *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 323.
[61] *Ibid.*, pp. 324; 330; 322.
[62] I will consider Lisa Robertson's approach to this problem in another chapter. In *My Life*, the subject's dispersal is achieved by frustrating the desire for the coherence in anything other than grammar, whereas in Robertson first person utterances are inflated such that their voiced and embodied elements are formalized.
[63] Hunstperger, p. 161.
[64] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 31.

to fall apart into random and inert passivity."[65] The inert passivity of postmodern form is summarized neatly by Joseph Conte, distinguishing between the complementary forms of "seriality"—admitting the aleatory, the chaotic—and "proceduralism"—arbitrarily rule governed: "[Seriality] creates a somewhat desultory topological map of the 'ground' of existence. [Proceduralism] produces a grid transparently superimposed on—and as easily lifted from—existence."[66] On the other hand, a work like *My Life* tries to reinvigorate the work-as-text, as an image of social life in formal plenitude—though if we are to read it as such, we should rethink the conception of formal artifice as opposed to language's participation in broader social systems. This would mean admitting something between the idea of poetic form as illusory limitation—the transparently superimposed grid—and a pure mechanical celebration of form as the rejection of expression, subjectivity, and creativity—in its becoming, not constraint, but the desultory map, the schizophrenic assemblage.

Form as Mediation

There is another current in poetry and poetics at around this time, generally in, but not limited to, Britain, that charts a path between the critique of appearances and the celebration of surfaces. It draws out further some of the implications of the contradictions between these positions that Language poetics and postmodern schizophrenia seem to leave us in, where poetic form is expanded and recombined against its perceived constraints on experience, and at the same time experience is imagined as separate from its aesthetic presentation, only ever accessible in the failure of the aesthetic.[67]

---

[65] *Ibid.*
[66] Joseph Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991), p. 17.
[67] Hence Steve McCaffery's proposition of a general economy of writing "which shatters the accumulation of meaning", foregoing value, use, and thus any pragmatics of language altogether for "eruptions without purpose". "Writing as a General Economy" in *Artifice and Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics*, ed. Christopher Beach (Tuscaloosa, AB: University of Alabama Press, 1998), p. 202. McCaffery's notion is distinctly anti-Hegelian and anti-dialectical—for a radical negation.

The poetry and poetics that I will go on to discuss takes as its starting point that there seems to be something inescapable about thinking form as constraint, and finds productive ways to conceptualize the attendant division between interiority and exteriority—individual freedom and social constraint—which that thinking reproduces. In general, all the kinds of mediation to which experience is subject can be understood as transformations of determining constraints: the mediation of socio-economic structures through the individual implies the mediacy of desires, of subjectivity in public language, of embodied temporality regularized in work routines. Poetic constraints formalize mediation, and because they subject the notion of the individual to constraint in ways I'll go on to elaborate, they provide a means to reflect on the process of mediation—and that reflexivity might be said to constitute a measure of liberation from constraint: the forms of constraint come to have cognitive and experiential shapes available to reflection.

Let's look again at the array of poetry's forms of mediation. Though disavowed by Language poetry, the lyric 'I' is one of the forms through which poetry mediates subjectivity and can thereby reflect on that process. The stubborn notion of voice, or the 'lyric subject', has been regarded with less suspicion in British experimental poetry than its more textual American counterpart. John Wilkinson has noted that

> it can feel as though the lyric poetry of the twentieth century has been harried past endurance by the problem of the first person singular, the lyric 'I', variously by its pomposity, its frailty, its pretensions, and its inadequacy. This cannot be evaded by extirpation of the cursed pronoun, for the depersonalised poem tends to then lay claim to an overweening authority.[68]

Commenting on this sentiment in Wilkinson, Andrea Brady glosses his investment in the continuation of lyric poetry while maintaining the 'I' "because it serves as a restraint on the poem's grandiose claims to universality."[69] This lyric tendency, more thoroughly explored in British late

[68] John Wilkinson, "Frostwork and The Mud Vision", *The Lyric Touch* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), p. 187.
[69] Andrea Brady, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Poet" in *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. Peter Robinson (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 710.

modernist poetry, Wilkinson puts in the lineage of W. S. Graham and Frank O'Hara, noting particularly their relationships with painters:

> What they shared also was a powerful ethic of improvisation and discovery *as well as* tireless practice and preparation, for the latter is the precondition for the structure through which feeling can be expressed in the former.[70]

The painters with which these writers were familiar, Wilkinson reminds us, "were [not] as committed as were their critical promoters to 'pure' abstraction or figuration, but they understood that the dynamism of painting was enacted in the tension between surface artifice and referentiality."[71] That tension and dynamism applies in part, for British innovative poetry, because of an unease with structural and synchronic accounts of language—in other words, with the way post-structuralism informed the poetics of Language poetry and its brand of linguistic self-criticism, focused, as I've set out, on artifice and structural autonomy. Peter Middleton has framed this unease in terms of British innovative poetry's pragmatic account of language, which has led it to propose different answers for "what sort of object […] language has become."[72] Middleton finds a working (pre)theory of language in Prynne, Peter Riley and Maggie O'Sullivan, and a subsequent generation of British writers, which understands language use to be a negotiation between various pressures and constraints: it is an activity capable of expanding our sense of what exists, though it must also rely on codified norms and systems of reasoning abstracted from the context of its usage; its present employment will also bear the weight of its historical associations; while language can recall us to our intimate capacity for sound-making, we are also constrained by "the extended cognitive, organic and inorganic ecology that makes us possible". "Language is an

---

[70] Wilkinson, "Frostwork and The Mud Vision", pp. 186-7.
[71] *Ibid.*, p. 186. I treat this idea more thoroughly in my discussion of medium in Anne Carson.
[72] Peter Middleton, "Warring Clans, Podsolized Ground", in *Modernist Legacies*, p. 36. Middleton intends pragmatism to denote C. S. Pierce's linguistic philosophy, which is often understood as an alternative to the Saussaurian model of the internally differentiated system on which post-structuralist accounts are based. (p. 27) This gives us a dialectical, rather than differential, account of language, and marks a dissension from the postmodern renunciation of contradiction for difference.

immensely complex pattern that derives from a long history of passionate struggle for improvement, both material and intellectual."[73]

While Middleton discusses an intuition that language is an object and objective of historical struggle, Romana Huk considers how this can be seen to constrain even the most personal expression. Huk puts forward a conception of personal expression as always already constrained: "riven at the very site of writing by *over*-writings one can't isolate oneself from—be they institutional, political, or global."[74] Yet in the face of this, she doubles down in defence of lyric's "model of involvement" which "asks me to feel in collaboration with it," itself dependent on being "almost intolerably personal"; contrary to the demystification of the subject brought about by Language poetry's strategies.[75] Maintaining a conception of poetry as the sharing of collective experience refracted through the individual, with the potential to practice "truth-telling by libidinal power", this more generous estimation of the capacity of lyric voice allows it a degree of self-reflexivity that Language poetry would deny. In other words, it allows for the capacity of lyric to register the constraints of its own understanding; as Sam Ladkin has written, rather than dissembling about its totalizing prospect, "the best lyric poetry has always known it was hoodwinking the reader, and so includes all sorts of winks and nervous tics to warn the reader of that fact and raise their suspicious."[76] Lyric's distinctive constraint, expression mediated by the 'I', constitutes an intersubjective activity, rather than an objective structure: it is a dialectical mediation between two terms, individual and society, each transforming the other, such that neither of which need be settled categories.

Another site of mediation is the apprehension of social language and meaning by poetic artifice. Although she provided the impetus to Language poetics' valuation of artifice, we might revisit Veronica Forrest-Thomson's theory of poetic artifice to retrieve a notion of form's social

---

[73] Peter Middleton, "Warring Clans, Podsolized Ground", p. 35.
[74] Romana, Huk, "New British Schools" in *Modernist Legacies*, p. 64.
[75] *Ibid*, pp. 74; 64.
[76] Sam Ladkin, "Lyric Versus Audit in the Virtual Society", *Forum for Modern Language Studies,* Vol. 47, No. 4 (2011), pp. 454-467; p. 454.

implication. It is true that Forrest-Thomson understands poetry's formal strangeness to "restore language to its primary beauty as a craft by refusing to allow its social comprehension."[77] Yet for Forrest-Thomson, poetry is constrained by formal artifice to be both connected to the world and separate from it: poetry exists as a "tightrope between Artifice and reality."[78] Forrest-Thomson argues that we should retain our attention to formal constraint or Artifice, because it is "a powerful instrument for absorbing and restraining the non-poetic world."[79] How does this absorption and restraint work? Constraint differentiates or individuates the poem from ordinary language: it marks and determines the transport between the social world and its meanings and that of the poem. On the one hand, poetry subjects language to a process of "internal limitation and expansion" where "the world of ordinary language is drawn into the poem's technique so that those parts of that world implied by the meaning of words and phrases are limited by their function inside the poem but also expanded by the power released when levels other than meaning become important."[80] Charles Bernstein adds the caveat that Forrest-Thomson is "wrong to designate the nonlexical/[…] extralexical strata of the poem as 'non semantic"',[81] and thereby includes the range of the poem's formal elements within its meaning—and this is generally accepted by the writers I will go on to discuss—so that

> meaning is not absent or
> deferred but self-embodied as the poem
> in a way that is not transferrable to another code or rhetoric.[82]

Though Forrest-Thomson insists that poetic meaning comes from the relation of the elements of the poem to each other, at the same time, she concedes that poetic obscurity is counterbalanced by "external limitation", that is, the residue of external meanings or empirical references that the

---

[77] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A theory of twentieth-century poetry* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1978), p. 142.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 117.
[79] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[80] *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
[81] Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption", p. 12.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

poem cannot shake.[83] These twin processes amount to discontinuity and continuity respectively; and they constitute the work of formal constraint as one of mediation.[84]

Metre is one aspect of poetic artifice, a constraint which shapes and times the movement of language. Prosodic artifice is not an objective quantity in the poem, but also a site of mediation: it emerges in the interaction between poem and reader. For Simon Jarvis it is therefore in *verse,* those paralinguistic parts of poetry that make it distinct from normal language, where poetry's intellectual activity is located. These cannot be reduced to mere classifications, decorative formal constraints that distinguish poetic language but can then be moved to the background when we try to explain its meaning. Instead, Jarvis terms the reading of the rhythm or metre of verse itself an "art"—not a simple matter of technique/classification—or a kind of thinking.[85] "Metre is always suspended between induction and deduction, description and prescription, because it is always something which you have both to induce empirically from the verse material in front of you […] and also something which you have to *do* to" that material.[86] From this perspective, a prosodic constraint does not merely coerce a certain reading—it is more involved, both constraining or limiting expressiveness and being the condition for it.

Even as artifice distinguishes poetry from everyday language, it also shows up the difference between formalized language and its experience: as Jarvis argues, metre exceeds its regularized schematization as extensive measurement; alternatively, expression might exceed the conventional constraints which provide its occasion. So argues J. H. Prynne in his essay "English Poetry and Emphatical language" (by which he means to refer specifically to the "exclamatory

---

[83] Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, p. 27.
[84] To read Forrest-Thomson this way emphasises the poem's continuity with ordinary social language more so than she does—to heed the orthodoxy of her theory would be to maintain that only with attention to poetic artifice's difference from ordinary language does a reader "free himself from the fixed forms of thought which ordinary language imposes on our minds." (16) But see Keston Sutherland's essay "Veronica Forrest-Thomson for Readers" for a reading of her theory as modified by an encounter with her poetry which pulls it back towards the world of everyday experience. *KR Online* Veronica Forrest-Thomson: A Retrospective (2008, Special Issue) https://kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/index-2/selections/veronica-forrest-thomson-for-readers/ [accessed 09/04/2020].
[85] Simon Jarvis, "Unfree Verse: John Wilkinson's *The Speaking Twins*", *Paragraph* 33:2 (2010), pp. 280–295; p. 284.
[86] *Ibid.*, p. 287.

Oh!" of lyric poetry).[87] Ostensibly the most solipsistic, inward, moment, the "Oh" would seem to present a state of interior feeling beyond words, "locked inconstruably into the interiority of the uttering subject."[88] Yet Prynne argues that this solipsism is not a weakness that disrupts or forestalls connectedness: in fact, as it occurs in poetry, it seems to point up the insufficiency of discourse and "the power of climactic expressive utterance to transgress its formal occasion" but at the same time it is "kept within the margins of an intelligible context of expressive forms and rhythms."[89] Prynne chastens the transcendent designs of Romantic lyric utterance by insisting that that utterance has a social use. He maintains that the way in which formal constraint acts on and contextualizes expression makes it possible for the presentation of the most personalized moment as "a dialectic convergence of outward and inward sense" that surpasses Lukacs' unfavourable view of lyric utterance as dependent on creating "imaginary space devoid of obstacles":[90]

> I believe it important to recognize that, in the hands of writers with powerful creative intelligence, the calling up of such exclamatory powers in the language of passion is a form of acknowledgement and dialectical holding to the locus of a demanding but possible truth, at least as much as simply the expression of some feeling about a moment particularly stressed by the pressures of experience.[91]

The outward and the inward senses articulated by these exclamatory powers of language calls upon another aspect of mediation: not only how language mediates our relation to the world and others in it, gesturing to a non-construable truth and a shared reality—creating a space of semantic depth; but also how it models our psychological imaginaries—the depth from which exclamation emerges. This aspect of language is given much attention by Denise Riley. Riley reflects on the way language mediates subjectivity, not only as a repertoire of grammatical and syntactic constraints that contour self-identifications and -articulations, but also by mediating how we imagine and conceptualize subjectivity, individuality and interiority. Riley discusses how we can

---

[87] J. H. Prynne, "English Poetry and Emphatical Language", *Proceedings of the British Academy* LXXIV (1988), p. 136.
[88] *Ibid.*, p. 140.
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 155.
[90] *Ibid.*, pp. 168; 145.
[91] *Ibid.*, p. 167.

come to a positive conceptualization of the gap between all that we want language to contain, and the limitations it imposes as the medium of self-articulation. She considers how one might both take account of language's role in 'constructing' the self, and correspondent fictions of interiority, without negating the real effects that derive from these linguistic sleights of hand. To do so requires we question not only the division between an interior subject and an external language, but also the division within language between the linguistic and the psychological; it requires, therefore, putting pressure on a concept of language as a superficial system into which the real irrupts as an unwieldy materiality.[92] This division authorizes an understanding of the psychological as a domain of passionate feeling supressed by inert words, felt only in the excessive irrationality of language.

> Instead of that deceptively neat arrangement of cool language with its hot underbelly, if we were to conduct some of the heat away into syntax and grammar, that might helpfully disarray the thing. For language does not cruise at an altitude well above what it then stoops to conquer: the rough warm realm of emotion. Yet there's a lingering conviction that it must, due to the belief that language is 'superstructural', the spatial metaphor again underlining the imagined apparatus of surface and depth.[93]

The bifurcated view of language in which it always imperfectly attaches itself to or overwrites its perceptual object is the type of thinking which, via Wittgenstein, finds its way into the theorizations of the Language poets. "Here grammar dazzles, entraps the fly in the fly bottle, offers the glitter of 'false appearances', and leads the enchanted thinker astray through a philosophy which is the terrain of error."[94] These seductions are dependent on a spatial metaphor, a logic of appearances in which language operates in a visual register: it hides its objects.

Riley argues that "this seeming universal spatial and temporal metaphoricity means that one wants at least to track its obstinate ubiquity, to incorporate these metaphors as natural features, and to not consider them as misleading defects, distortions, or seductions."[95] The metaphoricity

---

[92] Denise Riley, *Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 37.
[93] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
[94] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
[95] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

which is a feature of the linguistic medium becomes a resource for giving determinate shape to feeling, which becomes thus sharable and circulates intersubjectively to participate in the world to which our perceptions respond: "Undecidable for thought, in practice the figurative speech of interior depth remains solidly as it is."[96] The medium of language is not a tragic interposition on the world but the terrain in which we live, and, to extend the metaphor, the natural resource with which we continue to produce our world. It creates semantic depth, conjuring meaning before, beyond, outside of the material signifiers with which it refers; it also figures a space of psychological depth, emanations of feeling which appear to exceed their verbal instantiation. Riley addresses both the felt constraint of affect's linguistic mediation, and also the resource for thinking and speaking of the self which that constraint provides.[97]

Riley's pragmatic approach suggests a further aspect of mediation that occurs when we experience formal constraint "in practice". In this respect, we can consider the ways in which poetic form is a site of mediation between a system and its durational experience—between the abstract system of affects, times and conventions of language and the experience of their material configurations. Douglas Oliver's *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* can help us in making this account. Oliver defines poetic performance thus: "a poem of fictional narrative considered as actually being written or read on one occasion, whether silently or audibly. I do *not* just mean reading aloud but activating the reader's whole response to the work of art: intellectual, emotional and sonic."[98] Thinking this way understands literature as an event or occasion and not simply as a set of underlying rules or structure. Importantly, in defining and justifying his focus, Oliver mentions approvingly the older, productively confused notions of scansion which saw it less as an abstract or constraining rule than an anticipation of performance, in which the rule and its individuation coexist: "the [older] scansion happily confused metrical competence and metrical

---

[96] *Ibid.*, p. 49.
[97] In *Time Lived Without its Flow*, however, Riley revises and qualifies the sufficiency of this idea as she considers grief beyond articulation. (London: Picador, 2012)
[98] Douglas Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. vii.

performance in a way which left the poem free to be judged as a work of art."[99] This final phrase points us to what is central to Oliver's conception of poetic form: irreducible to extensive measurement, and continuous with the capacities of everyday linguistic performance.

For Oliver the experience of reading in time—his focus is stress, but this is an instance of poetic form more generally—consists in "carrying out smaller acts of mental reflection in which we appreciate the developing form" while also appreciating this form as a simultaneous pattern beyond our phenomenal experience of it.[100] In this way he elaborates the paradoxical nature of form, in that every instantaneous experience of form seemingly contains a content, and that content is meaningful only in relation to the totality of the poem.

If the formal instant mediates between the meaningful totality of a poem's moments and its performance, that does not mean formal constraint is simply a conceptual abstraction from experience. Andrew Crozier contends that the "formal restraint" in free verse be understood as the formalization of the sensory experience of language which escapes abstract measurement. He writes that "language adheres accurately to the complexity of experienced reality, the product, I would maintain, of that extension of consciousness beyond or beneath the purely mental, to include the activity of the senses."[101] Given that language is a system including conceptual and sensuous processes, Crozier writes that

> The criteria for performances in such a system will relate to the extent to which they realise the occurrence of appropriate occasions of experience, without making such occasions submit to inappropriate restrictions on their ontological status, and will also relate to the extent to which such realisations embody a recognition of the participation of the system which makes such presentations of consciousness possible.[102]

That is, the experience of formal constraint is critical: it generates reflection on the negotiation between the language system and the instants of its articulation. Oliver suggests that to recognize or reflect upon formal instances we require those abstract or ideal concepts of formal

---

[99] *Ibid.*, p. viii.
[100] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[101] Crozier, *Free Verse as Formal Restraint*, p. 206.
[102] *Ibid.*, p. 206.

measurement that allow us to observe patterns of recurrence, even as he complicates how these patterns are realized in each material sensory instance. Oliver concludes that the abstract and concrete character of stress makes it unavoidably paradoxical, "as instantaneous and as durational, as still and as moving, or as passive and as active."[103] For Oliver, "the notion of artistic form depends" upon this ambiguous dynamic.[104] The paradox is thus: "perfect formal unity is impossible" and yet "it is the nature of form to suggest a unity that can be captured in an instant".[105]

Thinking back on *My Life* we can see how this understanding of form modifies how we conceive of the poem's oscillations between local and global coherence, between the semantic and the syntactic or metonymic, the personal and the impersonal. Rather than concluding that this ambivalence undermines any unification, we could consider it to be the exacerbated condition of all reading, where simultaneity and duration coincide in a "permanent working model of experience".[106]

As a working model, this formal instant contains real emotion—it is not a derivation from or imitation of it. As Riley argued, language furnishes the resources for the generation, circulation and conceptualisation of affect—including the affect of linguistic unease, feeling more than an utterance can contain—beyond its mere representation. The experience of form registers both the intensities of emotion recognized by feeling-sensation-cognition and the notional form of emotion as conceptual thought. Oliver argues that "Poetry discovers a way to unify the time-scales of emotion, concept, and verbal music. It does so by transforming the emotion itself into a concept, a fiction."[107] That fiction stages a relationship linking certain language dispositions and certain ways of feeling. The fiction subsequently produces real effects. It does this by combining three senses of emotion: "first, the fictional miming of real emotions that goes on in literary art; second, the real emotion of Horatian-Coleridgean delight in aesthetic form; and third the complex emotional

[103] Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, p. 104.
[104] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
[105] *Ibid.*, pp. 108; 109.
[106] *Ibid.*, p. 172.
[107] *Ibid.*, p. 166.

play-off from the fictional effect of the text into our own lives."[108] We might restate these as: the representation of emotion, at the level of the conceptual; artifice/aesthetic form as itself producing affective response; artifice in performance, where the production of sound or intonation by a reader "will modulate perfectly to vivid meaning" because "intonation cannot mime its reaction to imaginary emotion without copying the necessary relation it has to real emotions; the coding is already there in the usage of language."[109]

If we attend with nuance to the operations of formal constraint we will discover more various senses of mediation than ideological constraint which regulates or disciplines the senses. Poetry's constraints are mediations of thought and speech. Because of this, they present working models of experience—experience which is itself always subject to constraints; always the locus of mediacy between the individual and the social world. Moreover, because these models are constructed in the verbal medium, they produce intersubjective effects which activate all or most of the components of everyday language as social practice. Also, because constraint is formal—estranged from the usual demands and conditions of language use (estranged, but not entirely discontinuous)—our performative encounters with it require us to actively employ capacities of thinking, speaking and feeling that might otherwise operate beneath our notice. As such, we are awakened not only to our participation in constraining formal systems but to our capacity to exceed them with powers of cognitive synthesis, memory, the production and interpretation of patterned sound, self-articulations and -identifications, all of which are conditions of constraints' reproduction, but not all of which are limited to such a function.

To think about these experiences of mediation, I turn briefly to John Wilkinson's long poem "The Speaking Twins". That poem, as much as Wilkinson's other writing, works the "strange amalgam of the individual and the abstract" that Wilkinson sees as characteristic of lyric generally, with the "counter-forces" of social language, into an argument over identity and

[108] *Ibid.*, p. 167.
[109] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

difference, the regular and the chaotic, in technologies of communication.[110] In this way it is related to our concern with the imaginative analogies poetry and poetics work with in order to think through how they are constrained by the social conditions in which they are produced.

> […]How come, how went awry
> Drifting so exact? Where a millisecond,
> Microvalve technology, where an audience clap
>
> Controls rate of output form and content with
> Its new disastrous data-net?[111]

The kind of regular, binary, registration of verse outputs that scanning requires is coincident with that of electronic transmission, and thus the technologies of broadcasting and computing. On this model, poetry's economy, what it circulates and recognizes as valuable, would seem to operate on the same wavelength as that of the mass media's economy of attention: "on/off: yes/no" feeding back and recognizing only identical outputs and inputs. One would want, perhaps, a way of distinguishing poetic form from this imbrication, not least so that it avoids identity with the productions of media commodities. While Language poetry's answer to the conundrum was from the perspective of consumption—the freedom of the reader, the deferral of meaning-as-the-consummation-of-exchange-value—Wilkinson's poem goes a different direction. It tests the limits of this analogy by requiring we value our rhythmic attention differently; to understand and admit an alternative way of counting stress, with "no lightning to rend starry rifts timely".[112]

In his reading of the poem, Jarvis is provoked to reflect on the nature of verse by its seeming "at once too rhythmically aberrant to produce anything like a metrical set, and also too insistently recurrent, too preoccupied with the fine collisions of repetition and difference to languish into inert arrhythmia."[113] He concludes that the poem works between two ideas of

[110] John Wilkinson, "Preface", *Schedules of Unrest: Selected Poems* (Cromer, Norfolk: Salt, 2014), p. xiv.
[111] Wilkinson, "The Speaking Twins", *Schedules of Unrest*, p. 64.
[112] *Ibid.*, p. 50.
[113] Jarvis, "Unfree Verse", p. 282.

"metrico-rhythmic expressiveness": firstly, an expressiveness that is dependent on its subversion of prior metrical constraints, making expressiveness perceptible by its difference; secondly, metre as "a system of *restrictive* constraints which must rule out sectors of the spectrum of rhythmic expressiveness."[114] In Jarvis's account of "The Speaking Twins", these two positions do not resolve: "it is as though, in this poem, the sinews or wiring of verse were to register both the flatness of being free in verse only, and the deadness of a contemporary resentful remetrification."[115] Expressiveness emerges in the mediation between system and its absence, such that the negation of rigid verse structures yet conjures their spectral presence.

For Prynne too, poetry's promise of freedom is only accessible by such a negation. In Prynne's poetry this is not only in relation to an assumed freedom of expression in prosody, but more generally in terms of an attitude to the autonomy of lyric utterance. *The White Stones* (1969) shares much with Olson and projective verse—a valuation of the expressiveness of the line, with lineation and enjambment ordering and modulating thinking alongside or on top of grammar; a similar lexicon that values "breath", "cadence", "heart"; and an earnest desire to place "where we are" in a vast historical and geographical field. Yet it is also laced with the beginnings of doubt as to the efficacy and purity of the voice speaking by way of epiphany or amelioration.

> […] we
> trifle with rhyme and again is the
> sound of immortality. We think we have
> it & we must, for the sacred resides in this[116]

Although moments like this appear to valorize the universal qualities of verse, the poetry also cautions against generalizing this familiar account of poetic experience:

> And yet home is easily our

[114] *Ibid.*, p. 290.
[115] *Ibid.*, p. 291.
[116] J. H. Prynne, "Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform", *Poems* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2005), p. 100.

> idea of it, the music of decent and proper
> order, it's this we must leave in some quite
> specific place if we are not to carry it
> everywhere with us.[117]

Elsewhere any redeeming capacities of speech more generally are cast into doubt: "I draw blood whenever I open my stupid mouth."[118] Instead of the singular and individual inflection of the 'lyric voice' Prynne's work considers how speaking and writing are open to the social and material determinations of language: "What goes on in a / language is the corporate & prolonged action / of worked self-transcendence."[119] Here the valence of the modern US understanding of "corporate", as well as that of corporatist social democracy, imply that "worked self-transcendence" in language cannot be taken as distinct from the social conditions in which other forms of labour are conducted.

> We live, as always we have, in an historic glasshouse of language; we can see out but only through the glass and it is not easy to cast a well-aimed stone that will not smash up more than was intended. All bystanders are by definition imperfectly observant, and mostly assuage this imperfection by climax outbursts of sanctimony. The complicity with bad consciousness is universal, though it may be argued that societies with more power to elaborate fanciful domains of individual freedom and purity of heart ought maybe to carry more of the guilt for their own self-deception. The only workable alternatives are sainthood (model now discontinued) or the intense cultivation of dialectical consciousness. Otherwise the self-implication of all consciousness in all acts of reflection designed to search out its limits and blind spots will completely obstruct even partial insight.

> Not one word of any language ever known to man has ever been innocent of these things; just as no human body has ever submitted to be expressively at the complete disposal of the mind that inhabits it or the meanings which that mind claims to deploy.[120]

This is Prynne writing later, in response to commentary on developments in Bosnia; yet it captures concisely his understanding of what Simon Perril calls the "necessary impurities" in language.[121] It

---

[117] *Ibid.*
[118] Prynne, "Concerning Quality, Again", *Poems*, p. 82.
[119] Prynne, "Questions for the Time Being", *Poems*, p. 113.
[120] Prynne, "A quick riposte to Handke's dictum about war and language", *Quid* 6 (2000), pp. 25; 26.
[121] Simon Perril, "Hanging on your every word: J.H. Prynne's *Bands Around The Throat* and a dialectics of planned impurity", in *A Manner of Utterance: The Poetry of J.H. Prynne*, ed. Ian Brinton(Exeter: Shearsman, 2009), p. 83.

is from this position that Prynne makes his response to the assertions of the Language poets which claimed that indeterminacy would see that

> the text is released from its fixed displacement out of a function-relation, its tokenised status as fetish, by being given over to readers as a class of individuals actively installed in the position of controlling the choices of their own consumption, to be renamed as production: the *open* text, the *inventive, selective* reader, free to opt for useful waste or wasteful utility. But my own clumsy response to this is to press several questions, all disputing the quality and competence of the freedom claimed to be thus established. Isn't it the classic freedom to eat cake, to diversify an assumed leisure and to choose out of a diversity which is precisely the commodity-spectacle of a predisposed array, clearwrapped in unitised portion control?[122]

Rather than the fetish of freedom in form only—or, the fetish of immediacy as freedom from determinism—an account of individuals' mediation by their social world could look to the ways poetry formalizes mediation in its constraints. It thereby furnishes the tools to reflect in thinking and speaking on determinate instances of mediation. In the last section, I'll read one of Denise Riley's poems, which represents the fraught attempt to reflect on one's own mediacy—a condition felt, initially, as a constraint—by foregrounding the resources of poetic form, itself apprehensible only at various levels of mediation.

Denise Riley and the constraints of poetic subjectivity

Riley's poem "Wherever you are, be somewhere else" articulates the desire for an expansive poetic subjectivity which would exceed the expression of a unified autonomous individual "voice"—chafing against the conventional constraints of lyric. It articulates this desire, however, by employing and exacerbating the formal constraints of the lyric tradition. These constraints come to regulate and insulate the expression of this desire from an amorphous "flatness"; but in the poem the sense of overdetermination by constraints also registers as liberating, forming a subjectivity and also constituting the means by which that subjectivity differs from its determinations. So, while it has similar concerns to *My Life,* the poem engages the sensible

[122] Prynne, J. H., "A letter to Steve McCaffery (January, 1989)", reprinted in *The Gig* 7 (November, 2001), p. 41.

constraints of poetic form as part of its argument—rather than abandoning them for the benefit of an imagined reader free to choose among textual threads in an open form.

The title of Riley's poem establishes the question of subjectivity, its location and its interrogative constitution as a matter of interpellation. The opening lines elaborate an idea of the dissolution of the subject, perhaps responding to the title's injunction:

> A body shot through, perforated, a tin sheet
> Beaten out then peppered with thin holes,
> Silvery, leaf curled at their edges; light flies
>
> Right through this tracery, voices leap, slip side-
> Long, all faces split to angled facets: whichever
> Piece is glimpsed, that bit is what I am, held
>
> In a look until dropped like an egg on the floor
> Let slop, crashed to slide and run, yolk yellow
> For the live, the dead who worded through me.[123]

Expansiveness and dispersal are imagined here, in a scene of fragmentation. Yet a violent intrusion is central, the "body" being at once forged from without and injured in the process. Even in these first lines, there is an oscillation between being violently subjected, "held in a look", and thus being fragile, and a sense of adornment or decoration: being "silvery, leaf curled", "a tracery". This parallels the aggressive negative affects associated with being "shot-through", "beaten", "faces split", which are tempered by the valence of freedom and liberation in, "light flies // right through", and "voices leap"; even in the sped-up cadence of "let slop, crashed to slide and run".

The feeling of speed-up in the fourth and fifth lines, as well in the final three lines quoted above, is the result of an effect that combines sibilance with shifts in stress and relative hyper- and hypometricality. The stress at the beginning of the fifth line occasions substitutions through "all

[123] Denise Riley, "Wherever you are, be somewhere else", *Penguin Modern Poets* 10 (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 72-4. Notes to the poem supplied in Riley's *Selected Poems* (London: Reality Street, 2000) indicate that the title is taken from a Nintendo advertising slogan; and that the sources for the italicized phrases are from old Chuvash, *The Peach Blossom* by K'ung Shang-jen, and two selections from *Ballad Minstrelsy of Scotland* 1983. Though these notes were not provided in the Penguin edition, they function all the same as allusions which unsettle spatial and temporal origin, ideas thematized throughout the poem.

faces split to angled facets" which, combined with the recurring /f/ and /s/ phonemes, give the line a density which dissipates or is "dropped" a few lines later, "let slop, crashed to slide and run, yolk yellow". The latter line, "lét slóp, cráshed to slíde and rún, yólk yéllow," with seven stresses but only ten syllables, accelerates our reading—in part because at this point in my reading, I speed up in anticipation of completing the sentence before pausing for breath. Sliding through the line also recalls the "slip side-/long" from the third and fourth lines, and again contributes to the sense of patterned density. These recurring alliterative clusters begin to make phonetic constraints meaningful, though with meanings which diverge from their semantic implications—the poem's sound world exceeding its representations. These two effects—conceptual and perceptual complexes—speed-up or dispersal, and patterning or density, are opposed but held together. There is not a sense here that the sensations arising from formal patterning are subordinated to the semantic significations or vice versa. It is not that the poem 'says' or 'means' that subjectivity is dispersed but really its material forms make the performing subjectivity dense and patterned; rather, the poem functions to affect us with the feeling and cognition of dispersal and density both, and these are held together and made to cohere, though we do not know whether to relate this coherence to the "I" speaker or to the impersonal, external perspective from which we read of "a body shot through".

This holding-together also has a sense of fragility, like the membranes around an egg, the "lined shell" and "skin fronds stretched" through which "the young snakes broke". Containment appears flimsy, "a fringe flapping"

> Round nothing, frayed on a gape of glass, perspex
> Seen through, seen past, no name, just scrappy
> Filaments lifting and lifting over in the wind

We might read these lines as suggesting a liberation from being "held in a look", and thus from the constraint of the dependence on another's recognition of identity in becoming a subject; not

being nominated, identified, and thus fixed. But dissolution and the absence of recognition brings about a sad and fearful feeling in what follows:

> Draw the night right up over my eyes so that I
> Don't see and then I'm gone; push the soft hem
> Of the night into my mouth so that I stay quiet
>
> When an old breeze buffets my face to muffle
> Me in terror of being left, or is that a far worse
> Terror of not being left. No. Inching flat out
>
> Over a glacier overhanging blackness I see no
> Edge but will tip where its glassy cold may stop
> Short and hard ice crash to dark air. […]

The "terror of being left" and becoming indistinguishable is mitigated by the familiarly of the poetic diction, the predictability of an "old breeze" that "buffets my face to muffle / me". The familiarity is both semantic but also formal, in that the choice of diction invokes at times the convention of an older, Romantic poetry. The poem mobilizes the constraints of lyric convention, adhering to conventional form—tercets; diction; lineation; address. That mobilization has weight—it is not being parodied (or, perhaps it is better to say that if there is a hint of parody, it is certainly not pastiche, as Jameson defines it vis "a neutral practice of…mimicry", "blank parody").[124] I am not arguing that the poem returns to an older 'naïve' or 'secure' notion of the subject, if indeed those characterisations of historical literary understandings are not overly reductive themselves. But it does more than merely dwell contentedly at the level of schizophrenic fragmentation and dispersal.

We can see this at the semantic level as well, where the poem's "gothic riffs" on self-abnegation palliate the fear of finitude and 'utilitarian' or transparent language use—"my usual fear of ends"—because they are so plainly artificial and repetitious:

[124] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 17.

I can try on these gothic riffs, they do make
A black twitchy cloak to both ham up and so
Perversely dignify my usual fear of ends

The notion that we are only intelligible in our accession to discourses or disguises might provoke the fear of ends, of personality being instrumental; and this notion is ridiculed by exaggeration here. Yet the poem also considers being thus clothed as the only way for recognition to be achieved. In the lyric tradition it finds a repertoire of styles that it can try on as differently fitting constraints which mediate self-identification. At the same time there are other material constraints which pull and shape the voice differently—again, here, the alliterative constellations in the middle line ("black twitchy cloak to both ham up and so"), which gives a determinate form and stability even as the poetic consciousness goes through the process of editing and clarifying the nature of its poetic existence.

Lyric's calling and address constitute other modes of self-articulation which the poem tries on.

[…] No, what

I really mean to say instead is, come back
Won't you, just all of you come back, and give
Me one more go at doing it all again but doing it

Far better this time round—the work, the love stuff—
So I go to the wordprocessor longing for line cables
To loop out of the machine straight to my head

And back, as I do want to be only transmission

The desire to be plugged directly into the word processor reads as a plea for immediacy, one which de-values poetic voice and the interiority assumed by confession, degrading the former to "only transmission" and the latter to a loop "out of" the external language "machine". The power of form to overwrite and transform, or even to undo, any stable consciousness, and to connect the work with everything outside it is articulated here with an enthusiasm for mechanical

technology and automatism that might seem to liken poetry to the machine-eye of the camera—that other "one-eyed self". Consciousness becomes unconscious automatic transmission: "in sleep alone I get articulate to mouth the part of / anyone and reel off others' characters". But poetry is not cinema, and at the same time a contrasting notion of the "one-eyed self", the lyric depth from which speaking projects, is felt as an obligation: "go into it. / I must." After all, these lines define the poetic subject by interpellating an addressee, both explicitly and implicitly. But, while lyric's intersubjective scene is evoked and enacted, there is discomfort with this traditional expectation, from which the poet distances herself (still, indirectly, confessing to an interlocutor): "I eat my knuckles hearing that." These lyric constraints, while clearly being ironized, still provide modes of appearing for the subject; modes of appearing which are set off against the idea of the subject's dissolution, its becoming a conduit for bits of social data, which is dismissed as "a modern, what, a flatness." The poem is stuck between earnestly addressing its readers, breaking through the solipsism of the subjective epiphany, and a more radical undoing of the subject entirely:

> --That plea for mutuality's not true. It's more ordinary that
> Flying light should flap me away into a stream of specks
> A million surfaces without a tongue and I never have wanted
>
> 'a voice' anyway, nor got it. […]

Riley's poem deals with constraints without valorising either their destruction or the adherence to them. This clears the way for a thinking about the operations of constraint in contemporary poetry that is focused on how the forms of expression might necessarily reiterate, but without being reducible to, social constraint. In Riley's poem we recognize an effort to rehabilitate expression but without conceding it to be the production of an autonomous or pure individual voice; thus, the poem comes to a close with the image of a balancing act that, at the level of meaning derived from the perspective of its poetic speaker (the 'lyric "I"'), it can't quite maintain. In the concluding lines, a series of injunctions try to fix the poetic subject; at the same time, they invoke with several deictic utterances the moment of the poem's performance, and also

the conventional time of lyric's present. These conventional constraints constitute a form of unconstraint, in that they unfix the poem as the representation of a voice and thematize its eventual existence as a dialectical mediation between object and reader.

> Stop now. Hold it there. Balance. Be beautiful. Try.
> --And I can't do this. I can't talk like any of this.
> You hear me not do it.

Not being able to talk "like any of this" points to the way in which articulations of, and the constitution of, selfhood relies on a kind of ventriloquism, throwing the voice elsewhere—another kind of mediation: to express oneself requires not only recapitulating existing constraints of poetic convention and discourse, clichés or habitual locutions; it also implies resuscitating the stubborn metaphor of interior depth, the part of the self that cannot be conveyed into language, that escapes being "like" anything else.

Riley's poem shows poetic form to be the site of constraining mediations, ideological (the 'I'; the diction and conventions of the lyric tradition), material (phonetic patterning, cadence, lineation), and intersubjective (postures of address and overheard speech). It activates these mediations in the process of self-fashioning, reflecting on the nature of being constrained formally and conceptually, and working as a check on an easy voluntarism. Formal constraint becomes a site at which to think through autonomy and social determination as well as poetry's public or intersubjective vocation. From here we can begin to think about a politics of poetic form that does not exceed or expose its constraints from a neutral position. Expression then need not be rejected as an ideological constraint in favour of an anti-expressive, impersonal form which institutes a mechanical or textual relation between anything and everything. Thematizations of constraint like Riley's and Hejinian's allow us to reflect on the nature of form; to reimagine it as a patterning or organization of experience that is not reducible to or identical with a fundamental structure or object; that preserves and connects various contradictory ways of organizing and understanding

the nature and value of experience without the suggestion that these are incompatible, irreconcilable, or negate each other.

An advantage of thinking about form in this way would be to suggest some productive readings of poetry which departs from the near-injunction to associate positive affective experience with formlessness, or the abundant proliferation of forms, formal innovation, and ostensible—indeed 'formal'—freedom accorded by the liberal impulses of Capitalism. In subsequent chapters, I'll discuss how poets experiment with making constraints creative, beyond the register of unlimited production or formlessness substituted for happiness. The desire for lyricism as a locus of creative expression and dignification becomes a site of political struggle for M. NourbeSe Philip in *Zong!*, a book whose prosodic constraints, rescued from formlessness, become constituent parts of an argument over the value of speech-sound. That argument can only be had if subjectivity and voice remain as operative—even if disputed—categories of analysis and poetic elaboration, rather than being dismissed as ideological constraints. For Lisa Robertson, whose work takes up the impulse to autobiographical estrangement through constraint from Hejinian and Riley, apprehending, inspecting and deploying received forms and shapes of language becomes itself a source of pleasure, such that these inconspicuous elements of habitual forms of language-use become available as objects of desire.

Before turning to these more explicitly politicized poetries, in the next chapter, I'll pursue the idea of mediation further, elaborating the ways in which we can think about the enabling constraints of the poetic medium. I look to the work of Anne Carson, in which poetry's medium becomes the object of reflection and the vehicle of its meanings, in ways which help to diversify our understanding of formal mediation. Medium is for Carson a field of attention and discipline whose constraints participate in and generate the forms of ontological unfixity with which her work is often associated. Again, here we find constraint allied with dispositions against which it is normally opposed.

Medium and Mediality in Anne Carson

These days there is a fashion for mixing. The mixed work is supposed to treat its materials freely:[1] not confined by a relation to a single medium, this kind of writing, or making, shirks the conventions of rule-bound disciplines. In its irreverence, it is inter-disciplinary, and therefore undisciplined; it announces the breakdown of genres, or their deconstruction as citations which are mentioned, rather than used substantively. [2] While some of its critics and theorists would register this as emancipatory, for others the celebration of an achieved fluidity is pre-emptive, indicative of a naïve ahistoricism.[3]

Anne Carson is commonly heralded as exemplary of this art- and literary-historical context. Carson adapts classical stories in modern forms; mixes high and low, treating serious subjects with playfulness; is often generically indeterminate, between verse, prose and academic writing; and frequently gathers the disparate and fragmentary in the open form of the sequence.

This hybrid work is habitually associated with a species of freedom, the loosening or escape from purportedly conservative constraints or totalizing frameworks. Beyond its ubiquitous characterisation within the discourse of hybridity, Carson's work is freighted with the frame- and form-breaking attributed to postmodernism. Monique Tschoffen, for example, argues that generic mixing in "Carson's *Autobiography* [*of Red*] celebrates all forms of egress and escape" from the "ideological restraints of traditions."[4] Ian Rae situates Carson's hybrid forms within a postmodern Canadian tradition whose "strategies of (un)framing…operate by a paradoxical process of

---

[1] Although we should hesitate to make this assumption; I have in mind the way in which J. H. Prynne takes issue with Language poetry's assumption of the reader and writer freely disposed towards their material; see above, p. 85.
[2] For examples of the discourse of hybridity, see: *American Hyrbid* ed. Cole Swenson and David St. John (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009); *Eleven More Women Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics across North America* ed. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 2012), which advocates mixing and hybridity as a tactic of resistance that "destabilizes larger cultural ordering systems." (4) On the other hand, Nathan Hamilton's introduction to *Dear World and Everyone in it* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2014) avoids distinguishing between mainstream and experimental tendencies which can subsequently be "hybridized", imagining the work of poets on a spectrum. (16)
[3] Cf. Brian M. Reed, *Nobody's Business: 21st Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Steve Evans, "The Resistible Rise of Fence Enterprises", http://www.thirdfactory.net/resistible.html [accessed 20/04/20].
[4] Monique Tschoffen, "'First I Must Tell About Seeing': (De)Monstrations of visuality and the dynamics of metaphor in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*", *Can Lit* 180 (Spring 2004), p. 41.

multiplying diegetic frameworks in order to create a less bounded text" than their modernist precursors.[5]

Yet Carson does not understand herself to be working in a condition where anything goes. In an interview she reveals: "I like constraints in general, there being no better freedom."[6] She conceives writing as a discipline, one which she often compares to the feeling for medium in other arts. Carson is a writer for whom interart comparisons are lexical stock, as well as one with a facility for different media—she began as a painter. She has remarked: "I still seem to approach writing as a very complicated, rule-bound form of drawing,"[7] and elsewhere, reflects: "even when the thing I'm doing is just writing I try to make it into an object. Try to make it something to look at or experience as well as read, so I worry about the topography and spacing, and just the presentation of it."[8] These comparisons conceptualize the specificity of poetic medium by analogy with visual and plastic art media: with pictures and, or as, objects. They are as integral to Carson's poetics as are hybrid forms.

For these reasons it makes sense to shift the focus to the status of medium in her work. Rather than fitting her work into a narrative tracing the movement from the bounded book length work of modernism to the unbound textuality of the postmodern, I test out the implications of thinking this path in reverse: might the medium of the bound book, or the plastic medium of the word, or the mediality of language provide resources against what Rosalind Krauss calls "the deadening embrace of the general" in contemporary art?[9] Indeed, might a tactical embrace of obsolescent medium-specificity be where we locate a measure of aesthetic value in Carson's work?

There has been recent attention to the significance of medium in literary studies.[10] In the context of an increasingly various and digital media ecology, critics have focused on the way in

---

[5] Ian Rae, *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada* (Montreal: MQUP, 2008), p. 34.
[6] Anne Carson and Peter Constantine, "Ancient words, modern words: a conversation with Anne Carson" *World Literature Today* (January/February 2014) p. 37.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[8] Anne Carson and Will Aitken, "Art of Poetry No. 88", *Paris Review* Issue 171 (Fall 2004) [online].
[9] Rosalind Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium", *Critical Inquiry* Vol 25 No 2 (1999), p. 305.
[10] Cf. Bill Brown, Bradin Cormack, "Medium, Essays from the English Institute", *ELH*, Volume 83, Number 2, (Summer 2016), pp. 293-297 [special issue on Medium]; N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA:

which literature is mediated, as well as the way in which it mediates ideas. Some have looked to correspondences with the discipline of media studies; while others have turned their attention towards to the ways in which works have taken their content as matter, rather than ideas.

This comes on the heels of what was understood to be the decline of traditional art media. Rosalind Krauss discusses the post-medium dematerialisation of the work into a system of signs with the emergence of conceptualism;[11] and Conceptual Writing in turn grapples with the dematerialisation of the book and its replacement by text and word processing (creating works which proudly attest that they can be consumed without needing to be read).[12]

While art medium is perhaps most familiar as a category concerned with the autonomous capacity of art's material support under the aegis of Greenbergian medium-specificity, Krauss extends the concept to "the idea of medium as such, a set of conventions derived from, (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support."[13] This is complicated in the case literature's verbal medium: both the technical support of and an element in social practice, one must further take into account language's own mediality—the way in which it introduces difference while speaking the world and saying being. The linguistic medium includes apparatuses of mediation, eg books, page, screen; conventions of reading, genres, performance; and the mediacy of language itself as a means of representation and sociality.[14]

MIT Press, 2002); Brian Kim Stefans, *Word Toys: Poetry and Technics* (Tuscaloosa, AB: University of Alabama Press, 2017); Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[11] Krauss had begun to theorize this condition in the late 70s, with a series of articles beginning with "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in which she charts the how the categories that defined traditional art media were becoming "almost infinitely malleable" leading to a reevaluation around medium in postmodernism: "the bounded conditions of modernism have suffered a logically determined rupture." (30; 42) *October*, Vol. 8 (Spring, 1979), pp. 30-44. See also "Reinventing the Medium" and "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition", *OCTOBER* 116, Spring 2006, pp. 55-62.

[12] Cf. *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, eds. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 2011). But even here, while Conceptualism negates the significance of the original book, it still maintains the medium of language, and is therefore constrained by the media in which it appears: text mediated by the page, the screen, the newspaper, the radio.

[13] Cf. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993): "the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium." p. 86; Krauss, "Reinventing the medium", p. 296; Raymond Williams discusses various senses of medium in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977) pp. 158-164.

[14] Williams: "Language is not a pure medium through which the reality of a life or the reality of an event or an experience or the reality of a society can 'flow'. It is a socially shared and reciprocal activity, already embedded in

When medium is approached in critical context of postmodernism it is often as a crutch for frame-breaking and irreverent hybridity. Brian McHale's study of the postmodernist long poem does not include Carson, but elsewhere he has written on her in the same context.[15] McHale's work on postmodernist fiction had distinguished it from modernism on the basis of an internal generic difference: where modernist writing was concerned with epistemological questions around perception and the reliability of knowledge, postmodernist writing would focus on the ontological implications of fictionality, world-making, the plurality of "modes of being". Extending this analysis to poetry, he finds that, like the novel, the postmodernist long poem recycles "obsolete and marginalized genres" in order to reorient towards similar questions. This entails a rejection of the modernist long poem's reaching after an epistemological totality: postmodernist long poem's "burst through their textual enclosures and overrun their boundaries."[16] By revealing the limitations of frames of knowledge, the artifice of their wold-making, and the possibility that things could be otherwise, McHale argues for a postmodernist poetics dedicated to the revelation of constraint. This revelation involves exposing "the ultimate ontological grounding of fictional worlds", that is, "the material reality of the book" and the "material activity of an author"—both of which are ultimately, texts.[17] In his discussion of Merrill's "The Changing Light at Sandover", he writes that the conspicuous thematization of a mediating apparatus (a Ouija board), "forc[es] us to acknowledge the artifice, the prosthetic character, of poetry itself" which in turn has a "dis-illusioning" function.[18] Poetry is credited with frustrating its own success, a valorisation of failure.

And yet there is more in the investigation of poetry's mediating apparatus than this, which McHale's periodisation obscures. This periodization situates any experiment with medium within the context of the overturning of the old orders (between media, and subjects and techniques), a

active relationships, within which every move is an activation of what is already shared and reciprocal or may become so." *Marxism and Literature*, p. 166.

[15] Brian McHale, *The Obligation to the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa, AB: University of Alabama Press, 2004); and "Telling Stories Again: On the Replenishment of Narrative in the Postmodernist Long Poem", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 30, Time and Narrative (2000), pp. 250-262.

[16] McHale, *The Obligation to the Difficult Whole*, p. 16.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 49

liberation which understands medium to have been a conservative constraint or mystification. Yet attention to the resources and repertoires of artistic media can be conducted with a view to mining and dynamizing medium-specific constraints rather than simply exposing them. This would evidently be distinct from a formalist critical discourse on modernism which eschews epistemological questions and is very much concerned with the poetics of artifice.

Most explicitly concerned with medium are Carson's intermedia works. But an expanded sense of medium would also encompass other recurring elements of her work: an abiding interest in ekphrasis and the practice of translation. Both of these modes concentrate more on the means of representation, address, figuration and communication, than the 'original' object represented—a work of visual art, or a source text.

In this chapter I will discuss two works in which medium is an enabling constraint, around which the poetry's social concerns are articulated. *Nox* is an intermedia elegy which explores the mediality of translation. *Autobiography of Red* considers ontological unfixity not only in its much remarked generic hybridity but through its sense for medium; as technical support, mediating conventions and mediality.[19] Both of these books might be understood in the context of a structure of feeling amounting to a sense of loss, anxious about dematerialisation in the digital age, the seamless transition to informatic code. Both works reflect on the poetic medium in order to thicken the means of verbal art against the diffusion of the world into text. In my discussion I will draw out the resources and affordances of poetic medium in order to probe in more detail the kinds of mediation that take place in poetry. As I argued in chapter one, a nuanced sense of poetry's formal activity as mediation is necessary if we are to think of poetic language as both constrained by and differing from its ideological and institutional framings. Rather than measuring poetry's distance from the social world (as in modernist medium-specificity), the verbal medium cannot be

[19] Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2009); *Autobiography of Red* (Toronto: Knopf, 1998).

divorced from its social function. At the same time, by thematizing its medium, poetry makes it a generative constraint, engaging in its production of meaning capacities of language which exceed the merely utile.

Elegy, Translation and Mediality in Nox

I'll begin with one of Carson's explicitly intermedia works. *Nox* is an elegy for the poet's estranged brother. Printed and compiled as a screenfold, its pages are unbound but folded like a concertina. It is contained in a box. The printed pages are xeroxed facsimiles of a scrapbook containing writing of Carson's own composition; a letter from her brother, Michael; photographs; transcriptions from diaries found by his widow; and translations and glosses of an elegy by Catullus. Each page of printed text is included on a mounted bit of paper, torn with ragged edges. Catullus 101, in the original Latin, is printed onto a yellowed sheet of paper, the text blurred as though by smudging or repeated photocopying. Carson's almost literal translation of the poem is presented in the same way, once in the middle of the book, and once on the last page, further degraded with the upper left-hand corner ripped, the edges blackened as though burnt, and the ink distorted by what appears to be water damage. The mounted sheets of paper bear the imprints of use—crinkling, the deliberate or accidental markings of pen or pencil. These effects are images of an original, reminders that the book only simulates the tactile experience of the scrapbook's construction.

Understandably, then, *Nox* is read in the context of the digital conceived as a threat to the physical book. Leideke Plate has written of *Nox* as a "eulogy for the book", counterposing an "aesthetic of bookishness" to the immediacy of the digital, whose "reflection on the book and the act of reading in the digital age" reasserts the book as a withdrawn object.[20] Wurth reads the book as an example of remediation: a contradictory re-vision of the book as an object through processes

[20] Ledieke Plate, "How to Do Things with Literature in the Digital Age: Anne Carson's *Nox*, Multimodality, and the Ethics of Bookishness", *Contemporary Women's Writing* 9:1 (2015), pp. 93-111; 108; 95.

of digital simulation that makes its materiality a problem of presence.[21] For Stephanie Burt, these same qualities are not salutary but detract from the poetry. The focus on the materiality of the book as technical support functions at the exclusion of expression and feeling which is the domain of poetry's verbal art: Burt finds Carson's reflexive book-work frustrates affective engagement with intermedia flourishes that exceed "the genre of mere poetry, the medium of the ordinary book."[22]

I want to linger briefly over this aspect of the discourse involved in the reception of Carson's work. We can see how medium is posited as a constraint on immediacy—and while for some critics this is welcomed for its capacity to root out persistent illusions of presence, from Burt's perspective it represents a fundamental disturbance to the poetic. In her review, Burt gives a summary of the enigmatic but pleasing qualities of Carson's verse, faint praise which aligns her work with so-called hybrid (what Burt has elsewhere called "Elliptical") poetry which forms a compromise between the deconstructive self-consciousness of the linguistic turn and the straightforward representation of emotion, interiority and personality (with the caveat that Carson's work is all the same uncomfortable, "anti-mellifluous", "brusque"; she "seems at home nowhere: not in her own head, or in our time, or in the ancient world"). The review continues: "But [Carson] has never seemed satisfied with such creations: she has to accompany them by frame-breaking devices, strings of quotations, visual texts, ways to break out of *the genre of mere poetry, the medium of the ordinary book*." (my italics) Burt conceives of genre as a discursive modality, and medium as its material substrate: the codex bearing the inscription of words functioning as poetry.

What Burt thinks is proper to the genre of mere poetry and the medium of the ordinary book is that meaning is incarnated in words, and that this agreement of sense (meaning) and sense (aural) is what facilitates intersubjectivity: "poetry lets us imagine that certain arrangements of

[21] Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, "Re-vision as Remediation: Hypermediacy and Translation in Anne Carson's *Nox*", *Image and Narrative* Vol. 14, Iss. 4 (2013), pp. 20-33.
[22] Stephanie Burt, "Professor or Pinhead" *LRB* Vol 33 No 14 (14 July 2011).

words, and nothing else—no camera, no lights, not much action—can tell us what it's like to be other people, and (in another sense) what it's like to be ourselves." Words, the book, should be the medium of poetry only insofar as they are the vehicle of its presentation, as long as they do not get in the way of its content. Burt reacts to the way in which the conventions of poetic medium, insofar as they correspond to the arrangement of sensory material, are transgressed in *Nox*: "When text does appear we may find it striking or shocking […] *but we may also find ourselves looking, not listening*." (my italics) The wrong sense is being appealed to; our attention is misplaced.

"Nox is the ghost of a book" which "points to a forever lost original"; words are not being used properly here, as though the physical medium incarnates the function of elegy that is supposed to emerge from language. Invoking McLuhan, and thus emphasising that for her medium is something like 'medium of communication', Burt continues: "The medium – not just the genre but the physical medium: box, printing methods and paper – becomes the message, and the message is that words will never do." This poetry is "too clever", not because it is not about emotion, not even because it is not affecting, but because it does not communicate emotion in words. Burt, writing elsewhere about experimental tendencies in the American context, summarizes a discomfort with avant-garde influenced formal innovation as evasive, "mechanical, shallow, soulless"—emotionless:

> While its poems and poets differed considerably, all avoided the easy epiphanies, the focus on *personality and emotions*, and the *storytelling* that (in their view) made so much sixties poetry (especially protest poetry) complicit with the social order it hoped to oppose.[23]

As an acceptable compromise, Ashbery's poetry is said to contain "friendlier, less aggressive difficulties." Similarly, later, less recalcitrant work is worthy of praise because it resuscitates the centres of communicable feeling: the personality, persona, meaning, context. Thus,

---

[23] Burt, "Close calls with nonsense" *Believer* 13 (May 2004), np., https://believermag.com/close-calls-with-nonsense/ [accessed 19/04/20] (my italics).

although the "Elliptical" poets "focus on artifice (and personality) at the expense of 'sincere' or 'natural' speech […] *Nonetheless, contemporary poems like these hold together if we can imagine a personality behind them*."[24]

It is the absence of a distinctly verbal manifestation of personality that would secure meaning and emotion that colours Burt's review of Carson's *Nox*. Addressing the "rapturous" reception of *Nox* in other quarters, Burt complains that it "testifies…to the continuing prestige but diminished actual interest that poetry as such seems to hold these days. For many readers, and not a few editors, *Nox* and its 'poetry of a kind you're not used to' has turned out to be poetry of the most welcome kind: a work you can admire and interpret simply by opening the box and unfolding the pages; a book of poems you don't even have to read."[25] This is an anxiety as applicable to conceptual work as it is, paradoxically, to medium-specific work like concrete poetry: it surrenders meaning, the proper remit of words, to deconstructive textuality (or textual materiality, in the case of concrete poetry); and this gives way to the fear that aesthetic response is founded outside of language, outside of intelligibility, where the concept of poetry is reduced to the mimesis of, in Meghan O'Rouke's words, "the felt chaos and unreality of loss."[26] These anxieties are not new: they recall what Jacques Rancière charts with the emergence of literature: the tension between "the two poles of art as artifice and as the vital experience of the spirit", or construction and expression.[27] With the emphasis too squarely on medium, which for Burt is inconceivable other than as the background, the invisible and inoperative substrate, construction gets in the way of expression. Burt does not allow that medium could participate in meaning-making.

But if we understand the work to only be concerned only with materialist literalism then we miss how it reflects in a more expansive way on poetry's medium and the way in which it

---

[24] *Ibid.*
[25] Burt, "Professor or Pinhead".
[26] O'Rourke, Meghan, "The Unfolding", *New Yorker* (12 July 2010) https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/07/12/the-unfolding [accessed 20/04/20].
[27] Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech* trans. James Swenson (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011) p.154.

animates the biographical impulse, the construction of personality which Burt identifies as integral to how poems mean. Where Burt argues that "poetry lets us imagine that certain arrangements of words, and nothing else—no camera, no lights, not much action—can tell us what it's like to be other people, and (in another sense) what it's like to be ourselves", *Nox* shows how poetry's medium introduces non-identity and difference—and this is the only way it can tell us anything.

Too narrow a focus on the substrate of the book obscures how *Nox*, as elsewhere in Carson's oeuvre, is concerned with the way in which mediation has always been a problem for language, regardless of the medium in which it was conveyed; at the same time, it also draws on the techniques of the book medium to expand the possibilities for conceptualising this linguistic mediation. The interest in *Nox* is how medium is not only understood as a material support but as related to the conventions of reading, and as part of the process of verbal art's putting into form: how language always exceeds its material instantiation, producing aesthetic possibilities precisely by linking heterogeneous times and spaces, sensations and what can be said about them.[28] The distinct ways in which medium becomes a meaningful constraint, and their inter-relation, are evident in the central thematization, and enactment, of translation as a mode of elegy.

Elegy deals with loss and its preservation in form. It is about the play of presence and absence in the process of mourning. To make memory repeatable, it must be given form. A repeatable form situates the memory of the dead in spite of the body's absence. Carson writes that

> History and elegy are akin. The word 'history' comes from the Greek verb ἱστορεῖν meaning 'to ask'. One who asks about things – about their dimensions, weight location, moods, names, holiness, smell – is an historian. But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself. (1.1)

[28] Jacques Rancière posits that the aesthetic regime is inaugurated in the revolutions literature in the 19th century, which more than any specific technical innovation, construct this peculiar mode of artistic vision, linking poetry and visual art: "an ambivalence in which the same procedures create and retract meaning, ensure and undo the link between perceptions, actions and affects.." *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), p. 5.

History is an experience of loss—survival—transferred into form. Carson's etymology makes explicit not only that history is a linguistic act of interrogation, but also its link to translation's work of carrying across. Her discussion of history is oriented towards its linguistic mediation:

> History can be at once concrete and indecipherable. Historian can be a storydog that roams around Asia Minor collecting bits of muteness like burrs in its hide. Note that the word 'mute' (from latin *mutus* and Greek μύειν) is regarded by linguists as an onomatopoeic formation referring not to silence but to a certain fundamental opacity of human being, which likes to show the truth by allowing it to be seen hiding. (1.3)

μύειν ("to close (the lips or eyes)") is suggested by the OED as etymologically significant for "mystery", but not mute. By placing it in her etymological gloss, Carson makes history a nexus of muteness and mystery, so that history's linguistic mediation becomes akin to religious revelation. As the fundamental opacity of human being, muteness is not an absence of, or incapacity for, speaking, but its hidden truth: history's linguistic mode of being. As such, history's truth—including the personal history which is the object of Carson's elegy—could never be revealed by an aggregate of facts; rather, "there is something that facts lack. 'Overtakelessness' is a word told me by a philospher [sic] once: *das Unumgangliche* – that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen the back of. And about which one collects facts – it remains beyond them." (1.3) Both this gloss of a Dickensonian adjective ("overtakelessness") by a Heideggerian noun, and the liberal etymological exercise, illustrate Carson's sense of translation: not concerned with the literal communication of meaning but with the transferral of a word or concept such that it retains the strangeness, the muteness and opacity, of its origin in the new context.

Benjamin describes the task of the translator to be producing a translation of form, rather than content.[29] Carson's concept of elegy as the putting into form of history's muteness echoes Benjamin's contention that the way the work (form) survives, in translation, testifies to that within

[29] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 71-82.

it which exceeds its immediate fulfilment—that which in language is non-expressive and therefore paradoxically autonomous. History is mute in the sense that in its mediation it calls upon the elements of language that allow it to be reproduced, to survive through time, at the same time as that which in language is indifferent to its external context; it contains a mystery beyond human understanding. History's muteness becomes apparent when it is put into form, translated. It survives, but only by differing from itself.

> Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch. But all those little kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate. (7.1)

Most literally, *Nox* prowls the meanings of words on the successive 'verso' pages containing (Carson's) glosses for each word of the Latin elegy, Catullus 101. The work begins with the Latin text of the elegy, and reading from beginning to end enacts a translation attentive to all of the ways in which translation exceeds the precise duplication of meaning from one language into another. The translation proceeds in slow motion: the definitions given for each word extend the space and time taken up by their language—each entry is spaced out by intervening material, usually on the following 'recto' page, but sometimes not reoccurring for several pages; the entry for "*vale*", the elegy's last word, comes six pages from the end of Carson's book. The entries themselves extend and distort definition as a linear process of correspondence. They combine various dictionary definitions and historical usages, stretched out by the gravity of Carson's preoccupations in *Nox*: almost all include an instance of the word in a phrase with *nox*, or an expression concerning night, or death.

The glosses take up space in time, as a translation must navigate them in relation to the collaged material around them, each informing the possible readings of the other. The entry for *prisco* ("belonging to a former time, ancient…") is set on the page facing Carson's translation of Catullus. It prompts reflection on the temporality of translation, particularly this strange and

hesitant example: the way in which the translation does not work unidirectionally to bring Catullus up to date, but preserves a strangeness in its faltering over word-order because of the ambiguities of declension: "oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me"; and in its literalism: "now still anyway this". In paragraph 7.1 she writes, "I have never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of the poem 101." Hesitating over translation and preserving the otherness of "ancient" material, "old as night", is a way of "conforming to a past standard of morality", the last definition for *prisco*. Translation preserves a form of social relation, it contains mediation. It is a form reproducing temporal and spatial relations in language.

Translation's mediacy is also enacted by the composition of the book and the way in which it contrives to be read. A convenient way of reading it is to have the book in two piles and, rather than turning the pages about the spine (there is not one), move from one set of pages to the next by pulling from right to left. Because of the pages having been folded like a concertina, there will be a 'bridge' formed between the two piles, with the pages balancing in the shape of a roof. Materialised is the radical etymological sense of translation: it spatializes the idea of the book as a mnemonic and memorial technology, the way reading organizes "web of [words] that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate." By analogy, this conceptualises writing as a plastic medium, creating experiential space and shaping time, in addition to the technical apparatuses of the page, print, and technologies of digital reproduction.

Elegy becomes a matter of translation: making a form to carry memory across time. Its medium includes the material traces of memory: the scrapbook, the photograph, the found text; and the mediality of language as it translates and imparts meaning, both of Catullus's elegy and of Michael's life; and language's capacity as a plastic medium, shaping space and time.

All these senses of verbal medium are apparent in the book's sentences. Given the paucity of material Carson finds to remember her brother by, she is left with the precarious traces of his words: "Because our conversations were few… I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I'd been asked to translate them." (8.1) Michael's history exists not only in autographic traces in his

letter, but also in the immaterial memory of conversations. Carson remediates these conversations, records of a few brief phone calls and remembered exchanges, printing them as text. The way in which this re-mediation occurs parallels language's mediality, that which Benjamin intends in describing language as the medium of imparting: in this sense not a medium between two positions, a transparent vehicle of communication across which concepts are carried, but a paradoxical quality which, as Samuel Weber writes, "communicates or 'imparts' nothing outside of itself."[30]

Carson's transcriptions, like her translations here and elsewhere, have a quality of flatness and unfamiliarity. Using limited punctuation, she transcribes vernacular usage and syntax; these form another aspect of the elegiac fragments collected in the book, found poems encoding a history of gesture, intonation, and cadence—the local colour of speech, the distinctiveness of Michael's sentences. However, it is as though their transcription attempts to minimize the interferences of the graphic conventions of written language—the shaping of its intonation and timing by punctuation, and the consequent encoding of affect or attitude by these features.[31] Consequently, these sentences exclude the vernacular distinctiveness that they try to preserve: "we have a dog that's him barking"; "Put the past away you have to". The absence of punctuation implies or anticipates the pauses and emphases that would animate these words in speech. These lines recreate in the negative the intimacy of the speech situation; though we might say that, printed as they are, their spacing and lineation on the page as fragments of conversation resemble lines of lyric, and they are now mediated through its conventions: the lines must be performed to be reanimated. This poetics of the unseen vies with the spatial or visual poetics. The words'

[30] Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 44; more generally, pp. 31-52.

[31] Denise Riley discusses how the formal constituents of a sentence, its punctuation and syntax, can conduct much of its affective charge, in excess of the conceptual sense of its words. "A tangible emotionality is enacted at the very level of language itself, and in such a way as to make that old question of 'how do words covey or express feelings?' in part redundant." *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

appearance on the page engenders a bathetic, flat affect, a defamiliarization of language caught between the everyday and the poetically significant. Somewhere in this gap is Michael's history.

> His voice was like his voice with something else crusted on it, black, dense – it lighted up for a moment when he said "pinhead" (**So pinhead d'you attain wisdom yet**?) then went dark again. All the years and time that had passed over him came streaming into me, all that history. What is a voice? (5.2)

To ask "what is a voice" here is to ask about the history of the voice, both a particular voice and voice more generally; to think of it as including more than the presence and content of enunciation (repeating "all the years and time that had passed over him"). At the same time, Michael's voice is indicated graphically by the typeface, and figured as brightness, locating it visually. In both cases, the biographical voice is dislocated from the present in which it is summoned, materialised or temporalized in linguistic form—conducted onto language's medium.

When Carson's transcriptions of Michael's voice are set in bold, or capitalised, that medium can come to seem like a resistant material, "something else crusted on" the voice, "black, dense." By making the typeface distinctive, as though it would attest to the specificity of an external context (Michael's voice), Carson's work of translation ends up emphasising the muteness of her linguistic material. Likewise, the absence of punctuation and the flatness of the transcribed conversations, while on one hand pointing towards an un-transcribable event of vernacular discourse, on the other hand reproduces one word after another, an arrangement of syntax rather than a vehicle of sense. And yet, the medium still reproduces a relation to history, a relation of alienation which is nevertheless quite literally palpable. That alienation, or mediality, is paradoxically what allows memory to persist in language.

In its reflexive exploration of linguistic mediation, *Nox* elaborates the mediality of translation, which holds open the distance that its biographical impulse would close. It derives its elegiac force from that mediality, which is expressed also in the various material mediations which

spatialize the resistant form of language. We can begin to diversify our concept of medium, then, to include linguistic mediacy, the plasticity of language as an art medium, and the ways in which a medium of communication becomes the object of meaning.

Autobiography of Red

The problematic of medium in poetry is not only 'discovered' as a late phenomenon, negatively, with intermedia work throwing it into relief; it inheres already in poetry's working through its verbal medium. Indeed, a more capacious sense of poetic medium is already being elaborated in Carson's 1998 work *Autobiography of Red*, even though it its questions are not articulated through intermedia experiment. The book draws upon the resources of linguistic mediality and the conventions of verbal art, conceptualising language as an art medium through analogy with photography.

Autobiography is often addressed as a paragon of postmodern generically hybrid poetry. Jed Rasula places Carson's "autotelic" book in the orbit of experimental writers such as Hejinian, McCaffery and bpNichol, who had experimented with the "book-as-concept".[32] Ian Rae contextualises *Autobiography* as exemplary of a postmodernism whose "strategies of (un)framing […] operate by a paradoxical process of multiplying diegetic frameworks in order to create a less bounded text."[33] The rhetoric of unbinding presents this postmodernism as having exceeded the frameworks which were supposed to have bound the modernist text; in a sense it follows closely the exposition of postmodernism given by Brian McHale, for whom an ontological concern for "world-making" emerges only with the demise of modernism's epistemological preoccupation.[34] While McHale and Rae's postmodern meta-narratives are surely convincing, they elide the ways in which the constraints of medium—rather than (un)framing or frame-breaking—already constitute

[32] Jed Rasula, "A Gift of Prophecy", *Canlit* 161/162 (Summer/Autumn, 1999) pp. 187-9; in *From Cohen to Carson*, Ian Rae situates *Autobiography* in the hybrid tradition of the "poet's novel" in Canadian literature, including Leonard Cohen, Michael Ondaatje and Daphne Marlatt.
[33] Rae, *From Cohen to Carson*, p. 34
[34] Cf. Brian McHale, *The Obligation to the Difficult Whole* and *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989).

a resource for world-making. The book's investigation of its own procedures is less a means of theoretical disenchantment as a reanimation of the conventions and repertories with which it conducts its world-making—now as object and vehicle of meaning. That is to say, to be concerned with medium-specific constraints is much more than to be concerned with medium as the truth of the work. *Autobiography* thematizes mediation such that it loses the familiar sense of being pernicious, dissembling, or revealed by self-criticism: there is no getting around it.

Autobiography follows the mythological character Geryon, a "winged red person," (83). The book is conceived as a rewriting or translation (in the broad sense) of the 6th century lyric poet Stesichoros's *Geryeoneis* (the Geryon Matter), the aggregate of "eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half-dozen citations" concerning the monster Geryon's encounter with Herakles. (5) Carson's book situates her historical source material with an introductory essay, her own translations of the fragments, three mock-scholarly appendices relating to the poet himself, and concludes with an "interview" with Stesichoros.

The main part of the book is "a romance" in 47 cantos which most literally comprise the titular autobiography. It reimagines the myth as Geryon's love affair with, and subsequent abandonment by, Herakles, and his coming of age as an artist. Geryon emerges as a queer hero, his sexuality unstated, his gender at times ambiguous, conscious of his monstrosity. Carson takes as her starting point what was exceptional about the Greek poet's version of the myth: the monster is spoken of sympathetically in distinction from the other narratives of Herakles's tenth labour, for example those by Appolodorus (*The Library,* 2.5.10) or Hesiod (*Theogony,* 979-983), in which he is an incidental character summarily dispatched by the hero.

Not only is Geryon's perspective centred, but, we are told, Stesichoros's tale innovates in his unconventional use of adjectives, which "released being". (4) In the essay introducing the book Carson writes: "Stesichoros released being. All the substances in the world went floating up." (5) Carson's version of the ancient poet, is said to differ from the epic of Homer, in which "being is stable and particularity is set fast in tradition." (4) It's tempting to read this as asserting that to

liberate non-normative identifications is to abandon a commitment the linguistic authorization of being, even to linguistic representation: to celebrate instead fluid discourse which flouts convention—the adjective, after all, is not a fixed entity but relative to what it predicates. In Carson's book Geryon settles on photography as the medium of his autobiography, as though to bypass language altogether.[35] But rather than chafing against or even abandoning the constraints of the linguistic medium, I'll argue that Carson's framing identifies a distinct mode of access to being in poetic diction; a manner of disclosing the world and a disposition towards it which incubates the unfixed identities that preoccupy the poet and her protagonist. This framing directs us to the matter of poetic medium, in several senses: as mediation between being and thought; as an art medium, the material and conventions associated with poetic composition; and as a medium of communication. Carson's attention to the constraints of her medium is significant precisely because medium emerges as a resource which deepens the production of difference and the unfixing of identity.

Medium as a mode of access

The expression, to "release being", is ambiguous. There are two ways in which we can understand what it means. First, to release being could be to relinquish it: to let it go. In this sense, Carson could be read as positioning the Greek poet's facility with the poetic medium as a release *from* being, from an ontological or 'realist' commitment. No longer attached to the world, substances go floating up and adjectives are free to designate anything whatsoever. Language then functions nominally; things are however they are named; identifications proliferate. We can read this nominalism in the first translation of one of the fragments of the *Geryoneis*:

> Geryon was a Monster everything about him was red
> Put his snout out of the covers in the morning it was red

[35] Dina Georgis, "Discarded Histories and Queer Affects in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*", *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* (April 2004), pp. 154-166; Georgis claims that "for the most part" the photographs are "not mediated by language", p. 162.

> How stiff the red landscape where his cattle scraped against
> Their hobbles in the red wind
> Burrowed himself down in the red dawn jelly of Geryon's
> Dream

Where the fixed diction of epic would have attached 'red' to certain ideal qualities, reflecting an existing and objective order of the world—Geryon would be red because of his monstrosity—here, Carson's apparently simple diction sends up the security with which everything about the monster could be determined by his "aptest attribute." (4) The repetitive focus on the colour red makes it begin to lose meaning; the words tend towards artifice. A textual redness; read red. Rather than an epithet which "fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute", (4) the colour red becomes an aesthetic concern. "Red wind" and "Red landscape" are not predicating reality, but an imaginative field of impressions in which the adjective's predicative force is merely grammatical. We could understand this as a vision of poetic language turning away from being—counterposing its artifice to any settled or centred reference or identity.

Yet Carson marks the difference between Homer and Stesichoros as that between "a passion for code" (4) and "a passion for substances", (5) respectively. If language use is oriented away from being and towards code, it is axiomatic and simultaneous, technical rather than ontological. A code seamlessly transmits information. It has no depth, there is no room for interpretation. It is anti-realist, or hyper-real (Carson's code analogy comes from Baudrillard). Indeed, Auerbach famously identifies just such a directness and an absence of depth in Homer such that "he cannot be interpreted" at the beginning of *Mimesis*: "The oft-repeated reproach that Homer is a liar takes nothing from his effectiveness, he does not need to base his story on historical reality, his reality is powerful enough in itself; it ensnares us, weaving its web around us, and that suffices him. And this 'real' world into which we are lured, exists for itself, contains nothing but itself; the Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret second

meaning."[36] Where Homer's diction ensnares us in its reality, it does so by abiding no distance between its ideals and the individuals in whom they are incarnated: we are presented with what Auerbach calls "uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feeling completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion with very little of suspense."[37]

To release being, in the first sense, would be to exacerbate the arbitrariness of the code, its distinction from being. While the depthlessness recognized by Auerbach persists, it does so without any claim to illumination. Identities go floating up, with category distinctions between the human and inhuman, the natural and unnatural, unfixed. Carson introduces this problematic in a post-structuralist vocabulary, framing a dispute between Homer and Stesichoros over the capacity of language to name the aberrant or unprecedented as a late 20th century debate about the nature of language: the postmodern fascination with depthless code, itself an outgrowth of structuralism's bracketing reality behind a system of representation; and the various phenomenological reanimations of language and reference, which do not devalue appearance against reality. In Carson's version, these two positions now appear as two regimes of art: a mimetic regime of art, in which being was fully present, and completely expressed in the actions which composed Homeric fictions—this plenitude recognized both by Auerbach and Hegel—only to authorize a rigid codification of what could be sensed and what could be said about it; and an aesthetic regime of art, in which appearances become, on the one hand, legible signs of and testimony to a deeper reality; and on the other, a contradictory sense in which depth lies beyond words in the substance of things, escaping systematization, interpretation, or codification. This aesthetic regime constitutes a sharing of the sensorium that is less 'fixed' precisely because of this contradiction.

Where the immediacy of coded diction relegates the effects of the intervening linguistic medium, the phenomenological current gives us its other. A passion for substances produces

---

[36] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), p.13.
[37] *Ibid.,* p.11.

depth, withdrawal and noncontemporaneity. Substance exists deep down, at the heart of things; it goes beyond words. This is a second and more apt sense of what it means to release being: to release being into language. To make language more than it is, both the medium and the message. Carson's translation dignifies Geryon by introducing redundancy (the repetition of "red") and pleasure in sumptuous description ("red dawn jelly"), aestheticizing his qualities. Releasing being implies attention to the interference in the substance of language, its contours: in ceasing to refer transparently—in losing its immediacy—the language used to designate redness becomes itself the vehicle and object of meaning.

This is something like realism, but a realism enlivened by linguistic envelopment with being, rather than the instrumental employment of language in the dispassionate contemplation of being; a thickening of reality that isn't a turning away from the world, but neither is it a clearsighted appraisal of it. The benefit of this framing is that in its anachronism it cannot easily be mapped onto the modernist/postmodernist periodisation, and therefore avoids locating the politics of modernism in its displacement of the world by the medium, and the politics of postmodernism in its reflection on the falseness of appearances; it includes mediation in its worldmaking, but not necessarily as a sign of incompletion. Mediation is both constraint and freedom.

The productive differences enabled by the poetic medium are evident in *Autobiography*'s attention to and virtual ekphrases of photographs. At the same time, this aspect of the book also secures an analogy between poetic mediation and plastic or visual art media. In Carson's verse-novel, Geryon tries on different modes of autobiography: we are told that Geryon had begun his autobiography on as a work of epic—"in this work Geryon set down all inside things / particularly his own heroism"; (29) later we read that he is "working on his autobiography" in the form of a "sculpture" because "he doesn't know how to write yet". (35) When he does attempt his autobiography in writing, it is a variant of Carson's translation of one of the fragments from the *Geryoneis*, (14) to which he flippantly appends an unsatisfactory "happy ending", (38) also a

variation on one of Carson's fragments. Finally, the autobiography takes the form of a "photographic essay". (60)

Geryon begins to practise photography, it seems, as a substitute for the frustrating duplicity, dissemblance and evasion that verbal communication permits. As Geordie Miller writes, "Geryon's initial turn to photography [is] a way to represent his autobiography and break from [the] coding" of the "semiological system".[38] In this sense, photography figures the verbal medium's other: when Geryon first takes up photography he "had recently relinquished speech". (40) Herakles tells Geryon it is "just a bunch of light / hitting a plate". (71) Yet Geryon finds photography "disturbing": "a way of playing with perceptual relationships" in which you can "see memories" objectified. The photograph represents a mediation between the object and the immediate interiority of the subject; it "confus[es] subject and object". (51) Rather than an intervening medium between two clearly delimited entities, it is a site of indistinction where both subject and object positions are contained in the same form.

In Geryon's photographic experiments, the poem continually attends to the opacity and thickness with which the photographic medium—and by extension, all plastic and verbal art media—emerges, releasing being but also manifesting certain constraints by which its mystery is both concealed and revealed. Extending beyond simply formal space, the verbal medium articulates the relationship between the work and the subject, and constitutes the space of intersubjectivity. In one episode, Geryon attempts to record in a photograph "the noise that colors make." (84)

> It was the year he began to wonder about the noise that colors make. Roses came roaring across the garden at him.
> He lay on his bed at night listening to the silver light of stars crashing against the window screen. Most
> of those he interviewed for the science project had to admit they did not hear the cries of the roses
> being burned alive in the noonday sun. *Like horses,* Geryon would say helpfully,

[38] Geordie Miller, "'Shifting Ground' Breaking (from) Baudrillard's 'Code' in *Autobiography of Red*." *Can Lit* (Autumn/Winter 2011), Issue 210/211, p152-167 [online, n.p.].

> *like horses in war.* No, they shook their heads.
> […]
> They stared at him. *You should be*
> *interviewing roses not people,* said the science teacher. Geryon liked this idea.
> The last page of his project
> was a photograph of his mother's rosebush under the kitchen window.
> Four of the roses were on fire.
> They stood up straight and pure on the stalk, gripping the dark like prophets
> and howling colossal intimacies
> from the back of their fused throats. (84)

Geryon turns to the photograph to construe sensation outside language, beyond the confines of linguistic expression. His photograph, however, is conceived as an interview, an inter-subjective activity with an ethical implication: to orient viewers to the intelligibility of the "cries of roses"—to hear these cries as language. (84) The engagement with photography turns back toward the linguistic, enfolding the sharing of meaning with the experience of unmediated sensation with which the photograph is conventionally associated.[39]

The poetic object oscillates between a surface for the representation of sensations and a vehicle for their sharing. We can see this in Geryon's photograph, a verbal mediation of a visual object which interferes with what it transmits. The photograph is contaminated by "noise"—interference as well as sound. The "noise" in this photograph does not come from the colour it depicts. It is produced by its technical support, language, in which we hear that "roses came / roaring" and the "silver light of stars crashing against / the window screen", the consonants /r/, /s/ and /l/ condensed both within the line and vertically across the line breaks. We might say this represents a thickening of the sensuous medium so that we are drawn to pattern at the expense of content.

But this does not mean that phenomenological experience is limited to the work's technical support; either in Geryon's work (the photograph of a sound) or in Carson's. The technical support provides obstacles to transparency that are also objects around which meaning is generated. Firstly,

---

[39] Barthes famously argues that "the Photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself." *Camera Lucida* trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), p.97.

the sonorous effects require voicing; this voicing implies a double excess or extension, writing extended by being articulated as speech; and our speech extended by being articulated by written verse. The medium implies a social relationship beyond the purely formal. Secondly, at the level of textuality, the verbal photograph includes a history of meanings. It figures sound both by conceptual and sonic metonymy: colour->red->roses->roaring->cries of horses. There is a sensibility for poetry's music such that the conventions of one medium provide the animating impulse for composition in another (photography). Similarly, the simile is intertexual, recalling Geryon's name, meaning "roarer" and the archetypal symbols of redness in the "sun" and the "rose", already freighted with the meanings accrued to them by the literary tradition. These intertexts both defer meaning elsewhere and, paradoxically, include Stein's "a rose is a rose is a rose" which refers only to itself.

Relatedly, the phrase alludes to the "fixed diction" of epic: Geryon's attention to the cries of roses takes on the status of an epithet, repeated from an instance earlier in the book, in one of Carson's translations of the *Geryoneis* fragments: "The sound of the horses/like roses being burned alive." (12) Yet, as is clear both from our reading experience and the response of Geryon's peers, the intelligibility of the epithet has come unfixed. Its meaning is not simply annexed to epic conventions; it has become mobile, and noisily interfered with Carson's "Romance." The epithet becomes synecdoche for an inaccessible or opaque epic diction; it also seems no longer to refer, but to generate an opacity in language. The more precision this synaesthetic description aims for, the more apparent its mediations become. A photographic scene aiming to establish direct presence ends up taking the same circuitous route as the indirection which Jonathan Culler identifies as a fundamental characteristic of lyric: not the reproduction of spoken reflection—or spoken address—but its simulation through certain conventions which ultimately foreground the

poetic act.[40] The ekphrasis of the photograph is substituted for the conventions of lyric address, such that even as Geryon has given up language he finds his way back to it in Carson's poem.

These medial interferences which move between the formal and the conventional, sensations and ideas, seem to play at the limit of what can be felt and what can be said about it.[41] They also prompt us to think about the noise (both in the literal and cybernetic sense) involved in the poem's figuration of its objects.

That figuration uses the mediality of language as its repertoire and technical support. Geryon is attempting to give figure to the cries of roses (already catachrestically figured)—intending all the inflections thereof: embodiment, shape, rhetorical figure. This is a way of identifying them and making their noise intelligible—even, making that noise intelligible as *noise,* the unintelligible becoming intelligible as unintelligibility. As an exercise in representation, it draws upon the capacity of language as a social practice. Through the photograph, Geryon is addressing an object and constituting it as a subject. At the same time, the address is dependent on figurative mediations, which makes the practice of representation difficult to imagine before or beyond its literary manifestation. To address the object, to represent it in the work, requires that it be figured: and figuration falls back on linguistic mediality, that to emplace something in language is to displace it elsewhere.[42] Not only this, but the phonic shapes of language come to participate in this figuration, so that linguistic mediation becomes more than a matter of referential presence/absence, but also makes the verbal medium itself take on meaningful existence, referring nowhere other than to itself.

---

[40] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 186-243.
[41] Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004) pp. 13; 39. I am intimating a conflict here between the planarity or 'flatness' of the medium as a site of interference against the idea of representation—here understood as the democratic textuality enabled by the page and writing, in opposition to the representation of speech—and the countervailing desire to represent the speech or intelligible noise of visual sensations. This is one of the productive contradictions of literarity theorized by Rancière. See also *Mute Speech* trans. James Swenson (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011).
[42] Cf. Paul De Man, "Autobiography as Defacement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

The image is of roses "stood straight up and pure on the stalk, gripping the dark like prophets / howling colossal intimacies / from the back of their fused throats." It is an image of voice: the figuration of sound in language, which tries to imagine its emergence but has recourse to linguistic trope. The troping is noisy, characterised by a betweenness which defers clarity: sound/speech; colossal/intimate; noise/silence; future/present (prophetic); light/dark. But we can also hear a patterning of sound that makes the attempt to give voice exceed simply the imaging of sound; and this is more apparent against the silent spectre of the photograph. "Roses came / roaring"; "the silver light of stars crashing against / the window screen"; "howling colossal intimacies". Reading closely, we can note the alliteration /r/ and /s/; the /ou/ /o/ and approximant /l/ in "howling colossal intimacies", whose voicing requires a mouth shape that seems to dictate the constricted sense of "intimacies", and even suggests the image of the fused throats. In its threefold capacity as a sensuous object, a means of address and a literary convention, poetic medium is grasped as the condition for perceiving this constellation of sounds and colours. Poetry's sounds, images and textuality all contrive not merely to reproduce, but to produce a space and a texture of intelligibility. This space involves opacities, frustrations or deferrals of meaning as much as it facilitates imagistic vision. The linguistic medium participates in naming and reference—indicating and specifying the nature of reality; but it also constitutes a worlding, poeisis, which includes plastic and intersubjective effects which interfere with and alter what it represents.

Poetic Medium and Interart Comparisons

It is instructive to link these investigations of medium with the developments which oriented the arts to specify the constraints of their own media around the time of modernism, most explicitly in the field of painting. Indeed, *Autobiography's* relationship with the visual arts is made explicit in the interview which closes the book. Carson situates Stesischoros in the intangible interval "after Homer and before Gertrude Stein," (3) and the period represented by Stein precisely for its transformations in the medium of vision. Stesichoros: "Up to 1907 I was seriously interested in

seeing I studied and practiced and enjoyed it."(147) In 1907, Stesichoros sees something that changes his understanding of the visible world: "First I must tell about what I saw… Paintings completely covered the walls right up to the ceiling…" (147) The phrase echoes Stein, who, ventriloquising Alice B. Toklas, also recognizes the imperative that she "must tell what I saw" in 1907.[43] This is the exhibition at the Salon des Indépendants of works of post-impressionism, featuring, according to Stein, "Matisse, Picasso, Renoir, Cézanne [and] also a great many other things."[44] These works, including Matisse's *Blue Nude* (1907) were later exhibited at the Salon d'Automne of the same year, which Stein recognises "was a step in official recognition of the outlaws of the independent salon."[45] With the sensorium made available by these revolutions in paintings, Geryon registers impressions of time. Here, like an analytical cubist painting: "he could feel it massed around him, he could see its big deadweight blocks padded tight together." (80) Or else, in a more impressionistic register, he asks: "how does distance look?" and concludes, "it extends from a spaceless / within to the edge / of what can be loved. It depends on light." (43) Though these visualisations use the vocabulary of modern painting, they clearly require the mediation of language to "tell" what is seen: to transcribe feeling, and to articulate the spaceless within inaccessible to painting's pictured space, and imbue the domain of vision with an ethical aspect ("the edge / of what can be loved"). To apprehend these kinds of innovative vision as mediations cuts against the way modernist innovation is often justified in terms of immediacy ("direct treatment of the thing"). At the same time, it recognizes the way in which those justifications imagine art media to be responsive to the social world and not simply responsive to the possibilities of their own materials and techniques.

There is evidently a linguistic aspect to the revolutions in seeing with which *Autobiography* is fascinated. As we have seen, the poetic medium is associated both with a kind of rhetorical imaging—reference, representation, and naming; and also another kind of figuration generated

[43] Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 12.
[44] *Ibid.,* p. 14.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

plastically by the shapes of verbal utterance. We might begin to speculate on the common conventions of intelligibility with which we apprehend the constraints of aesthetic mediation more generally, especially as it will help to resist the idea that an art medium is simply the limit point at which a work's formal integrity marks, inertly, its discontinuity from the world.

What can we learn about poetry's medium by this comparison with the apparently non-linguistic plastic arts? If poetry's verbal medium is at once the material of its construction and the way in which it animates being, this distinguishes it from the way in which the medium-specific plastic and visual arts were, at least in high modernist formalism, said to be concerned only with the possibilities of their own matter. This idea of aesthetic formalism is one in which artworks are distinct from the world, they *are* in as much as they do not represent, or even present. The formalist work is divided according to the kind of sensory experience afforded by its medium. Thus, Clement Greenberg can speak of the "area of competence" of each art, defining that of painting as "purely optical" and finding this optical essence exemplified in the flat canvas.[46] As a corrective to the literalist direction in which Greenberg's medium-specificity was taken by minimalism, Michael Fried adds the caveat that the phenomenal experience of the work should be integral to its materials, provided those materials possess some recuperating aesthetic possibility. They must be intelligible by their formal arrangement without supplement: anti-theatrical, such that the meaning of the work its confined to its pictorial space, defined by a formal system of differences and its "radical unlikeness from nature."[47]

In an adjacent but heterodox formulation, the British painter Patrick Heron's understanding of pictorial art links its material support to its unique "quality of illusion": "The illusionistic operation of any image recorded on a flat surface is painting's inherent magic, its

[46] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993): "the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium", p. 86.
[47] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago,1998), pp. 148–72; this would distinguish plastic art from verbal, emphasising the former's autonomy against the nature of poetic resources, which Valéry characterises as "the voice of the public, that collection of traditional and irrational terms and rules, oddly created and transformed, oddly codified, and very variedly understood and pronounced", "Poetry and Abstract Thought", p.67.

unique power. This quality of illusion—of the sensation of a spatial configuration existing behind (and occasionally in front of) the surface of the picture—is inseparable from the sense of space (itself illusory, in painting: though in sculpture it is actual). The merest scratch of a line on a white surface induces sensations of recession—of an imaged form advancing out of or falling back through the place where the marked white surface stands."[48] Heron's formulation posits that the emergence of the spatial subsumes abstract and representational space. By this account, the materiality of the medium is not opposed to but generative of its illusory effects.

Rather than distinguishing the arts, this points to an area of contact between poetry and painting: the verbal medium similarly combines material and illusory effects. The literary is read both as the 'pictorial' creation of images with withdrawn presence (rhetorical figuration) *and* as the phenomenal event of linguistic utterance—the illusion of voice and the sensation of giving voice, as I implied in my description of Geryon's photograph of the cries of roses. This points to the dual operation of figuration and abstraction. As Heron notes, abstraction oriented towards pure space cannot absolve itself of resemblance: it is difficult to create space itself without also making it look like something. Likewise, when we think of language, it is difficult to reduce poetry to its musical function, for example, without its also being evocative; and it is difficult to reduce those evocations to the purely felt, without the intervention of a shared set of meanings. Art medium cannot be extricated, autonomous, from its participation in social communication; nevertheless, it might at times mark the conceptual limit-point of sense-making.[49]

---

[48] Patrick Herron, "Space in Contemporary Painting and Architecture," in *The Changing Forms of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), p. 46.

[49] In an interesting recuperation of Greenberg, John Russell argues that the flatness of the canvas is an illusory yet nevertheless real virtual horizon—a frontier of sense: Greenberg's absolute flatness is both a conceptual abstraction and a historical reality of the technical support (ie flatness was understood as a conceptual horizon toward which the practice of painting was oriented during a period of the 19th and 20th century). Although painting's material substrate cannot be reduced to literal flatness, the flatness which is the truth of painting's medium reappears as a virtual horizon, a conceptually absolute position which is recreated by the actualizations of the individual work. Russell imagines the conceptual flatness—a discursive flatness—as effecting an incorporeal transformation of the surface of the painting into its medium, where medium is "a complex relationship with surface as resistance/critique or immersion/celebration or both." "Return of the Living Dead III: Clement Greenberg is a Conceptual Artist: Flatness and Shapeism" in Robert Garnett, Andrew Hunt (eds.), *Gest: Laboratory of Synthesis* (London: Book Works, 2008) pp. 81-99; p. 92. NB also Jacques Rancière's account of the inauguration of the flatness of painting: "Painting is flat in as much as words change their function with respect to it." *Future of the Image,* trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), p. 78.

All of this suggests a particular epistemological approach to the material. Rather than dichotomize medium into its material constraints and its referential content, and reduce it to the former while designating the latter as superfluous, we can conceptualize medium as marking, and generating, a fundamental indistinction between the material and the ideal. Here the manifest always keeps something in reserve, but in no sense is this liable to revelation: rather, that reservation becomes integral to its phenomenal experience. This is evident in the way in which the material constituents of the verbal medium also furnish the metaphors by which the intimate space of interiority is imagined, in the example at the end of the previous section; and in Denise Riley's discussion of the role of linguistic affects in the imaginary of selfhood which was considered in chapter one. Riley's discussion of linguistic unease illuminates how our apprehension of language as a self-reflexive and therefore intransigent medium is entirely compatible with the idea that language is nevertheless speaking about something; though, rather than as a medium of transparent reference, we can understand language to be generating its field of objects with other, non-referential aspects of the linguistic medium: its phonemic and graphemic elements, for example.

These considerations of art medium are germane to a complex of millennial anxieties around the dematerialisation of the artwork and the inauthenticity of the digital. Exemplary of this discourse is Baudrillard's *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared*: identifying the threat of digital reproduction, Baudrillard defends the analogue photograph against the proliferation of dissembling codes. He makes this defence by invoking the medium of poetic language: "the image is more important than what it speaks about—just as language is more important than what it signifies."[50] "The intense pleasure of poetic language lies in seeing language operating on its own, in its materiality and literality, without transiting through meaning."[51]

[50] Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2009), p. 49.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

In 1999, a year after the publication of Carson's book, Jacques Rancière gave a lecture entitled "The future of the image" (later translated as part of a book of the same title in 2007).[52] There, he questioned the conceptualisation of the image as mimesis, as well as those theories, like Baudrillard's, that pit the intransitive image authorized by the self-evidence of its material support against the dissembling visibility of the endlessly (re)producible image and its unfixed meanings. For Rancière we cannot distinguish "the forms of identity and alterity peculiar to images from the properties of apparatuses of production and diffusion."[53] The discourse of the "end of the image" attempts to do so: it attempts to resolve the contradictions of images, either by counterposing "pure art, conceived as art whose results no longer compose images, but directly realise the idea in self-sufficient material form; or art that is realized by abolishing itself, art which abolishes the distance of the image so as to identify its procedures with the forms of a whole life in action, no longer separating art from work or politics."[54] Rancière proposes that this misunderstands the fundamental operation of art since the 19th century: to produce, and to maintain, a discrepancy between regimes of sense, between what can be seen and what can be said about it.

It is in this capacity that Rancière argues that the image has been central to art: not, as mimetic reproduction but as the manifestation of a disjunction. The artistic image is not the simulacral copy; it is "the interplay of operations that produces what we call art: or precisely an alteration of resemblance."[55] To replace the image as such is to foreclose the capacity of these aesthetic alterations to reorganize the sensible world.

> The images of art are operations that produce a discrepancy, a dissemblance. Words describe what the eye might see or express what it will never see; they deliberately clarify or obscure an idea. Visible forms yield a meaning to be construed or subtract it. A camera movement anticipates one spectacle and discloses a different one… All these relations define 'images'. This means two things. In the first place, the images of art are, as such,

[52] Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, pp. 1-32.
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 19.
[55] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

> dissemblances. Secondly, the image is not exclusive to the visible. There is visibility that does not amount to an image; there are images which consist wholly in words.[56]

This regime of imageness suggests a literarity—which Rancière defines as an excess of words—at the basis even of visual art, and displaces the notion of medium specific formalism with an idea of discrepancy. It is implicit in some recent re-evaluations of the significance of photography for modernist literature. That rethinking recognizes the photograph's insistent ambivalence in the discourse of art, its role in de-stabilizing—rather than overcoming—the distinction not only between the dynamic possibilities of aesthetic perceptions and the profane sphere of technical reproduction; but also between the image and the word.[57] After all, Benjamin had already conceived of technical mediation as augmenting, rather than inhibiting, the perception of reality: of cinema, he mused that "the equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice, the vision of immediate reality the Blue Flower in the land of technology."[58] This troubles the periodisation which approaches modernist work on the grounds of epistemological questions (the reliability of knowledge, the refinement of techniques for capturing reality—questions germane to the thinking which would oppose "pure art" to the dissemblance of the image) and defers questions of technical mediation and ontological stability to the postmodern period.[59] In this sense, both the modernist image which crystalizes the deeper truth beneath perception, and the postmodern image which reveals its own culpability in the falseness of appearances produce a discrepancy: between the truth of the work and the prosaic world, or between the artifice of the work and a deferred and ungraspable truth beyond it. That discrepancy

---

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[57] Cf. Stuart Burrows, *A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language of Photography 1839-1945* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), which argues that photography is not merely identical with apotheosis of realism's verisimilitude nor with disillusionment with equivalence: in fact it calls the process of representation into question; Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), which considers the camera as a technology of writing.
[58] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility (Second Version)", in Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin eds., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, p. 35.
[59] Cf. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*.

emerges as a result of a dialectical mediation which produces the dichotomy between art and the world it would seek to abolish in the name of immediacy.

Contemporary with Rancière's intervention, Carson's *Autobiography* also dwells on an expanded sense of the image: not as a limit to an idea of literature gone the way of postmodernist dematerialisation, but as, in Rancière's words, "an ambivalence in which the same procedures create and retract meaning, ensure and undo the link between perceptions, actions and affects."[60]

I'll turn to one example of this: the way in which the constraints of poetry's verbal medium furnish a polytemporality that enlivens the notion of the image as a frozen instant. Poetry and photography are each associated with critical traditions annexing them to distinct ways of mediating time: poetry, whose genres and modes are distinguished by brevity or length, lyric compression or narrative progression; and the photograph, the pictorial and spatial medium containing a single moment in time.[61] In Lessing's famous refutation to *ut pictura poeisis,* he opposes the intangible imaginative medium of poetry, where actions take place in time, to the spatial material supports of visual art, "where everything is visible and visible in precisely the same way."[62] On the other hand, when Carson mixes the conceptual resources and repertoires of writing and photography, the photograph becomes a site of heterogenous visibility.

For example, Carson's description, in her introduction, of Stesichoros's fragments in the language of film scenes suggests a cinematic potentiality latent in literary medium:

> the extant fragments of Stesichoros' poem offer a tantalizing cross section of scenes…from Geryon's own experience. We see his red boy's life and his little dog. A scene of wild appeal from his mother, which breaks off. Interspersed shots of Herakles approaching over the sea. A flash of the gods in heaven pointing to Geryon's doom. The battle itself. The moment when everything goes suddenly slow and Herakles' arrow divides Geryon's skull. We see Herakles kill the little dog with his famous club. (6)

---

[60] Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 5.
[61] To formulate photography's relationship to time in this way links the photograph to Lessing's distinction between poetry and painting, which emphasizes the "the single moment" by which art is bound in the visual medium. *Laocoon,* trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), p. 16.
[62] Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 77.

Here she implies a composite visual and narrative sensibility, so that we might read the subsequent cantos as employing, between and within themselves, varieties of montage, slow-motion, jump cuts, decisive moments and synecdochal images; what Monique Tschofen calls "(proto-)cinematic strategies".[63] This is a kind of visibility that, rather than simulating direct perception, registers its mediation by the narrative techniques of contemporary media. In a similar way, the interrupted temporality of memory is rendered with another anachronistic technology when we read of Geryon that "his brain was jerking forward like a bad slide projector." (75)

The way in which technologies of presence are bound up with linguistic mediation is something Barthes cannot get away from: "I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if *direct vision oriented its language wrongly* [my italics], engaging it in an effort of description which will always miss its point of effect, the punctum."[64] Even if not engaged in description, there is still some orientation of language that will intervene between the photograph and its observer. The punctum still requires the (indirect) mediation of memory before it emerges in the flashes that unfold—unpredictably, like a bad slide projector—"latency": "I had just realized that however immediate and incisive it was, the punctum could accommodate a certain latency." Jesse Matz writes about the same temporal mediation implied even in the immediate sense-impression of many modernist writers: "When used by its practitioners, the term 'impression' rarely refers to unmediated sensory experience; instead it tends to come up when writers or artists want to refer to some mingling of perceptual moments. Subjectively felt, impressions were nevertheless also true to life; momentary, they also lingered, and they were in a host of other ways essentially mediatory."[65] To understand "direct vision" as both the apprehension of surfaces and the intimation of latent depth, we require a way of interpreting the image that can see (or read) in it two things at once. Both the meaningless instantaneous capture

[63] Tschofen, "(De)monstrations of visuality" p. 37.
[64] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* p. 53.
[65] Jesse Matz, "Cultures of Impression" in *Bad Modernisms* ed. D. Mao & R.L. Walkowitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 312.

of the real on a material substrate, "just light hitting a plate", and also the significance or intelligibility of this felt immediacy: that history was inscribed there.

This temporal duality is what draws Geryon to photography in *Autobiography*. When thinking on the question "what is time made of?" Geryon gravitates to the sensation of time he identifies in the photograph. Rather than being "*an abstraction—just a meaning / that we impose upon motion*", he finds "much truer / is the time that strays into photographs and stops." (93) This apprehension of time "compressed / on [the photograph's] motionless surface" is not an abstraction imposed upon motion. (51) The appeal of the photograph is precisely in its alternative to the vitalist opposition between mediated abstraction and real motion. Monique Tschofen neatly condenses this paradoxical temporality as one which "introduces motion into stasis yet compresses movement into an instant."[66] Time is felt in its absence or negation, deeper than the visible surface of the photograph. This dialectical apprehension of time conceptualises it as something that was already there, anterior (the time that strays into the photograph and stops), and as something in progress, underway and present (reading the photograph).[67]

This confusion only attracts Geryon to the photograph more, even after Herakles gives an example to distance the photograph's effect from its cause, to emphasise its status as a simulacrum and its mediation, incapable of participating in original presence of the object and terminally divorced from the experience of its existence in time:

> Photography is a way of playing with perceptual relationships.
> Well exactly
> But you don't need a camera to tell you that. What about stars?
> Are you going to tell me
> None of the stars are really there? Well some are but some burned out
> Ten thousand years ago.
> I don't believe that.

[66] Tschofen, "(De)monstrations", p. 44.

[67] This double poetics of the image is akin to literary deixis: Heather Dubrow argues that the deictics in lyric which imply the poem's exchange between author and reader (eg "here it is-/I hold it towards you" in Keats' "This living hand") constitute both a material and a referential 'here', such that "here is a moving target". In much the same way that the 'here' of poetic utterance conjures the moment of its speaking and "draws attention to the material page," the invocation of recording technology in Carson's temporal images conceptualizes these images in terms of the simulation of a no-longer existential present and the recording's material embodiment. "Neither here nor there: Deixis and the sixteenth century sonnet", *The Lyric Poem, Formations and Transformations* ed. Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 39; 31.

> How can you not believe it, it's a known fact. But I see them. You see memories.
> […]
> Just don't believe it. Let's see someone touch a star and not get burned. He'll
> Hold up a finger, Just a memory burn! He'll say (65)

A memory burn: the photograph as a prosthesis of memory—hypomnesis. An image of memory burned onto a disc. Not only does memory rely on inscription in a material support, displacing its facticity, but that support itself is figured by historical analogy with the CD. That the CD was barely fifteen years old at the time of *Autobiography's* publication and has now been eclipsed by other means of digital file storage, transfer and distribution, only places this image of memorialization more firmly in time. The moment is contained in time by the vehicle of its articulation—the history embedded in the vocabulary of the metaphor—even as it travels beyond the limits of its original temporality. In another way, the memory burn is echoed in the episode with the burning roses (p.84), so that textually it occupies a temporality distinct from the unfolding progress of narrative. As in the photographic image, history is inscribed in the verbal medium.

This points to a rehabilitation of the photograph, not as a document, but as a site of the kinds of perceptual confusions afforded by the aesthetic regime. The kinds of photographs Geryon takes are notable for their abstraction and their focus on aesthesis rather than the impersonal documentation of the real: a photograph of a dream; (131) a Steinian photograph of "some red rabbit giggle tied with white ribbon" entitled "Jealous of my little sensations"; (62) one photograph derived from a scene that "Geryon was memorizing… so he could make a photograph later." (115)

Here photography's memorializing function shares a temporal medium with verbal art, confusing subject and object and troubling indexical immediacy. It points to the peculiarities of deixis in common between this conceptualization of the 'thereness' of the photographic memory and that of poetry's saying here and now: the oscillation between a fictive thereness, in the image or referred to by the text; a thereness contemporary with that of seeing or reading; a thereness whose referent is the photographic print or the page; and the there (this has been) which

distinguishes the historical origin of the rays, or moment of writing, and its contemporary reception.

What emerges from these considerations is a complex sense of the poetic medium operative even in conventionally printed poetry—the threefold properties of mediality; the art medium (substrate and conventions); and the medium of communication, address, and the sharing of meanings. In *Nox* and *Autobiography* reflection and cognition are enfolded, at the granular level, with their linguistic medium. They thematize medium as producing embodiment and voicing, constituting social practice, and animating its objects through its alienations and interferences, as well as through reference. To think of medium like this is to hybridize the distinction between the formal space of language and the world which it animates. Much more than a formal constraint, by grasping the operations of poetic medium we come to understand meaning in language as a consequence of linguistic mediality—its condition of being between matter and idea, the instant of articulation and a withdrawn history, shareable meanings and a recalcitrant non-expressiveness. This enables us to recognize an array of constraints in the poetic medium: material, textual, conventional, all of which mediate how we experience time, how we construct subjectivity and intersubjectivity, and therefore how we manage biographical and autobiographical impulses, and how we place ourselves in the world, conducting familiarity or strangeness, fixity and unfixity. In the next chapter, I'll look at how all of these points of constraint become available as sites of political contestation. That contestation extends beyond issues of representation understood as matters of reference, and into the constitution of the linguistic medium itself, whose manifold material elements are drafted into disputes over the valuation and regulation of expressive capacities.

"rude sound": Sounding the limits of the law, unlimiting the prosodic sensorium in NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*

The technique of appropriation is most often associated with Conceptual poetry, where it is linked to the capacity to manipulate and move around text afforded by word processing technologies and the internet. By "replicating, archiving, mirroring, and reprinting", this new model of writing is not concerned with the production of new texts but with the liberation of text from its original context, with the writer imagined as technician with the "attitude of a pirate".[1] But the technique has also been used by poets who situate themselves in a postcolonial or setter-colonial context, and as such are less sanguine about the liberatory possibilities of estrangement by appropriation. In the work of poets like Jordan Abel, Srikanth Reddy, and Divya Victor, and M. NourbeSe Philip, the re-presentation of material from a historical archive serves to expose or comment on the social and political forces and ideas which underwrite its linguistic structure. In these cases the poetics of appropriation are the basis for reflecting aesthetically on the way social and political conditions are reproduced in language.

I take M. NourbeSe Philip's appropriative poem *Zong!* as indicative of this tendency, and this chapter I read it as articulating the technique of appropriation and its associated historical dynamics with problems of lyricism, formal constraint and prosodic values, clarifying the politics of their aesthetics as well as the aesthetics of politics. *Zong!* takes its source from the colonial archive—the language of a legal case, whose formal estrangement reveals how it polices the limits of the human. At the same time, Philip's text uses appropriative techniques and strategies of formal

[1] Kenneth Goldsmith, "Provisional Language", *The Poetry Foundation* (2010), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/04/provisional-language [accessed 07/12/20]. Goldsmith invokes the cyberlibertarian rhetoric of internet piracy, open source software, and free exchange of information. Jacob Edmond notes that the controversies around appropriation in conceptualism are due in part to the fact that "the copy can equally function as a figure for liberation and for the inescapable repetition of existing power relations." *Make it The Same: Poetry in the Age of Global Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 113. In working through M. NourbeSe Philip's approach to this problem, this chapter will insist that the conceptual be considered in relation to the embodied experience of reading *Zong!*, finding there its articulation of aesthetics and politics.

fragmentation—manipulating, corrupting, and repurposing her source text—as part of a lyric project, an attempt to give voice to a population whose subjectivity was historically erased and silenced. In this chapter I outline *Zong!*'s double poetics: it exerts a negative force on language understood to embody a racialized social order; and at the same time it demonstrates a pleasure in prosodic innovation and linguistic performance, allying itself with the Caribbean poetic tradition which expands and redefines the aims and scope of modernist formal strategies. In this reading, social conditions as they are reproduced in linguistic practice do not just become visible through formal estrangement, nor are they replaced by the institution of formal autonomy; rather, they make up the material and vehicle for the poem's technique—its newly instituted formal constraints. This represents a fundamentally different understanding of the politics of aesthetics: here, emancipatory capacity is sought in the expansion of a sensorium rather than in the realization of the truth of appearances or the positing of a utopian community in the provisionality of language which can be liberated from its context and repurposed.

Zong! is a book-length poem responding to a historical event: the murder of over a hundred malnourished slaves aboard the ship *Zong* in 1781 in a bid to claim their underwritten value from insurers.[2] The book represents two poetics, two forms for a politics of art which appear to be in conflict: a demand for equality in representation, and a demand for resistance and refusal by which poetry would maintain an inassimilable otherness and thereby avoid adulterating the memory of the event by half-measures. On one hand, to accomplish the impossible task of repair, to turn "back into human" (*Zong!*, 196) those Africans who were killed; to represent; to voice their stories; and to wrest something like beauty from the name of that ship and what it stands for by the conjuring of linguistic transformations: adding an exclamation mark, making the name into a cry, a shout, a song, a moan, a demand. This first demand asks that art institute, by representing a community, a kind of justice. On the other hand, there is a drive to resist representation, to forgo

[2] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

the violence of narrative, and to point up how the same archival language from which we receive testimony to the event is complicit in the denial of the humanity of the African people sold into slavery. The *Zong* massacre has been treated in several works of art, among them Turner's *Slavers throwing overboard the dead and dying—Typhoon coming on* (1840), Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), the 2003 feature film *Belle,* D. S. Marriot's poem "Soultracts" (*The Bloods*, 2011). Unlike these, Philip's treatment does not attempt a narrative reconstruction of the events on board. It is here where we find its second poetics: that art should function as a critique of how language polices the borders of what counts as human speech, what speaking is capable of articulating a demand and insinuating a wrong, and what speaking is unheard and beneath apprehension.[3] It announces itself in intransitive language, resisting through formal and semantic difficulty the constitution of the poetic space as identical with the longed-for situation of equality for its subjects and readers; with Philip suggesting that she is doing violence to the English language in an act of "revenge." (*Zong!*, 205)

The latter demand is plainly evident on first encountering the book. A look at the opening poems and a cursory glance through the subsequent pages will discern the outlines of a fragmentary and difficult text which frustrates interpretation; and, moreover, which perpetrates a kind of violence on language by subjecting it to stringent constraint and deformation. There is limitation in the domain of vocabulary, of sense and meaning, and even of voice: spare lists of words in columnar format and scattered letters inhibit free and flowing expression, more conducive to disinterested surveillance than mellifluous articulation. Some of these limitations are echoed in Philip's procedural constraint: the appropriative repurposing of an 18th century legal judgement relating to the culpability of insurers for compensating the ship's owners for the "loss" of their human cargo. The text is subject to re-ordering, redacting, analysis, cut-up and collage. The former demand, for representation, emerges as the poems circle around and pressurise by repetition

[3] For Jacques Rancière, the contested apprehensibility of this demand is the site of the rhetorical possibility of politics. Cf. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) I set out Rancière's formulations in greater detail later in this chapter.

certain words: "should", "truth", "justice", "subject". We can also hear it in the abortive lyricism of the book's second part, in which a strange music rises and falls amid snippets of overheard dialogue, confession, and broken syllables and phonemes constituting a base level of noise beyond or beneath the reach of intelligible speech.

The scene of slavery's unfreedom, the formal restraint and the procedural constraints conspire to establish within the book a contradiction which hinders how these demands can be answered: between a posited, but deferred, freedom of the aesthetic to represent a community in a situation of equality—"to conjure the presence" of those absent in the records of slavery—and an attentiveness to the social world out of whose discourse and material relations that community is constituted, and thereby "contaminated". (*Zong!*, 199) In responding to this historical event Philip feels it is important not to freely compose a new poem, citing an inhibition towards narrative and lyricism: "there is no telling this story", she writes, in the journal she kept while composing the book. (*Zong!*, 196) At another point she asks "should I do a long poem in my own voice?" (*Zong!*, 195) but demurs, noting that "my urge to make sense must be resisted." (*Zong!*, 193) Instead, Philip opts to be bound to the language from which she would turn away, "to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape", adopting the constraint of appropriation. (*Zong!*, 191) This discursive landscape is indexed by the text from which Philip forms her poetic lexicon, the legal record of the civil trial to decide whether the throwing overboard of the ship's human cargo warranted an award of remuneration from the insurers to the ship's owners. Philip writes in her postscript to the poetry: "The limitation here is the text itself." (*Zong!*, 192)

In that its form is a site of unfreedom, and in that its form is tied to the law, *Zong!* inhabits the problematic identified by Saidiya Hartman, who restates the passage from slavery to emancipation as a transition between one form of subjection to another. Hartman highlights the ways in which the granting of legal rights and the recognition of humanity nevertheless "acted to

tether, bind, and oppress"[4] post-emancipation, drawing a continuity between the law's instrumentality in objectifying the slave as property and the forms of subjectivity which maintain inegalitarian relations even as formal equality under the law is recognised: "the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved; by the same token, the failures of Reconstruction… also need to be located in the very language of persons, rights, and liberties."[5] The same scepticism about formal freedom leads Philip to recognize the continuing legacy of slavery in contemporary mass incarceration and the violent policing of Black citizens: "It is a painful irony that today so many of us continue to live, albeit in an entirely different way, either outside of the law, or literally imprisoned within it." (*Zong!*, 207)

As such the decision to be tied to the 18th century text can be understood as a decision not to foreclose the problematic "entanglements of slavery and freedom", in Hartman's phrase.[6] Fettering her composition with this text, Philip stages that entanglement's ambivalence. It is true that poetic elegy habitually reflects on its fraught efforts to shape the memory of loss into form; as Angela Leighton reflects, "elegy, perhaps more than any other genre, conceives its poetic form as the relief somehow, the shaped remains, of something that has gone. It is a verse-form bound to, and defined by, being 'about', while also expressing the verbal and emotional limits of that 'about'."[7] Yet in *Zong!*, relief is harder to come by: its abstention from verse form precludes even the hollow consolation of poetic edification, being bound instead to the linguistic remains of the social world responsible for the grief that it would wish to mourn.

Philip's stated desire is to excavate "the story of these African men, women, and children… locked in this text." It is a "story that can only be told by not telling," for telling would impose a logic and order on the events from without: benevolently freeing the story of these people on the

[4] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 4.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[7] Angela Leighton, *On Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 222.

condition that their existence is proliferated in words they did not choose. (*Zong!*, 191) The apparatuses of sense-making represent "an ordering mechanism" which exerts a "force" on language; (*Zong!*, 193) Philip's conceit is that she can avoid the imposition of order if she forgo "the comfort and predictability of my own language," resisting the effort of translation (from legal record to narrative or lyric). (*Zong!*, 190) To forgo translation is to stay one's own speaking and submit to the unfamiliar silences of the text, the internal logic of its material, "the words suggesting how to work with them." (*Zong!*, 195) "Within the boundaries established by the words and their meanings there are silences; within each silence is the poem." (*Zong!*, 195) For Philip this silence is only "revealed" by transforming the text into intransitive poems which resist and inhibit the way language functions in its original context (as the instrument of the law): she cuts up the text, (*Zong!*, 192) describing the process not as an artistic technique but as murder and mutilation.

> I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs… create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer, sangoma, or prophet who, having sacrificed an animal for signs and portents of a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling. (*Zong!*, 193-4)

Clearly this represents an effort to undermine the law's authority and to wrest a negative freedom from its binding decree. Philip's violence silences the original text, taking the life out of it. It produces poems out of silence, which are "revealed only when the text is fragmented and mutilated, mirroring the fragmentation and mutilation that slavery perpetrated on Africans, their customs and ways of life." (*Zong!*, 195) On one hand this is a revelation which comes about from refraining from speech, from refusing the task of telling. On the other hand, the revelation is posited as mimetic, itself representing, "mirroring", the violence of which it wants to speak—the text refers beyond itself, so that it is no longer strictly intransitive. To mimic, of course, is not to originate, and it is difficult to locate restored agency in a second-order reiteration. Yet Philip maintains that the repetitious act of appropriation inaugurates a difference, consequent on a kind of voicing. She suggests that the poems do speak, moving from the silent revelation of violence to

a speech which gives testimony of life: "silence was its own language that one could read, interpret and even speak." (*Zong!*, 195)

Philip has written of this dynamic movement from recalcitrant silence to voicing elsewhere, in terms of her efforts at interpretation or 'translation' of the desires and beliefs of the people of post-colonial Tobago. These desires and beliefs, Philip says, have been overwritten and channelled by centuries of "ambivalences, erasures and silences":[8] the imposition of Christianity, western education and cultural mores; the withholding of information regarding African customs and religious practice from one generation to the next for fear of its abuse, subversion and ridicule in the colonial context; the duplicity learned and practiced on the plantation in order to keep up appearances to the Master. In this context, Philip writes,

> I, too, am merely a dummy, trying to catch the voice of the people—my own silence—which often speaks at frequencies too low for me to hear clearly. Our speech is not their talking; the best we can do at times is translate the silence […] They—we—remain unvoiced, working along the seams of word and silence, longing to translate the untranslatable—silence into word.[9]

Philip represents the difficulties of translation by figuring a split in her own speaking—distinguishing her capacity as a speaker or writer from her belonging to an "unvoiced" "we". In *Zong!* the split is exacerbated as the position of speaking and writing is yielded to the source text, which plainly does not try to "catch the voice of the people." Philip will turn to the silences of a language not her own in order to attempt a translation, effectively setting that which in language exceeds the word against its own authority. Yielding to the internal logic of words this silent language functions beyond the bounds of representation, constituting language out of what is excluded from language and what it can comprehend, the "irrational, illogical and unpredictable." (*Zong!*, 197)

---

[8] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Genealogies of Resistance* (Mercury: 1989), p.193.
[9] *Ibid.*, p.198.

Zong!'s aesthetic renovation of its source text, then, is both constrained by the "discursive landscape" which it must inhabit, "a language already contaminated, possibly irrevocably and fatally", against which its only recourse is a reduplication of violence and a politics of refusal; (*Zong!*, 199) and, lest that refusal be interpreted as the restaging of a scene of slavery's subjection for the consumption of a complacently triumphant liberalism which imagines itself emancipated from such horrors, the poems' language is to remain opaque, further subjected to the immanent constraints "locked in" the material of words which take on a life of their own, but seem only to be able to give voice at the expense of representation. The question I'll consider in what follows is how, in this situation of overwhelming constraint, the book will find an innovative politics in its own limitations.

Making Space in Language

In the first section of the book, its language tends towards the refusal of telling, being subject to stringent constraint, confined to the reordering, redacting and recombination of words in the legal text. With the exception of the first poem, in which words are fractured and dispersed across the page, the 32 poems are arranged in columnar form, evoking the ship's ledger, the archival record of the slave's existence as property. The legal judgement is provided as an appendix to the book:

> This was an action on a policy of insurance, to recover the value of certain slaves thrown overboard for want of water. The declaration stated, that by the perils of the seas, and contrary currents and other misfortunes, the ship was rendered foul and leaky, and was retarded in her voyage; and, by reason thereof, so much of the water on board the said ship, for her said voyage, was spent on board the said ship… (210)

The first poems Philip makes from this document struggle to narrate, with limited vocabulary. With their impersonal diction and their appearance on the page the poems suggest dissection or analysis. They seem to be oriented towards giving a thorough account of the language of the

judgement, turning towards the words themselves in an effort, perhaps, to remake them by removing them from their prosaic existence.

To this end, the writing investigates linguistic materiality as a site of struggle. At times the poems render this condition of language as the endless recombination of signifiers, for example in "Zong #18", which compresses language to a series of substitutable definitions: "means / truth / means overboard / means / sufficient / means / support […]" (31). Or else, in "*Zong!* #15", behind or inside the meanings of words we find other words:

the subject in property
the save in underwriter
where etc tunes justice
and the *ratio* of murder
is
the usual in occurred
(25)

Paring the language down to its constituent parts, isolating them and cataloguing them, these poems dwell in grammar. "*Zong!* #14" meditates on what difference tense makes:

the truth was
the ship sailed
the rains came
the loss arose
the truth is
the ship sailed
the rains came
the loss arose

the negroes is

the truth was

(24)

These poems torque grammar and tense, parsing and re-parsing statements as though to pull apart the finality of the law's decree, lingering in particular over the verb "to be":

there

is was

is is

should

and

have been

there is

was

there

(*"Zong!* # 21", 38)

The contradictory "subject in property" becomes, here, a subject in language—"negroes is"—but it is not clear that this constitutes existence beyond the law's decree. We can read the poem above as musing on the location of this being beyond the law; as asking after the "there" where the truth is or was. "There" has the indeterminate force of the deictic shifter: not a place itself but the empty signifier indicating place. The question of location is significant, it pertains to situating the remains of the dead, integral to the consolation of mourning.[10] Following Philip, Christina Sharpe finds

[10] Philip's essay cites this aspect of Derrida's discussion of the work of mourning from *Spectres of Marx*, p. 202.

Zong! an example of "wake work", playing on the meanings of that word to establish the specific context of black expressive work in which memorialisation, memory and mourning can find no solid grounding in the fluid and fading traces of trans-Atlantic crossings.[11] What if, in "the bone beds of the sea", (*Zong!*, 203) there is no there there; or, in the ominous postulate of a later poem's Augustinian epigraph, "there was no then"? Is there a place and a time beyond its linguistic decree: "declaration / in the absolute / of rule"? (*Zong!*, 39) Or can a space and a time be made in the repetitions and differences of these linguistic performances?

We can understand these poems as retreating into language, making a space and a time there in inverse proportion to the sparseness of their lexicon, in order to suspend and defer the closure of the sentence. *Zong!* #9 and 10 end with, respectively, "become" and "suppose"; the last word of *Zong!* #13 is "of"; and the final line of *Zong!* #25 hovers between verb and noun: "the could". Language is stalled here, in the middle, on the way to nominating the world but not yet reaching it.

Along these lines, another effect of Philip's occupation of language is to thicken it, so as to obscure what it refers to. In "Zong #26", for example, a single sentence constructed with repetitions of the syntax "was the [noun/adjective]" compiles the references to the conditions of the voyage in the judgement and only in its final line mentions "negroes": "negroes was the cause". Mimicking and exaggerating the features of the prose in Gregson v. Gilbert, the language thereby elucidates the formulaic constraints of the original document, whose prose is oriented towards discovering the final determination, the *ratio decidendi*, "the kernel of the legal principle at the heart of the decision" (Philip's gloss (*Zong!*, 199)), inevitably coming to the conclusion that "the /

[11] Wake work is based on the premise that "slavery's continual unfolding is constitutive of contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic and material dimensions of Black non/being as well as Black aesthetic and other modes of deformation and interruption." Sharpe writes that wake work can be understood to operate in "forms of Black expressive culture… that do not seek to explain or resolve the question of ["the ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging; our abjection from the realm of the human"] in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or civil rights, but rather depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity." *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 20; 14.

negroes was the cause" of their own death. The conclusion then follows rationally from the poem's grammar: the negroes are both subject and property, "the subject in property".

This recalls a similar thickening of language in "Zong #1": here the words "water", "good", "day" and "one" are stretched out, dispersed, repeated, deconstructed and recombined into their letters and syllables across the page. One line reads:

te r gg g g go

A reader is compelled to attend to the sounding of this fragmentary language as a medium of phonemes rather than ideas. In Philip's postscript, however, while she invokes this capacity of verbal medium, likening it to a physical medium, water, she also signals clearly that she considers this no insular investigation of linguistic autonomy—these poems contain the shadow of aurality and orality, and as such they amount to more than investigations of writing, legislation and legibility:

> I recall hearing a radio interview with Gavin Bryars, composer of The Sinking, the Titanic, in which he discusses the idea of sound never ceasing within water, an idea he suggests Marconi believed, since water is a much more "sound-efficient medium" than air. I have often since wondered whether the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo underwater. In the bone beds of the sea. (*Zong!*, 203)

To imagine language as a medium like water prises it away from its habitual positioning as a medium of communication. Rather than being volitionally wielded to convey ideas, it becomes an echo chamber bearing sounds separated from their origins. But in Philip's analogy these sounds have historical meaning. The sounds of the poem figure "the sounds of those murdered Africans": to hear in Philip's verbal seascape the echoes of murdered Africans is to apprehend its sound as referring to and fictively emanating from subjects. This is manifestly different from the reduction of language to its truth as inert material. It is in fact an augmentation, to hear in language more

than we ordinarily would; to attune our sensoria as though to catch a frequency beyond the range of the naked ear, those frequencies which Philip would want to translate: "frequencies too low for me to hear clearly". And to hear in this range of frequencies of linguistic material, which exceeds reasoned speech and "the absolute / of rule" in grammar, the residue of human life. It is almost a dialectical process that we are following: on one hand, the appearance of language as a material medium which is the other of the *logos* of the legal document; on the other, and with the first as its condition, the apprehension of language as a medium through whose materiality historical memory is transmitted. To read these fragments of words ("te" "r" "gg") is to be reminded of speaking's embodiment, the way it articulates a speaking subject. In this reading, the thickening of language is not impersonal, and turns us toward the moment of speaking, even as that moment exceeds the reasoned argument of the legal text's measured syntax and the historical silencing it implies. Our reading is certainly attentive to language itself, but not as an abstract materiality, rather as the locus of spoken discourse; in this case, a paradoxical discourse that is sounded but fails to attain the intelligibility of speech. I'll consider this more fully when I turn to the second part of *Zong!*, in which these conflicts over speech and utterance are more pronounced.

The poems call on the discursive in another way, this time reaching not after excess but plenitude. At the bottom of each page Philip writes a number of names of the murdered (which were never recorded) in cursive script, beneath a line designating the margin of poetic space on the page. These names are fictional. The naming of the dead is an act of memorialization—a ritualized speech act, connected to language's discursive, social employment. And yet, the act is situated as, quite literally, under*writing* the poems evoking the ledger which denies the humanity of the Africans and recognizes their value only as property. The names are, palpably, written, the cursive script opposed to the typeset text, a sign of the literacy by which the colonial project was administered and against which it defined its others: as such they are an impossible memorial, in that they would never have been recorded in writing by those on board the ship. A Derridean reading might pick up on how even the signature's testimony to presence implies the

commutability of the sign: neither signature nor the exchangeable signifier can be the basis for the manifest community, which exists only as a hauntological possibility. Again, however, this leaves us in the realm of language in the abstract. But we can also read a dissensus between two relationships between words and bodies: on one hand, a community of bodies conjured by their proper naming, in which writing and speech are not opposed; on the other, words which circulate indifferent to bodies—both the inhuman indifference of the ledger, and also the indifference which affords the book the capacity to reanimate bodies in fiction regardless of their absence.

There are two logics, then: a rhetorical logic in which words manifest a presence in their enunciation as the shadow, or latent condition, of another kind of linguistic logic, where words only have abstracted meaning, and where the spectre of embodied speech is banished for the specular logic of taking an account (a count).[12] At the same time, this logic shades into its other, in which the opaque materiality of words precludes their ordering according to a higher-level semantic system. There is a contamination of these linguistic logics, between speech and abstract language, and between the phonetic and the semantic. The contamination implies that, on one hand, even in the language of the account book and the court judgement there exists a another sensible reality: we hear this language also as a different kind of claim than a claim on insurance—a claim to speech; but on the other hand, this claim cannot be articulated from an ontologically prior position: it does not exist other than as the manifestation of material opacity within the damaging language of which it is the shadow. Philip's occupation of language makes a space here, but it is not simply the space of deferral: what is at stake is language's capacity to manifest a community in and beyond speech.

Critique, Illumination and Opacity

[12] Who is counted as belonging to a community is integral to Rancière, for whom democracy is always a miscount: the apprehension of a certain number of bodies and enunciations as having the capacity to make judgements in the interest of a community according to a particular order (*arche*); and then the conflicting an-archy whereby anybody and everybody is counted as having the capacity to rule, which is the principle of democracy. Cf. *Disagreement*.

As is clear from the centrality of forms of the verb "to be" in these poems, and from the naming of the dead, linguistic nomination is cast as a site of struggle over erasure and visibility: illumination's underside is the violent decree of what is not. If on one hand the politics of *Zong!*'s poetics is in the making visible of social constraints mediated by language, on the other hand, it preserves the opacity of this linguistic mediation in such a way as to surpass the inversion of revelatory critique. This is missed when *Zong!* is read as revealing the limits of colonial discourse in such a way as to un-conceal the lives erased in that discourse. Some critics credit the poems' recalcitrant surface with the capacity to undo the reification by which the law transforms person into property. Thus, it is argued that the text has the effect of "removing bodies from their commodification";[13] or that it helps to "see beyond imposed limits."[14] Yet these appraisals are in danger of conflating *Zong!*'s poetry with the instantiation of the postcolonial critique in which it is framed. Textual intransitivity is then overwritten by an external conceptual discourse.

The dangers of such a manoeuvre are identified by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, who, arguing against the movement of revelatory critical reversal—and the attendant politics of art it overdetermines—write that this type of "critique endangers the sociality it is supposed to defend."[15] They argue that this elides the "sociopoetic force" of "preservation", and suggest an orientation towards fugitive, evolving traditions or bodies of thinking: "Taking down our critique, our own positions, our fortifications, is self-defense alloyed with self-preservation. That takedown comes in movement, as a shawl, the armor of flight."[16] Theirs is a notion which allies poetry's fugitive thinking with an idea of community, linking intransitivity with the survival of imperilled identity. Thus Moten has likened *Zong!*'s poetics to "black social thought": "the socio-poetic project that examines and enacts ["possibilities for inhabiting and soliciting the human

[13] Erin M. Fehskens, "Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold: *Zong!* and the Catalogue" *Callaloo* 35(2) Spring 2012, pp. 407-424; p.412.
[14] Myriam Moise, "Grasping the Ungraspable in M. NourbeSe Philip's Poetry" *Commonwealth* 33:1, pp. 23-33; p.23.
[15] Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), p.19 http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf [accessed 24/05/2017]; Michael Snedicker makes a similar argument with respect to queer theory in *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
[16] Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, p.19.

differential"] as they exist over the edge of the separatist, monocultural and monotheistic imperium that will have been defined in and by ontological and epistemological settlement."[17] This is a figure of thinking that does not content itself with a knowing critique of or abstention from the false epistemology of the "liberal humanist subject", but grounds its politics in linguistic improvisation and incomprehensibility.

We might understand this in the context of re-evaluations of modernist formal strategies, which have retrained their vision from the locus of medium, its associated concerns of precision, clarity, intransitivity and autonomy, to mediation, emphasising representation, institutions, communities of reception and aesthetic ideology. Such reconsiderations concede that aesthetic difficulty and autonomy shares terrain with representation. Anthony Mellors yokes difficulty and fragmentation with the preservation and transmission of occult knowledge, in the context of an elite anglophone tradition.[18] Beyond this sphere, as the remit of Modernist Studies has broadened spatially in its "transnational turn", it has revised its aesthetic presuppositions to exceed the supposedly neutral and deracialised forms of European high modernism, engaging "with postcolonial theory [and concerning itself] with the interrelation of cultural, political, and economic transactions."[19] The politics of modernism is increasingly understood to exceed the freedoms afforded by its formal autonomy. David Nowell Smith finds that the legacy of modernism in vernacular poetics has it facing two ways: at once "prob[ing] the forms of domination by which speech is standardized and nonstandard speech supressed" and producing works which "take the phonetic, rhythmic, and syntactic material of vernacular speech as the basis for an exploration of the way language bodies forth; the sheer pleasure in word- and noise-making becomes itself a powerfully political gesture."[20] James Brunton has written of contemporary Black writers whose

[17] Fred Moten, "Blackness and Poetry", Evening will come: A monthly journal of poetics (Affect Feature—Issue 55, July 2015) online http://www.thevolta.org/ewc55-fmoten-p1.html [accessed 24/05/2016].
[18] Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).
[19] Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies", *PLMA* 123.3 (2008), p. 739.
[20] David Nowell Smith, "Langwij a thi guhtr" in *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today* (London: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 177-191; p. 178.

employment of modernist techniques goes beyond recent valuations of aesthetic failure as an end in itself: for these writers, "the failures of language [is at the same time] always strategically directed towards survival."[21] At this point it is uncontroversial to hold that investigations of language and politically freighted representational concerns with subjectivity or identity need not be mutually exclusive.

Jacques Rancière makes this explicit, and also reminds us that modernism is part of a longer history linking aesthetic innovation with the political. Rancière's claim is that, in the aesthetic regime, a literary-artistic tradition diverse enough to include Wordsworth, Flaubert, Mallarmé, Walker Evans and James Agee, has practiced politics by other means: "its way of producing its own politics, proposing to politics re-arrangements of its space, re-configuring art as a political issue or asserting itself as true politics."[22] The politics of aesthetics has varied over time, but at root it mobilises the democratic perceptual regime of aesthetics[23] against or in the service of transforming inegalitarian everyday life. One such mobilization might be the discourse on the falseness of politics counterposed by the truer sensations and perceptions afforded by art: we might trace a line from objectivism to Language poetry and beyond in this vein. Or else, there are ethical mobilizations of art, in which the democratic form of the work of art becomes indistinguishable from that of the social world it wants to see manifest. From this perspective, "art is the formation of a new sensorium—one which signifies, in actuality, a new ethos."[24] Both cases imply a "consensual framing of the common world."[25] Here we might point to the utopian impulse of modernist projects with certain affinities with *Zong!*, Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (1897) (with which it is similar in terms of layout, and in terms of its central concern, a disaster at sea) and

[21] James Brunton, "Whose Metamodernism?: Metamodernism, Race, and the Politics of Failure", *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 41, No. 3 (2018), pp. 60-76; p. 66.
[22] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p.127.
[23] That democratic perceptual regime is constituted, essentially, by: the conceptual valuation of purposiveness without purpose which makes art exceed its function or destination; the ideal of a universal capacity for aesthetic judgement; the overturning of the classical proprieties of genres, forms and subjects; as well as the democratisation of audiences by writing and print circulation.
[24] Rancière, *Dissensus,* p.127.
[25] *Ibid.*, p.127.

Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) (with which it shares a geography). Though their authors might differ in their expressed politics, both of these books are exemplary of the practising of politics by other means in attempting the establishment of a new community in the text. In Mallarmé's project the universal community is deferred from the world to be realised in the absolute power of the word;[26] Césaire's book, on the other hand, makes the democratic claim to "words" indicative of their connection to historical reality and therefore of a contest, rather than a consensus, over their significance: "words of fresh blood, words that are tidal waves and erysipelas and malarias and lava and brush fires, and blazes of flesh, and blazes of cities…".[27]

Attentive to the postcolonial politics by which the power of words is unevenly distributed, Édouard Glissant's account of the politics of modernist aesthetics forgoes the premise of universal visibility—a consensual framing of a common world—which he sees as central to the European project and the kind of representational violence Philip is concerned with. His thinking of opacity sees it not as formal intransitivity but as constitutive of creolisation, the "willed effort towards consciousness itself that produces community" in a historical situation of unrootedness.[28] Like Philip, his thought is attentive to the historical conditions and constraints that make it possible, not opposing opacity to universality but finding the former within the latter.

Totality as an aesthetic sensibility, Glissant writes, once it escapes the limiting projects of European modernism which had aimed to establish a new community in the book, or a unity beneath fragmentary perception, is no longer approached "by lightning flashes" of revelation (Baudelaire's *éclair*). Instead: "we approach [totality] through the accumulation of sediments… Lightning flashes are the shivers of one who desires or dreams of a totality that is impossible or yet to come; duration urges in those who attempt to live this totality, when dawn shows through

---

[26] For Rancière's account of Mallarmé's politics see *Mute Speech*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), particularly chapter 9, "The Writing of the Idea"; and *Mallarmé: La politique de la siren* (Paris: Hachette, 1996).

[27] Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), p. 23.

[28] Édouard Glissant, "An Exploded Discourse", *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael J. Dash (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 214.

the linked histories of peoples."[29] "Duration" here implies a lived experience of totality without teleological culmination in a final form. If "lightning flashes" represent the vision that instantaneously perceives the fundament 'behind' the surface, the "accumulation of sediments" gives a material weight, and a sense of productive process, to the experience of relation ("the linked histories of peoples") in language.

Thinking with Glissant, we are directed to the middle—for Glissant this is figured by the middle passage. This poses a challenge to the presuppositions about history and subjectivity on which revelatory critique relies. As Jacques Rancière maintains, "the logic of the critical tradition" is couched in "the thesis of the ineluctable historical process and its necessary effect: the mechanism of inversion that transforms reality into illusion or illusion into reality."[30] This temporal logic remains one in which a subject realises its ultimate destiny in progressive development. It is elaborated in a version of dialectics which turns upon a proper subject of history to the exclusion of what is beyond—or beside—its categorical comprehension. Turning away from the implied temporality of revelation, Glissant's poetics is concerned with horizontal relations.[31] Denise Ferreira da Silva draws on Glissant to argue for a "Black poethics"[32] emphasising relation beyond "the separation and determination of efficient causality and its categories/forms", and appealing to spatial relationships rather than temporal.[33]

We hear this echoed in *Zong!*'s injunction to "snap the spine of time,"[34] (*Zong!*, 141) an injunction which is manifest in the multiple directions that reading may take, orienting itself

---

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[30] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2011), p. 31.
[31] In this his work finds common cause with E.K. Sedgwick's repudiation of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Sedgwick suggests that "the irreducibly spatial positionality of beside […] seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which beneath and beyond turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos." *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 8.
[32] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Towards a Black Feminist Poethics", *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 44:2 (2014), 81-97; p. 89.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 92; "However one decides to go about the task—releasing the Subject, Man, to the World, and from Time—it would have to begin with a fracturing of Hegel's and Marx's versions of dialectics itself, and its sequestering of Space in the unfolding of Time." p. 90.
[34] In this paragraph I've removed any of the formal fragmentation so that the phrases from the poem do not interrupt my prose—obviously this is not to say that their sense can be considered without their formal presentation, and indeed, that fragmentation will affect the temporality of reading, emphasising a spatial sense of the relations among material, phonetic, constituents of words, often at the expense of the procession of ideal meanings

spatially according to clusters of words, tracing both vertical and horizontal vectors through the text; and furthermore through the poem's various articulations in performance: because Philip often innovates how the text is read, either on her own or by arranging choral readings and musical accompaniments, the performances cannot be said to have a linear relation to the text as published. This is not to mention the volume of thematic references to temporal disturbance: "we are out / of time" (*Zong!*, 120); "we are outside of time" (*Zong!*, 144); "the trap of reason binds us in the net of time" (*Zong!*, 169); the epigraph from Augustine, in "Sal", "there was no then". (*Zong!*, 58)

Without the temporality of efficient causality and the logic of critical reversal it sustains, we can think far more fully about the politics of constraint in *Zong!*: it need not be understood simply as referring to or revealing 'political' structures, but as containing the potential for their transformation. However, importantly, this transformation would retain a difference from the kinds of intelligibility (eg eurocentrism, liberalism, theoretician thinking) that have been instrumental in rationalising systems of domination and exploitation, including a diffuse cosmopolitanism.[35]

As such, we might distinguish *Zong!* from the poetics of Language with which it has a clear affinity. Language poetry sought to eliminate the fiction of the voice, highlighting the artificial constraints that language imposes on meaning—it thereby opposes intransitivity, or opacity, and representation.[36] Philip writes that she had initially conceived of writing *Zong!* as a critique of the language of European colonisation as it was manifest in the juridical-economic architecture represented by the judgement "Gregson v. Gilbert". An intransitive approach to language would "reveal [its] hidden agendas" by questioning "the assumed transparency of language". (*Zong!*, 197) Yet there is a difference in emphasis between Philip's project and that of Language poetry. First,

---

as the basis for narrative. Here, however, my quotations are merely intended to make a thematic point—in my discussion below I'll treat the formal fragmentation more fully.

[35] Glissant's concept of opacity is explicitly ranged against notions that understand difference as the transparent aggregate of diversity: "difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent. […] the process of 'understanding' people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought [has its basis as] this requirement for transparency." *Poetics of Relation*, pp. 189-190.

[36] See Ch 1, above, for detailed discussion.

and by her own admission, her use of similar formal strategies is in the interest of a "critique of the European project" specifically, compared with Language poetry's undifferentiated economistic paradigm, being the foundation for its analogy between textual transparency and false consciousness and alienation. In the orthodox formulations of Language poetry its critique of reference and emphatic artifice was the preliminary to the reader's free production of meaning in the open text. Philip's writing, on the other hand, is more reluctant to celebrate this kind of readerly freedom as emancipation. As I'll discuss below particularly regarding the second section of *Zong!*, reading the text is not only intellectually difficult—in terms of a resistance to naturalising the text by reference to some external state of affairs—but also difficult in performance, at the level of enunciation; in both cases it resists attempts to reduce it to the recapitulation of an enlightening theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, as I've mentioned, Philip's framing of the text is not concerned with the emancipation of the reader so much as the paradoxical representation of the slaves in telling a story that cannot be told. The focus is on the constraints on sense-making, voicing and the production of speech, not as a means to disabuse false consciousness that the reader might freely consume the text, but in order to "conjure the presence of excised Africans". There is a shift from the collusion of visibility (revelation) and freedom to the register of incomprehensibility and enunciation. That is, although she sets out initially to "reveal the hidden agendas of language" Philip is struck that "in my approach to this text I have only revealed what is commonplace, although hidden." (*Zong!*, 198) The unveiling here seems beside the point, insofar as it only "reveals" that any and all linguistic expression is constrained by discursive "systems that shape us such as gender and race", when what Philip wants to do is "conjure the presence of excised Africans" in "a language already contaminated, possibly irrevocably and fatally." (*Zong!*, 198; 199)

The distinction between Philip's poetics and those of Language poetry is further clarified if we briefly consider the ontological stakes of the critique of reference specifically in terms of the "critique of the European project", and the discourses of race and racial division that it implies. In

her accompanying essay, Philip emphasises that her critique of language is gauged towards the way in which the "non-being of African people" is maintained in language through the policing of the possession of *logos* by the hygienic elimination of disorder and excess: "The language in which [the events of the *Zong* took place and were apprehended by the law] promulgated the non-being of African peoples, and I distrust its order, which hides disorder; its logic hiding the illogic and its rationality, which is simultaneously irrational." (*Zong!*, 197)

Zong! does not bracket the question of being by turning instead to linguistic artifice as the site of its construction. Its formal opacity reaches beyond the textures of words as they are implicated in sense making (for eg in syntax), to the way in which these textures organise the nonsensical ground of another way of thinking being. This exceeds a generalised critique of reference, which the first part of the book is indeed concerned with but should not be subsumed within. For what remains to be apprehended is a paradox: that which is legislated not to be—that is, blackness as nonbeing, formally excluded from value—as the basis for a claim, as the ground for speech. Rather than to writing and revelation, Philip's recourse is, in the next part of the book, to the capacity of that which is within speech but outside language to testify to being: "oath and…moan…mutter, chant and babble…curse…chortle and ululation." (*Zong!*, 106)

Lyric, race, and rude sound

The second part is divided into four movements, each of which is evidently more lyrical than the poems from the first section. Though scattered across the page, groups of words are often connected by a principle of rhyme or other sonic contiguity:

she rides

my nights the bell the good ship

vedic visions no

gongs provisions (67)

There is an elevation of the phonetic aspect of the language that, along with the implied speaking voices which occasionally appear, overdetermines the text's oral timbre: "the story can not stand the truth only *el son el son* my song." (*Zong!*, 123) This is registered either in explicit reference to song, "sing a song / for us / of water / for *os* in bone" (*Zong!*, 68; and here, the principle of sonic continuity is what links "us" with "*os*" the French, subsequently appearing in English as "bone"), or else in oral and gestural performances of chant, "ya ye / ya ye ya ah ye ye ye / ye ah ye ye" (*Zong!*, 140), tone, "fa so la la la m / i fa so re red o do mi / fa so so la do" (*Zong!*, 140), prayer, "*san* say a *sanctus* for m / e a *san* / *ctus* to the sea a *s* / *anctus* to the *san san s san s* / *san s sanctus*" (*Zong!*, 141) and beat, "dum d/um de dum dum the no / ise the noise th / e drum it does not sto / p the *oba* sobs a // gain." (*Zong!*, 141-2) Given that song is cognate with *Zong*, we might expect that the book's lyricism answer to the fraught and interrupted life to which that ship was temporarily home; and this is the case. Both thematically and formally, the arrangement of sound is disconcerting. A complaint recurs: "oh the noise" (*Zong!*, 66). At times this seems to refer the song of the slaves: "they sing", "they groan", they sing "with no notes" (*Zong!*, 79): "I hear them words strange to my ear", "a / rude sound" (*Zong!*, 82; 98). This rude, or crude, sound is what emerges once the text's fractured spacing is taken into account; it breaks up words leaving letters hanging in space, available to polyvocal readings competing for or exceeding sense:

e oh ye ye afr i

ca oh o

ver an o

ver the *o* *ba* s

o

b

s (173)

Here, for instance, we could pick out "SOS", "bass", "oo", as well as "the *oba* sobs"; each of these will be complicated by the sounding and spacing of the individual letters whose phonic force undermines any straightforward semantic deciphering. Sarah Dowling has called these abortive voicings, "enfleshed voice";[37] breaking the "association of voice with personhood", Dowling argues the poem's utterances create a bodily awareness of producing sound "divorced from interiority".

W. E. B. Du Bois gives an account of this type of otherworldly noise as integral to black social life in *The Souls of Black Folk*, noting the "awful" spectacle of "frenzied" chanting in the church in which the worshipper's speaking is overtaken by the manifestation of the Spirit.[38] Following him, Moten asserts that the unruly noise of the spiritual exaltation exhibits an indistinction between words, gestures and sounds which materialises the expressive capacity of the non-sense in speech; what Philip calls the "disorder in language". Moten argues moreover that the social force of these ritual gestures is indicative of a universal intelligibility in excess of that which Kant had tried to claim for a disciplined aesthetic sensibility—one which would insist on the inessential nature of poetry's phonic materiality in the judgement of its beauty. Moten's reading of Kant pivots on the way that phonic materiality does not submit to the discipline of the understanding; it represents an anoriginal paralegal nonsense indicative only of the "lawless freedom" of the imagination.[39] He goes on to analogize "nonsense [as] fugitive presence" with that which originates the regulative fiction of race:

---

[37] Sarah Dowling, "Sounding Impossible Bodies" *Canadian Literature* (2011) vol 210-211 np.

[38] Du Bois description of encountering "Southern Negro revival": "A sort of suppressed terror hung in the air and seemed to seize us, — a pythian madness, a demoniac possession, that lent terrible reality to song and word. The black and massive form of the preacher swayed and quivered as the words crowded to his lips and flew at us in singular eloquence. The people moaned and fluttered, and then the gaunt-cheeked brown woman beside me suddenly leaped straight into the air and shrieked like a lost soul, while round about came wail and groan and outcry, and a scene of human passion such as I had never conceived before.

Those who have not thus witnessed the frenzy of a Negro revival in the untouched backwoods of the South can but dimly realize the religious feeling of the slave; as described, such scenes appear grotesque and funny, but as seen they are awful." "Of the Faith of the Fathers", *The Souls of Black Folks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 128-129.

[39] "So far as beauty is concerned, to be fertile and original is not such an imperative requirement as it is that the imagination in its freedom should be in accordance with the understanding's conformity to law. For in lawless freedom imagination, with all its wealth, produces nothing but nonsense; the power of judgement, on the other hand, is the faculty that makes it consonant with the understanding." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans.

> The regulative discourse on the aesthetic that animates Kant's critical philosophy is inseparable from the question of race as a mode of conceptualizing and regulating human diversity, grounding and justifying inequality and exploitation, as well as marking the limits of human knowledge through the codification of quasi-transcendental philosophical method…[40]

> "Race" in Kant is incantatory gesture, the mark of an incapacity that drives philosophy (the black can't of philosophy, philosophy's unpayable debt to the unmeaning jargon and illegitimate rhetoric, the phono-material suasion, it keeps trying to leave behind). The proper valuation of that gesture is made available to us by inhabiting what Kant devalued and, at the very moment of his deployment of it, disavowed and by considering what even Kant couldn't imagine, namely the beautiful art of what is supposed to be unbeautiful.[41]

As Moten writes, this inhabitation will animate "the conflict between flight and constraint" which the law will try to settle.[42]

In discussing her strategies of textual intransigence and her analytical violence to the text, Philip positions herself as a "censor"; on the other hand, to summon speaking from being that is beyond the law's decree, Philip likens herself to a "magician". (*Zong!*, 199) Conjuring is of another order to the revelation of the archaeologist or the legislation of the censor. Like magic, Philip finds poetry an exception in language, marshalling the "incomprehensible, as in the religious practice of speaking in tongues, which subverts the very purpose of language." (*Zong!*, 197) Subverting the purpose of language—or its communicative function—is near enough to the practices of Language poetry; however, the invocation of speaking in tongues turns the subversion away from freedom and into another kind of constraint: being inhabited and articulated by voices from the outside is a dispossession of the self, and therefore defers Language poetry's sought after emancipation of the reader through critical revelation. Not only this, but the emphasis now is on poetic enchantment, as opposed to the disenchantment by which poetic artifice stands in for

---

James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 148; see Moten, *Stolen Life*, pp. 1-2.

[40] Moten, *Stolen Life*, p. 2.

[41] *Ibid.*, p.32.

[42] *Ibid.*, p.32.

antifetishistic ideology critique. If there is a kind of revelation of being implied by speaking in tongues, it is a revelation that remains unintelligible within the existing order of things.

Speech, Noise, and the Distribution of the Sensible

Zong!'s conjuring of opacity will turn on the (in)distinction between speech and noise; the regulation of sound and its categorization as sense and non-sense. As such, the politics of constraint in *Zong!* elaborate and provide a corrective to the way in which Rancière conceives of politics as a dispute over the account made of speech-sound, and by extension the capacities attributed to the producers of enunciations. Rancière derives his concept of politics from rereading Aristotle's formulation that man is a political animal whose capacity for judgement resides in the possession of speech, *logos*. *Pace* Aristole, Rancière maintains that politics is not a matter for logical animals, but instead the foundational "opposition between logical animals and phonic animals" is in fact "one of the stakes of the very dispute that institutes politics." (*Disagreement*, 22) This dispute is between "those who have a logos…those who really speak and those whose voice merely mimics the articulate voice to express pleasure and pain. Politics exists because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the *account* that is made of this speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise signalling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt." (*Disagreement*, 22)

Political disagreement is not based in the type of misunderstanding due to insufficient knowledge, whose revelation would resolve the dispute. Instead it is based on the contested apprehensibility of "sonorous emissions" as speech or noise; on the intelligibility of legitimate demands and the unintelligibility of the incomprehensible cry. The reason why this is a disagreement (*mésentente*), more than simply a misunderstanding that can be remedied by the inculcation of sufficient knowledge, is because it is a question of the account made of a phenomena—the "sonic emission"—rather than a mishearing or misperception. We can sense the

cry. But we do not sense it as issuing from rational speaking beings, in possession of *logos*. It is formally excluded according to the division between beings capable of political speech and phonic animals, a "sensory order that organizes… domination." (*Disagreement*, 24) Reasoned speech is accounted for as a sonorous emission linked to the capacity for making legitimate demands: it is perceived as the enunciation of bodies who have this capacity, among whom an equality exists based in shared understanding, common sense.

For Rancière the moment of politics is the contestation of this division. The contestation is enacted by "fluctuating performers" who do not exist as perceptible constituencies prior to their declaration. (*Disagreement*, 89) Their demands are not only unintelligible but insensible within the existing sensory order, because, prior to the staging of a political dispute, intelligible demands are only perceived as issuing from those who are already accounted for in the extant social order. The contestation is "a quarrel over the issue of speech itself"—where speech comes from. (*Disagreement*, 23) In a performative staging of equality, subjects who are uncounted as part of the community, and thereby deprived of speech, act as if they possess the speech of those who are accountable, and thereby institute themselves as party to a dispute, on a level of discursive equality with their interlocutors. The contestation first implies a suspension of the formal division between noise and speech—a calling into question of the grounds for its arbitrary imposition. This is the disagreement, the polemical verification of equality that flies in the face of the common sense that had determined the parts of the community. The disagreement is a process of subjectivation: it produces, rather than being produced by, subjects as political agents. Subsequent to this disagreement there will be the installation of a new common sense including the newly legible subjects. This constitutes a redistribution of the sensible such that it now includes a link between what was formerly noise and the capacity for reasoned speech.

Several commentators have elaborated and reoriented this theorisation of politics towards the specificity of the postcolonial situation. Holloway Sparks suggests that "the racial and gendered legacies of chattel slavery, colonialism, and patriarchal white supremacy in the United States have

shaped the possibilities for democratic disruptions and miscounts more profoundly than Rancière's approach can easily elucidate."[43] Discourses of race and empire (among others) contribute to distributing the sensible horizon which delimits the powers of acting and speaking, and this horizon is clearly the site of struggle opened up in *Zong!*'s first part. Political subjectivation is determined by and must depart from these coordinates, which constitute specific constraints. At times these constraints amount to the preclusion of the performative staging of equality in speech by a radically repressive police order (that is, the order which maintains the divisions between parts and places in a community, between what is sensible as speech and noise), which makes the consequences for speaking out severe. Thus, Ayten Gündoğdu writes that we might pay more attention to "the conditions that shape and constrain political agency" when thinking about the staging of equality in Rancièrian terms.[44] Colonial regimes and slavery engendered particular distributions of the sensible, or police orders, that precluded the staging of equality more extensively—more globally—than those police orders from which Rancière takes the majority of his examples (eg within the classical world, or within the white populations of European countries). These forcefully limited the participation of certain bodies in political speech, exercising a control over their bodies based on an epidermalised ontology that could not be seen beyond, and which justified the containment, segregation and disciplining of those bodies, their physical confinement to certain spaces in which their claims and demands only elicited the response of corporeal punishment or even death. In other words, the police order constituted them as absolutely other, beyond the social—they could thereby be subject to arbitrary violence. Gündoğdu therefore argues that "not every police order is equally open" to the irruption of politics.[45]

It is clear that in *Zong!* the attempt to appropriate and resignify forms of speech and writing, indicative of an inegalitarian and dehumanising logic, is a fraught problem. The book dramatizes

---

[43] Holloway Sparks, "Quarrelling with Rancière: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Democratic Disruption", *Philosophy and Rhetoric* Volume 49, Number 4 (2016), pp. 420-437; p. 426.
[44] Ayten Gündoğdu, "Disagreeing with Rancière: Speech, Violence, and the Ambiguous Subjects of Politics", *Polity*, volume 49, number 2 (April 2017), pp. 188–219; p. 205.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 206.

how constraints which left those on board with no access to writing and no access to a common language inhibit egalitarian demonstrations in a manner which Rancière does not spend much time elaborating. It is a problem immanent to Rancière's theorisation, however: the staging of equality is an issue of translation—not linguistic translation, from one language into another, but the translation of the claim to speech by those who are of no account into a sensory order which hitherto could not decipher it. This translation expands the field of the sensory order, because its intelligibility exceeds the narrowly defined distribution of the sensible according to which only the words issuing from those within a community comprising certain parts and roles could be understood. This is distinct from the transparent translation of the previously invisible into the extant distribution of the sensible—the redress of liberalism, of assimilation. Rancière's formulation of politics recalls the theorisation of opacity given by Glissant, and is not simply a question of universal representational visibility. Integral to this account of politics is the manifestation of a discrepancy between two logics—not an agreement over the terms of what can be sensed. In Rancière's account of political subjectivation that discrepancy subsides with the resumption of normal service—the reinstitution of an altered or expanded distribution or police order.

But in *Zong!* there is no resolution in this sense. Partly this is for the reasons elaborated by Gündoğdu: demonstrations of political agency in the midst of a racist distribution of the sensible are subject to severe constraints and cannot function as purely as in Rancière's examples—they might result in "thwarted attempt[s] at disidentification"[46] from existing orders which stop short of a claim to equality, their subjects remaining absent, fugitive and beneath legibility, as in the pared down, skeletal language of the first part, and "Dicta" in particular, which can offer no memorial consolation, no names for the dead.[47] But, more specifically in its aesthetic capacity, *Zong!* extends

[46] *Ibid*., p. 214.

[47] The poems in this section include the line beneath which the fictive names of the dead had been written in the earlier poems, but this space is left blank. The title refers to those elements of the case considered inessential to the question at hand, labelled *obiter dicta*, "all other opinions". (199) The poems therefore concern what was/is

its politics beyond the scene of the appropriation of speech. Even in Rancière's account, politics is not simply a matter of rhetorical demonstration: it concerns the valuation of perception more generally, the disputation over the intelligibility of that which comes before or is beyond speech. For reasons already elaborated, those on board the *Zong* were deprived of language—absent from written records and denied the capacity for speech by a sensory order that justified their domination. More than simply highlighting or exacerbating this fact, Philip's book sounds out the expressive capacity of noise even in and because of the historical constraints which confine her to the extra-, pre- and para-linguistic: shout, moan, mutter, cry.

This should give us pause: if we too readily translate noise into speech and confine political interruption to this moment, we miss or deny precisely this expressive potential of noise *within* speech. To make this translation excludes what is beyond speech from the expressive capacity to use language granted to all human beings equally. For it is not the capacity for speaking intelligibly (rendering interiority) that Rancière posits as the foundation of equality, but the capacity for linguistic expression which does not take determinate form—the excess of and in words—and can therefore be used by those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings; those whose usage would be unintelligible according to the extant structure of intelligibility which defines the right to speak as the right to be counted. The common iterability of language—the democracy of writing, or what Rancière calls "literarity"—means that even those who are not intelligible as speaking politically have the capacity to take up and misuse language, to use it unreasonably to express a wrong. Rancière therefore argues, against Plato and Aristotle, that language includes politics only because it exceeds the distinction between reasoned speech and unreasonable noise—it includes the difference between a community that orders bodies based in their claims to and in reasoned speaking, and a community of sensing that exceeds that distribution of bodies. [48] If the principle

inadmissible to the law: "seas without / insurers / owners / perils / islands / africa". (49) Here what is beyond the law and outside writing cannot be remembered.

[48] Rancière notes that for the ancients, the democratic freedom manifest in language was reconcilable with a society which included slavery based on a circular logic whereby freedom was not a 'human right' but the opposite of slavery: "The slave is the one who has the capacity to understand a logos without having the capacity of the logos.

of democratic politics is of the capacity of anybody to take part, but language as the instrument of that politics is held to divide a community based in the capacity for judgement, this is a contradiction. It is this contradiction that will be felt, sensed, as the aesthetic disincorporation of any distribution of bodies and capacities in community.

The aesthetic regime, evident in the "orphaned letters" of writing without an intending subject, but also in the hypothetical equality in the power of speech, indexes the fact that an "arrangement of words was no longer guaranteed by an ordered system of appropriateness between words and bodies." (*Disagreement*, 57)

> Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his 'natural' purpose by the power of words. This *literarity* is at once the condition and the effect of the circulation of 'actual' literary locutions […which] do not produce collective bodies [but rather] introduce lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary collective bodies. (*Disagreement*, 39)

The literarity of politics both undoes existing sensible distributions and constructs new ones which are heterogeneous, incomplete; premised on a principle of fiction that "involves the re-framing of the 'real', or the framing of a dissensus. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance."[49]

This is the significance of aesthetic dissensus to politics: it disarticulates the relation between what can be sensed and what can be said about it, it disincorporates bodies and words. The aesthetic regime of art is essentially an ideology of art which formalises the suspension or disjunction between sensations, words and bodies. It represents a disarticulation between what can be sensed and what can be said about it. It disincorporates bodies and words (orphaned letters

---

He is the specific transition from animality to humanity that Aristotle defines most precisely as participating in the linguistic community by way of comprehension but not understanding […], the slave is the one who participates in reason so far as to recognize it (*aesthesis*) but not so as to possess it (*hexis*). The contingent naturalness of the freedom of the man of the people and the naturalness of slavery can then be distinguished without referring back to the ultimate contingency of equality." (*Disagreement*, 17)

[49] Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p.149.

without intention); there is no necessary link between sonorous emissions, linguistic performances, words, bodies, and their capacities. This means, however, that there can be no final redistribution of the sensible as long as there is aesthetic dissensus.

In the suspension of the aesthetic regime, the boundaries which determined the division between noise and speech are tested for their stability. In poetry prosody is a site of this testing: it is continually troubling the division between the semantic and non-semantic features of language, alerting us to what is beyond speech in language, and to the noise that is within speech. The grounds of rationality are transformed: it is not just a question of what counts as speech, but what is perceptible as constituting the valuable and intelligible units of poetic composition, which, if poetry does more than ornament paraphrasable content, comprise the measure of its thinking. Rather than hearing speech in noise, attending to poetry's formal constraints as poetic thinking means hearing *logos* in sound. For the condition of *logos* is that it "*expresses*" while *phone* "simply *indicates*" (*Disagreement*, 2)—but once sound becomes expressive it need not be assimilated as speech: prosody is precisely expressive noise which challenges the reservation of *logos* by the semantic.[50]

This is all the more pertinent to Black expressive work: the marginalisation or exclusion of forms of verbal expressivity is part of the aesthetic division that distinguishes Black creativity on

[50] To be clear, I am not opposing prosody with the semantic, as Agamben does in his opposition between the semiotic (material aspect of language) and the semantic. I intend that prosody is the site where this dualism cannot be maintained. This is similar to Benveniste's expansive understanding of the semantic to include prosody, which I discuss in more detail in Ch 4. I do not think that this necessarily invalidates Rancière's discussion of the distinction between noise and speech as the basis for political disagreement, because he does not make an ontological distinction between the two; but it does extend the sensory field in which political conflict is staged beyond the strictly referential elements of speaking to include the gestural, intonational, in short what is referred to as the paralinguistic, in as much as these are also always constituent elements in what is valued as meaningful speech. Of course, to acknowledge this will change what we understand by the nature of utterance, and, as I mention above (pp. 157-8), will alter our conceptualization of speech by challenging its attribution only to those granted interiority. It might, then, also reconfigure how we understand the metaphysics of subjectivity--see David Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry*, for a fuller discussion of this; and also for an argument which opposes Rancière's notion of a redistribution of the sensible to a notion of its revaluation, particularly pp. 87; 110; 114-6. Where Nowell Smith concludes that Rancière's concept of politics is based on an idea of sensory redistribution implying a fixed array of elements understood to be linguistically valuable, I have argued above that Rancière's strict conception of politics is based precisely in the manifestation of a discrepancy in perceptual logics than in the ultimate redistribution of sensible elements, which redefines a new police order.

the basis of sound in opposition to White literacy.[51] That is, the partitioning of noise from sense/*logos* has been constitutive in determining cultural value, based in the ontologisation of each and their hierarchical ordering. There is a politics of vernacular and oral culture that seeks to reverse this hierarchy—but there is also a politics that would question the ground on which the partition is made in the first place. In these interstices we can find the politics of *Zong!*.

Expanding the prosodic sensorium

Zong!'s own formal constraints—that is, the prosodic texture by which its phonic material is organised in performance—are themselves the site of a dramaturgy, the staging of a conflict between flight and constraint: a (dis)articulation of the voice by rhythm. In the rhythmic shaping of the poem's material, the critical points which inflect the poem's prosodic intonation are both embedded within and exceed the language out of which Philip constructs the poem. So far in my reading of *Zong!* I've been giving an account of how its appropriated language becomes a site of struggle over the meaning of the historical reality to which Philip is responding, so that her attempt to "conjure the presence" of slaves must work against the modes of apprehension that structured that reality. In what follows I look more closely at the techniques of *Zong!*'s prosody as formal constraints in which this struggle takes place beyond the field of the visible, within the opacities of the work's prosody.

The second section of the poem splays words across its pages, which many commentators, following Philip's own suggestion, describe as evoking "the fragmentation and mutilation that slavery perpetrated on Africans." (*Zong!*, 195) But beyond the form's mimetic evocation of violence, the language generates its own immanent meanings. The intoning of these words, their cadenced articulation and voicing, is for Philip a way to answer the question: "what meaning did [those on board] make of it [their experience] and how did they make it mean?" (*Zong!*, 194) There

[51] Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

is a question of agency here: what meaning did these people make in spite of and in excess of the violence perpetrated against them? To make fragmentary language mean requires that we value fragments in and amongst themselves, rather than allowing them to be overwritten as the violent inhibition of meaning, and of human being, thereby recapitulating the force of linguistic occlusion which *Zong!*'s first part illuminates. The value of these fragments will exceed the discipline of the understanding—not by breaking language and inhibiting its completion, but by constituting prosodic elements irreducible to regular measure. "*Perhaps, the fragment allows for the imagination to complete its missing aspects*", Philip muses. (*Zong!*, 201-2)

Zong!'s fragmentary language is patterned by a rhythmic character which traverses the work and shapes the interaction of its various parts. It is here where we might begin to locate some of its meanings. If we are attentive to the felicities and dynamisms of its prosody, we might see how to Philip's text attunes us aesthetically to the unheard in its salvaged language, exceeding either speech or silence.

Zong!'s prosody enacts the "rude sound" of which one of its voices complains. The complaint targets not only a representation of unintelligible song, but formal manifestation of rhythm and pattern in the text: without radically condensing the fragmented text and disregarding the line beaks and uneven spacing, the poem's rhythms are often disarticulated from, and disarticulate, any parsing of the text's semantics. Take one of the examples quoted above, which I rendered as "dum d/um de dum dum the no / ise the noise th / e drum it does not sto / p". On the page it looks like this:

des & sp *es* dum d

um de du m dum th e no

ise the noi se th

e drum it do es not sto

p the *o* *ba* so bs a (141)

More irregular and more challenging to transcribe than the metrical tempo "dum dum de dum dum", there is nevertheless some principle by which we will orient our reading of these letters, and which will emerge as the text is elaborated in performance, and this is what I am calling the rhythm.

the bells ding ding

and dong over

the water done done deed done died

done dead

there is fresh fish no water

rush rush feet

guns run red (85)

sea ague gripe

grips the gut the gun

get the

gun the man runs she runs

hold them over

board with them a rout it

was a riot good dog he pats it *me*

I be man me man (109)

A cursory scan detects repetitions determined by alliterative development, lexical and rhythmical refrains, with an emphasis on trisyllabic figures and spondees. The uneven spacing makes timing unpredictable. Because there is no consistent lineation, it is difficult to determine the measure

against which we value each stressed or unstressed syllable. There are elements of calypso, dub, and the encounter between African song and English from which they derive. This variety engenders in the text a polyrhythmic character. We could scan the sequence of phrasing "GRIPS the / GUT the gun / GET the / GUN the man" as a syncopated trochaic tetrameter, if we ignore the line break and spacing; but this competes with the sense, which would group "grips the gut", "the gun, get the gun", "the man runs, she runs" as phrasal units with different emphasis. Our encounter with what looks like a transcription of spoken language in a Caribbean vernacular towards the end of the passage comes with its own rhythms, which subsequent reading may retain even as it pronounces phrases in Standard English.

This is further complicated by Philip's delivery of the poem, which is exceedingly varied: sometimes accompanied by music, other times intoned chorally, sometimes using the book as a score for an improvised performance. Nevertheless, I confine my discussion of the poem's rhythms to its appearance on the page as a performance, in a way which both transcribes and anticipates, and contours, voicing. Here the rhythmic figure includes resonances at the level of the phoneme, of syntax, tone and semantics; it finds its expression in a range of vernacular registers and languages. It would be better to describe this rhythm as a "cellular" figure, as Ben Etherington sets out in his essay on "Cellular Scansion" in Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage*, a book with which *Zong!* has thematic as well as rhythmic overlap.[52] Etherington's approach suggests the cell as a unit of scansion whose "component elements generate poetic tissue that, cumulatively, structures our experience."[53] As will be evident from my account, some of these components are derived from the appearance of the poem on the page, its spacing and grouping of words determining rather than simply transcribing speaking. Indeed, Philip's interactive performances and improvised

[52] Ben Etherington, "Cellular Scansion", *Thinking Verse* III (2013), pp. 186-209. Etherington's approach has the benefit of avoiding the free verse/metre distinction, which in the Caribbean context reduces the complexity of the enabling antagonism between verse orality and the written word by aligning authentic rhythm with vernacular speech; rhythm then appears simply as a mechanical transcription of speech. Furthermore, *Zong!* is too irregular to allow for the determination of a meter against which a spoken rhythm could be contrasted.
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 195.

responses relies on the nature of the poem on the page as a kind of score, available for democratic elaboration.

Because *Zong!* is not a linear text it would be fraught to try and demonstrate that its rhythm is necessarily established from the beginning and then developed throughout the book; instead, my claim is only that a rhythmic character becomes evident at various points, with certain elements predominating in each of the four sections of the book's second half.[54] From the first movement of this half of the book, "Sal", we can detect several of the figures that will recur:

there is

creed there is

fate there is

oh oh oracle

there are

oh oh

ashes

over

ifá

ifá

ifá i (60)

What is predominant to my ear (and eye) here are the repetitions of words—although Philip mines her source text for a diverse and multilingual vocabulary, there are many thematic recurrences in each language, and a "Glossary" and "Manifest" at the end of the book take lexical stock of these; the syntactical repetition, "there is"—and I mean to point to the repetition of syntax in general rather than this particular syntax; phonemic repetitions in twos or threes, "**oh o**racle **o**ver", "oh

[54] In a 2011 performance in Calgary Philip told the audience in an aside that she feels each of the sections has a distinct rhythm which she discovers each time as she reads. The performance can be found on youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zjz8UFGCJeI [accessed 30/06/20].

oh oh", "**o**h **o**h **o**ver", "*if**á** if**á** if**á***"; and the three stress or three syllable grouping, as in "fate there is". Even as the words are fragmented, these elements remain: a few pages later we read "**ter** wa**ter**" (*Zong!*, 68) and on the same page the figure repeats, this time fitting the patois: "***d**e **m**en **d**e**m** / **c**a**m** fo **m**i*".

In the next section, "Ratio", we find "land no land"; "save *omo* save"; "*man me man*"; "gut the gun"; "gun the man." (*Zong!*, 108-9) In "Ferrum" as the language becomes more particulate, it becomes harder to determine where stress might fall: "see i mad", "e a rush", "to the o". (*Zong!*, 130) Phonemes are isolated and orphaned, and subjected to unusual stress:

y great bla me & **r**a

in **r**an **r**ed fort

une flam es feed s our nig

ht s di (159)

Typical of the reading experience is the moment in the passage above, where we stall over the pronunciation of "fort / une flam-es", the French *une flamme* caught between the English "fortune flames". Also typical is the jarring appearance of "nig" as we pass over the line-break, which is only partially recuperated as the first syllable of "nig-ht-s". This awkward torsion on language makes the voicing of its syllables decisive, and in the duration of a continuous reading a conflict emerges between submitting these syllables to a rhythmic consistency and balking at their difficult interruptions. The effort to smooth over these interruptions anticipates and echoes moments where the text does resolve into full song or chant in its various African languages (even as these passages are still interrupted by the spacing on the page):

Oh ye ye oh ma abo oh oh mi ebora

Ye ye lan tic oh ca ri be eh sho ala o mi o (168)

In the Caribbean context, rhythmic innovation has been understood as an escape from constraint. In his writing on poetics, Edward Kamau Brathwaite inveighs against the imperialism of the pentameter: first, because its metrical strictures fail to adequate the spoken rhythms and the environment of the Caribbean, which exists beneath any kind of official codified language, "not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word";[55] and second, because it represents the legacy of linguistic domination in the education system which was entirely focused on the English canon. As Etherington sets out, interventions such as Brathwaite's go beyond theorising a proper prosodic measure for Caribbean poetry: they tell "a story about the emergence of a new verse culture in the decolonizing Caribbean, which was said to be restoring poetry to the rhythms of the creole voice and, thereby, reconciling print and oral traditions."[56] But Brathwaite's program for nation language poetry is not simply an escape from the prosody of the page into the truer rhythms of the spoken word; it is rather the instantiation of the speech-rhythms of Caribbean language as the material basis for an expanded prosody, such that these sounds are heard not as aberrations to metrical order but as comprising the units for a new rhythmic texture. As a resource for poetry, nation language is language that in its syllables, its "contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions" emerges from but also elaborates Caribbean experience.[57] To make nation language poetry is to destabilize the centre/periphery dynamic which undergirds the linguistic and cultural aspects of the colonial project. As Laurence Breiner writes, "nation language can provide not only linguistic objects to be enshrined in a poem, or the means to create a poem of characters, but the material of the poem itself, its own voice, its *logos*. Once the poem itself, rather than a voice represented in it, can be said to be speaking nation language, then the value of that language as a mode of expression is established."[58] Nation language, then, clearly has a political valence, though not based

[55] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: the development of nation language in Anglophone Caribbean poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p. 17.
[56] Etherington, "Cellular Scansion", p. 189.
[57] Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 13.
[58] Laurence Breiner, *Introduction to West Indian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 182.

in its representations or the direction of its author's commitments: its politics reside in the way in which it redistributes a linguistic sensorium. If we detect something like the politics of nation language in *Zong!*'s rhythms, it would be in its altering the valuation of the components of sound in speech.

This is how *Zong!* could be said to redress, without looking beyond, the history of black exclusion. Philip's rhythms are necessitated by the material out of which Philip makes the poem: not only the court judgement, but the enunciative possibilities afforded by the language she mines from it. The material of the poem is historical—the possibilities for its shaping are constrained by the history of technique embedded in it: Glissant calls technique, "an organized method used by a group to deal with its surroundings."[59] Those possibilities are realised not by the genius of the artist putting the material in accord with its true form, but by responding to the internal logic of the material as an accumulation of the history of technique.[60] For Glissant, that technique is the sedimented logic of relation. Its elaboration describes a creolisation, a mixing which retains opacity:[61]

> Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures.[62]

We might think of the woven fabrics that Glissant is describing as the material constraints out of which a poem is made. If the rhythmic components of *Zong!*'s language are continuous with the politics of Nation language, it is because they are a manifestation of "linguistic difference", in

---

[59] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* trans. Michael J. Dash (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1989) p.16.
[60] Cf. for an elaboration of this sense of material and materialism—as opposed to that which sees the material 'behind' or external to the work—specifically in the context of Caribbean Literature, Ben Etherington, "What is Materialism's Material? Thoughts towards (actually against) a materialism for 'world literature'", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48.5 (2012), 539-551; and for a materialist account of art as *techne*, Henry Staten, "The Origin of the Work of Art in Material Practice", *NLH* Vol. 43, Iss. 1 (Winter, 2012), pp. 43-64.
[61] "Creolizations bring into Relation but do not universalise", *Poetics of Relation*, p. 89.
[62] *Ibid.*, p. 190.

Glissant's terms, through a "framework [that] is not made of transparency."[63] Nation language is "constantly transforming itself into new forms" and "adapting to the new environment and to the cultural imperative of the European languages."[64] Its import for Brathwaite is that it "affects literature": it transforms the material of literature and the "perceptual models" with which it unfolds.[65]

To think about *Zong!* redistributing the sensorium in the manner of nation language is to think about how it registers the translatability of different linguistic regimes, without conceding that this translatability requires a transparent third term—a master language, or the regulation of the understanding, in which phonetic materiality is sorted and eliminated from semantic meaning. Thinking this way avoids the short-circuit whereby rhythm stands in for an authentic representation or reconstruction of a vernacular (say, of the spoken rhythms of these languages, which are various and attributed to different personas in the poem). As should be clear, the poem's prosody does not emerge only in the situations of dialect or African languages, but cuts across the text's linguistic material. It is constituted by a creolization of language; by the collision of different official and unofficial languages; the oral and the written; and by an experience of textual silencing.

It therefore links the cadences of performatively innovated speech sound to the historical reality encoded in its material. That historical reality is twofold: on one hand, the reasoned language of the court judgement, which excludes the possibility of unreasonable speaking; and which operates on a principle of silent and uninflected voicing. This silence, manifest in gaps on the page, also becomes part of the poem's prosodic articulation. It spaces and cadences the voicing of the imagined overheard vernacular languages of the middle passage—but with gaps on the page indicating a temporally indeterminate background of silence out of which voicing emerges, which is evidently distinct from the usual way that the gap manifests a silence in the regularity of the line-

[63] Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation* trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p.120.
[64] Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 7.
[65] *Ibid.*, pp. 15; 8.

break. Perhaps we also hear something like the sound of the violence of denying humanity: its physical manifestation as sound, "the beat in bone", in the whiteness of the page now animate in dialectic with the poem's intonation.

On the other hand, the historical reality is registered in the way in which rhythm both encodes and differs from spoken language. Like Brathwaite's choice to make nation language the expressive vehicle for Caribbean poetry, rather than simply a dialect that it represented, Philip mines the resources of the conflagration of languages in the poem. Often this emphasises their expressive capacity over and above any discernible semantic 'content'. Particularly in "Ferrum", the penultimate section of the poem which Philip describes as her "revenge" on "the language of the coloniser", (*Zong!*, 205) the result is something approaching sound poetry, where collections of phonemes articulate speech rhythms, sometimes familiar and sometimes cutting against habits of intonation and pronunciation. Where the beginning of the poem sets out a three beat figure which is roughly coincident with English monosyllablics, at some points these monosyllables themselves are split in two; the beats multiply (I've indicated spacing with square brackets for economy): "ri / [ ] se up in ti [ ] me to sn [/] ap the sp [ ] ine of tim [ ] e". (*Zong!*, 141)

This is further complicated by the accent of the reader—in Philip's case, her Canadian/Trinidadian inflection can more easily accommodate certain rhythms or phonemic combinations that I stumble with in my Canadian/RP. Accent also makes the temporality of reading various: among the scattered letters there can emerge a recognizable word in any of the text's languages, whose pronunciation might then reconfigure how the phonemes around it are voiced, for example in the following succession: "ir ski" "n on he" "r sk" "in he wa" "s a sly o." (146) Where the first encounter with the "ski" might pronounce a long /aɪ/, once it is recognized as a constituent part of "skin" the phoneme will change to /ɪ/. Likewise for the 'a' in "wa [ ] s". All of this makes for a polyphony of voicings, oscillating between the abstract and the situated or performed.

Usually in poetry this situation of disorder at the level of the phoneme is owing to the tension between spoken rhythms and prosody. But here, the spoken rhythm itself is denaturalised. There is no 'normal' way to speak this poem which must compete with its metrical scheme. It is as though the only ground for consistency is a rhythm which is in excess of the habitual tendencies of spoken language, but also in excess of any notation on the page. Cutting across the fractured language in the poem, the rhythmic figure implies often contradictory, impersonal voicings; but it also gives a coherence to those fragmentary voicings. The non-semantic and sonorous patterns in prayer, the abstract sound in tone, the "beat in bone", the 'unmeaningful' orphaned graphemes: all of these are linked by a rhythmic figure that both defamiliarizes and makes expressive its material. We hear the excess in written Standard English which, rather than being overlooked as unintelligible deformation of the language, becomes here the material basis and vehicle for expression.

This represents the prosodic elaboration of Philip's valuation of the phonic over the semantic in her 1989 collection, *She tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*.[66] There, Philip focuses on the effects of the deprivation of language on Africans in the new world, and of the imposition of English as a "father tongue". This deprivation and imposition, says Philip, leads to a breaking of the link between image and word, or self-conception and self-expression, and a situation in which "the African was decontextualized except in so far as her actions generated profits for her owners."[67] In this sense, alienated from speech, self-expression, the African is reduced to mechanical labour-power. Yet even at this level, Philip suggests the preservation of a vital power at the same time as the human is compressed or reduced to a function of production, "that body might become tongue", "that skin become/ Slur slide susurration / polyphony and rhythm—the drum."[68] What seemed a simple opposition is here made into a complex dialectic at two levels:

[66] M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT: 1989).
[67] Philip, "The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became A Spy", *Ibid.* p.81.
[68] "She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks", *Ibid.* p.72.

firstly, between the semantic and phonetic, or speech and utterance; and secondly, at the level of utterance, between vital power and reduction to value; a dialectic whose ambivalence is neatly suggested in the morbid yet vital image of body become musical instrument, "drumstick the bones."[69] It is as though each side of the opposition has a material and a social dimension:[70] social meaning depends on a material substrate of embodied utterance; and utterance itself can come to have a social function—rhythmic value—over and against its purely biological function. In *Zong!* that social function is manifest in the way its excessive utterances are valued as part of the poem's prosody; not simply as nonsense as the negative of the understanding's regulation, but as the ground for another sociality.

Zong! not only revenges itself on language by the violent negation of sense, and by the illumination of the nonsense underwriting the word's authority; it presses against the limits of its source text by locating the production of speech and sound as a site of political contest. Furthermore, it accounts for the value of the unruly noise produced by its fragmentation, locating its concern for political representation in the opaque measure of its prosodic constraints. By attending to the aesthetic dissensus in *Zong!*'s form—rather than reading it as reduplicating a critique we already understand, or instituting a representational plenitude which forecloses opacity—we become better attuned to the ways in which the difference between speech and noise is still audible, pressing at the limits of intelligible language and carrying across time the continued exclusion by which the parameters of the human are maintained. Hearing this difference reminds us of the contingency of this exclusion and the possibility of political transformation.

---

[69] *Ibid.* p.72.
[70] to transplant Jameson's re-evaluation of the base/superstructure division in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), p.48.

"You've always wanted poetry, our slimy harness and soft restraint": Performativity, constraint, and linguistic subjectivity in Lisa Robertson

So, if we may not let the muse be free,
She will be bound with garlands of her own.
John Keats

What freedom might mean for me in writing might be to substitute constraints that temporarily displace the social and political constraints that identify us so often damagingly as persons
Lisa Robertson[1]

The quote from Lisa Robertson with which I begin raises several provocations. First, and perhaps least surprising, is the claim that writing's resistance is in form's difference from the damaging social and political world. And yet the freedom of art's formalism is posed paradoxically here, as the substitution of alternative constraints. Constraint's freedom is evidently different from the absence of precedent, or the freedom of form's novelty. Nor is it, in Robertson's formulation, a negative freedom gained only by the deformation of the given: the submission of a damaged discourse to arbitrary constraints in order to wrest value from language whose habitual mediation of social transaction is understood to be irrevocably compromised. As a synecdoche for Robertson's poetry, and in common with the other poets in this study, the statement challenges us to think about freedom other than as the absence or negation of constraint: not freedom as the epiphenomenal effect of constraint, but freedom in the occupation of constraint. What freedom is there in choosing, like Keat's Muse, one's own fetters?

Robertson is alert to the gendered implications of formal constraint as they appear in formulations like Keats'. "Sometimes I want a corset / like to harden me or garnish", she writes, in *The Weather*.[2] In this awareness, she relates the discursive constraints "that identify us so often damagingly as [gendered] persons" with the poetic constraints for which they are substituted. A feature of Robertson's work is its interest in the ineluctable deployment of rhetoric in poetry and

[1] Lisa Robertson and Julie Carr, "An Interview with Lisa Robertson", Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics (Issue 25, January 2013—Feminist Issue) [online], n.p. http://www.thevolta.org/ewc25-jcarr-p1.html [accessed 20/04/20].
[2] Lisa Robertson, *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001), p. 52.

poetics which she understands as the fact of "language's social appearing".[3] In foregrounding its rhetorical dimension, Robertson's writing fits with and departs form Jonathan Culler's plea that we understand lyric not simply as a fictionalization of a situation of address, but as a "rhetorical transaction."[4] Culler goes on to stress that "lyric is characteristically extravagant, performing speech acts not recorded in everyday speech",[5] and although Robertson would not malign lyric's extravagance, for Robertson that extravagance does not disqualify utterances from political significance. Invoking formal constraint as a "substitute" for those existing public discourses which govern the norms by which persons appear, or are identified, declines to differentiate between formalism and modes of social appearing. It yokes formalism with the performative practice whereby persons are given to their social intelligibility. And it acknowledges an affinity between the acts of speaking and recognition involved in politics, and the aesthetic distribution of voice, speech, noise, text, action and appearance; and therefore, it acknowledges this aesthetic distribution as more than purely formal. To articulate how poetry is a kind of constrained public speaking is then to take up a question which Holly Pester has recently formulated as "how to use poetry's framing of speech to rethink the idea of the *freedom of speech*."[6]

Before addressing that question, the homology between formal and social constraint compels us to clarify some points: must we take the constraints that organize linguistic matter, its material patterning, perceptible as repetitions of sounds, the visual aspects of its layout, its rhythmic measure, as equivalent to the material conditions or retrospectively realized rules which govern a subject's appearing in the social world? Is it the case that aspects of prosody can be located determinately in the poem, or do they exceed schematization and remain virtual, renewed in each performance? And what of the programmatic, procedural constraints that generate

---

[3] Lisa Robertson, "My Eighteenth Century", *Assembling Alternatives*, ed. Romana Huk (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003), p. 393.
[4] Jonathan Culler, "Why Lyric?", *PLMA* 123.1 (2008), p.205.
[5] *Loc. Cit.*
[6] Holly Pester, "The Politics of Delivery: Against Poet-Voice", *Poetry Review* 109 (2) (Summer 2019), [online] https://poetrysociety.org.uk/the-politics-of-delivery-against-poet-voice/ [accessed 20/04/20].

Robertson's recent books—are they like the arbitrary and abstract coercions of measurable regularity to which our lives conform, or can they too provide material for inconspicuous and fleeting embodied arrangements? All of these senses of constraint will be useful in approaching Robertson's poetry.

We can see already how, in this conceptualisation, formal constraint is the location of contradictory tendencies: on one hand its presumed self-sufficiency—the poem's integrity mounting a resistance to social and political constraints; on the other, an opening to the social in constraint's affiliation with the ethics of the performative speech act. Rhetoric goes beyond the self-sufficiency of the work in that it anticipates its reception by an audience and appeals to precedent in order to persuade. In a sense, it cedes the autonomy one might seek in writing's freedom to the citation of a shared set of practices, rather than the autonomous ingenuity of an individual. A further contradiction then exists between the type of constraint poetic performance is supposed to substitute: discursive, textual, linguistic; or embodied, material, non-semantic. Perhaps these dichotomies themselves are unstable and alterable.

In this chapter I want to consider the stakes of aligning formal constraint with performativity in the production of poetic subjectivity. My discussion will note how this alignment works through the problem of agency complicated by theories of performativity. It is often asked: if we are, as Judith Butler argues, "dependent on what is outside us" for our autonomy, and we thus "derive our agency from the field of [social norms'] operation", then what scope exists for differing from the norms by which a person's intelligibility is judged?[7] How might this difference be articulated in poetry which openly advertises itself as a site where expression is subject to constraint? I want to ask as well what difference it makes to think about constraint as at once a surface of appearance—that is, the iterative performances by which a subject becomes intelligible—and a governing structure whose existence precedes the subjects it generates. Might

[7] Judith Butler, "Bedside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy", *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 32.

this ambivalence be reflected in the various senses of poetic constraint I've alluded to above and set out in the forgoing chapters? For Robertson constraint conflates perceptible, material adornment and armature's invisible structure—it is a way of identifying that the fundamental materials which construct subjectivity in language might nevertheless be the object of phenomenal experience and pleasurable investments, rather than simply determining structures, against which the only possibility of liberation is refusal or rupture. To pursue these questions is not only to ask after the substance of constraints, but also to question what it would mean to co-exist with the constraint that creates you, but not be identical with it nor exhaustively derived from it.

***

> And if I become unintelligible to myself
> Because of having refused to believe
> I transcribe a substitution
> Like the accidental folds of a scarf.
> From these folds I make persons
> Perfect marriage of accident and need.
> And if I become unintelligible to myself
> Because of having refused to need
> I transcribe a substitution
> To lose the unattainable.
> Like the negligent fall of a scarf
> Now I occupy the design.[8]

What kind of thinking would be able to distinguish poetry's social constraints from its manifestations of truly human freedom? How can we know which constraints respond to a need, and which ones are accidental, unnecessary? If we say that poetic constraints are replacing and thereby disenchanting harmful social constraints, is that because poetry's constraints are more embedded in some sphere of unalienated life than the ideological mystifications through which we are normally constrained to relate to the world? It may be that this form of thinking is itself ideological, and too easily separates categories that are dependent on each other. This kind of materialism is overly credulous and invested in the power of the forces it opposes; in this case, the

[8] Lisa Robertson, *R's Boat* (Berkley, CA: New California Poetry, 2010), p. 81

strict separation between the material truth of poetry and its luxurious, ideological, and false ornamentation would be propped up on a metaphysics for which this ontology is necessarily unshakeable. Robertson's twisting and folding between felicitous accident and necessary design in the poem above responds to this predicament.

That metaphysics, distinguishing between material and the ideological—and the insistence on its absolute inherence—is not only ahistorical, it is congruous with the hierarchical division of gender. The dualism between surface and depth, frivolity and substantiality, has so often underwritten the minimalist tendencies in modernist calls for poetry's progressive refinement, for its shedding of the superfluous. It is attached to a cultural history which denigrates the feminine as superficial, capricious and ungovernable. This is essentially the case that Robertson makes in her essay "My Eighteenth Century."[9] Robertson's essay sets out a critique of some received ideas in contemporary poetry and poetics which circulate around the concept of materiality. She argues that there exists a false and damaging distinction between the material world and our ideas about it, and that this distinction underwrites a form of militant poetics which stakes its radicality on the elimination of any successful linguistic performance or identification as a kind of false consciousness. This distinction has a lineage that would include Wordsworth's stated aim to purify poetic diction in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*; modernism's rejection of the superfluous and embrace of sincerity in Pound's precise image, at "the furthest possible remove from rhetoric";[10] Hulme's "dry, hard" classicism; Olson's paring back to the breath; and Language poetry's version of materialism, which rescues the use-value of linguistic matter from the abstractions of syntax. These she likens to Benjamin's metaphor of a historical materialism "man enough to blast open the continuum of history"[11] in the face of the investments and attachments of the era, questioning whether these poetic stances which appear to be aligned with ideology critique are not in

[9] *Op. cit.*
[10] Ezra Pound, *Gaudier Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 83.
[11] Walter Benjamin, "Ten Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 254.

themselves ideological. Robertson finds this economic empiricism gendered, in that it reads psychic investments, aesthetic experience, feeling, and the rituality of rhetoric as superfluous, reiterating a metaphysics with a long history of devaluing the gratuitous and insubstantial as feminine.

> The means by which materiality has been defended as a dominant critical trope of avant-garde practise are similar to those symbolic structures of authority which circumscribe and limit the performative site of gender as an enunciative rhetoric. That is feminized, devalued, identificatory tropes figured as decadent, insincere, pathological, or neurotic, receive the therapeutic or pedagogical or revolutionary stamp of radically corrective materialist method.[12]

The argument challenges the idea that the poetic subject need not be sought in anything other than minimal truth of its structure. It also questions the way that rhetoric comprised of those gestures which read as gendered expression (ie rhetoric that is perceptible, non-neutral) is positioned as an inauthentic concession to the social forces that aesthetic autonomy would want to orient itself against. In contemporary poetics, conceptualism and language poetry similarly couch their projects in the refusal of identificatory pleasure or emotional simulation. In Oulipo for example, the poem is to be the result of arbitrary constraints, effecting a repositioning of constraint as *restraint*, a check on an unrestrained emotional register, distributed among and received from ideological or social compulsions. Robertson harks back to an earlier neo-classical poetics in which rhetorical ornamentation was not so thoroughly incompatible with serious poetic purpose—even if, as Emerson Marks reminds us, "elegance presupposes propriety" in neo-classical poetics, and thereby disguises an arbitrary relation between ideas and words as necessary.[13] Nevertheless, this poetics explicitly valorises rhetoric in a way that post-romantic postures of sincerity disavow. Robertson calls this tradition of post-romantic poetics masculinist in so far as it stakes its materialism—the closeness of its words to the truth of the material world—in opposition to the

[12] Robertson, "My Eighteenth Century", p. 396.
[13] Emerson Marks, *Taming the Chaos: English Poetic Diction Theory Since the Renaissance* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 65.

pleasures of imaginative and artificial linguistic swagger. This kind of materialism, posing as neutral or scientific, therefore precludes the felicities and infelicities of performance as superstructural, ideological, or incidental to social truth. It is this materialism which is characteristic of the orthodox formulations of Language poetics discussed in the first two chapters, and one of the reasons why those poetics have a blind spot for the self-articulations and -identifications involved in the politics of gender and race. Thus, for Philip as well, the dignification and pleasures afforded by the valuing of patterned utterance are more important aspects of the politics of aesthetics than the critique of appearances—indeed it is her renovation of the prosodic sensorium that constitutes *Zong!*'s critique, a critique which mobilizes precisely these 'superstructural' aspects of language.

Earlier attempts to consolidate a feminist aesthetics sought to address the gendering of constraint with a move towards formal excess and unconstraint: restraint and design were to be repudiated in favour of the unformalizable. The argument against the usefulness of this conceptualization is that it recapitulates an essentialist notion of feminine writing and uncritically links it to (modernist) postures of form-breaking, parataxis, failure, undecidability or anti-narrative, postures which are politically debilitating: this is Rita Felski's claim in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*.[14] But in writing-off experimental techniques as essentially negative or deconstructive, Felski's argument precludes the productivity of the kinds of operations at work in a feminist poetics like Robertson's—precisely on the basis that Felski follows (although superficially inverting) the same 'materialist' logic that rules out certain psychic and political investments in poetic techniques as incompatible with the socially necessary instrumental function of communication. Robertson's desire that feminism "expand the sensorium" (*Cinema of the Present*, 50), on the other hand, questions the stability of the division between the necessary and the excessive, which in turn repositions constraint as an ambivalent animation of personhood beyond mere mechanical determination.

[14] Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Robertson thus continues a conversation in feminist poetics and theory with writers including Erin Mouré and Nicole Brossard, whose work bears the influence of feminist engagements with psychoanalysis: Laura Mulvey, Theresa de Lauretis, Jane Gallop, Luce Iragaray, Héléne Cixous. These writers negotiate the articulation of the symbolic order which structures desire without proscribing the necessity of pleasurable investments and identifications: in other words, they test the exhaustiveness of psychic constraints, and trial strategies for thinking and desiring outside the phallocentric model but which stop short of refusal. Mouré's seminal book *Furious*, for example, speculatively preserves a concept of pure reason as a faculty belonging to everyone while recategorizing it as a "deep emotional current"—opposing it to logic, the structure whereby it is accessed, and which devalues the feminine position.[15]

Thinking about constraint together with identification also raises another of performativity's thorny problems: the issue of pleasure, and what it means to be gratified with an identity whose existence is constructed according to frames of intelligibility that precede the subject whose desire they are supposed to fulfil. Robertson's work centres around pleasurable identifications with frames of subjectivity that are ec-centric and dispersed across pre-determined, iterated and inherited poetic utterances. Bridging formalism and 'representation', her work puts into question the opposition between the naïve work as a dissimulation of a speaking subject, and the autonomous avant-garde work whose formal integrity (which can include estrangement generated by constraint; and even the "open" work, as I've argued with regard to Hejinian) immunizes it from the false consciousness attributed to the straight-forward poem. In this vein Robertson takes the situationist Michèle Bernstein's maxim as an epigraph for her 2010 book *R's Boat*: "We have now reached a stage of experimentation with new collective constructions and new synthesis, and there is no longer any point in combating the values of the old world by at Neo-

[15] Erin Mouré, *Furious* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2018), p. 84.

Dadaist refusal. Whether the values be ideological, artistic, or even financial, the proper thing is to unleash inflation everywhere!"[16]

For her part, Robertson's poetry refuses to exempt experimental writing from the complications of desire and identification. Resituating modernist techniques as "tropes of style" in which performative self-fashioning takes place—that is, aligning what were formerly "promoted as continuum-blasting militarisms" with the decadent contouring of thought in prosody—Robertson suggests that materiality can be understood as a "linguistic figure" equivalent to the more seductive rhetorics of narrative continuity or expressive luxury.[17] "Rhetoric is the performed milieu of the living relation between persons—simply, of politics."[18] Where modernist "continuum-blasting" techniques purportedly exclude the speculative pleasures of rhetoric, opposing them to the icy silence of the materialist gaze, Robertson proposes a poetics "foregrounding the enunciative rhetorics and artifices of language" shared among all speaking beings whose elaboration makes them exceed the merely given.[19] Owing to the effects of linguistic performativity, these rhetorics will always include more than they want to say. They are a testament to the living relations among persons, rather than the record of a disinterested view from beyond that milieu.

Performativity

Robertson, then, will not distinguish between the linguistic figures in which we conduct ourselves to each other (and to ourselves) and the deeper truths which lie within them. This is not only a question of refusing to adjudicate between inauthentic dissimulations of subjectivity and their authentic expression. It is also a question of the extent to which the always already social and external origin of poetry's rhetorical styles is felt as an inhibiting or enabling constraint; a question

[16] Michèle Bernstein, "In Praise of Pinot Gallizio", [1958] trans. John Shepley, [online] The situationist international archive https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/inpraise.html [accessed 20/04/20].
[17] Lisa Robertson, "My Eighteenth Century", p. 392.
[18] *Loc. Cit.*
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 393

whose scope also unsettles the 'here' to which the social is the external 'elsewhere'. These are the questions at stake in the metaphysics of performative subjectivity.

Performativity can be productively considered as a negotiation between autonomy and constraint. As it is formulated by Judith Butler, the performative concept of subjectivation sets out that a subject is constituted by the citational performance of a set of intelligible gestures or speech acts. These performances are intelligible because they function according to existing norms constituting a given field of intelligibility. That field precedes the subject; it is the condition of its emergence. Butler defines performative subjectivity as "a practice of improvisation within a field of constraint."[20] If when I act I am performatively constituting myself as a subject, and that performance is contingent on citing existing norms of speaking and acting, then by what measure could 'I' be said to be anything other than an instance of the norms I perform? Or, to put it another way, how could subjectivity be both a situation of constraint and a situation of improvisation? To think through performative agency is to ask what scope there is for difference from the proscribed or predetermined pattern by which subjects constitute themselves by reconfirming what exists as the horizon of the possible.

To open up this problem it is first necessary to backtrack. If the subject's condition of possibility is a field of existing norms, what, in turn, conditions that field? Ultimately, language. Linguistic iterability is the condition of possibility for performativity, as is Derrida's well-known conclusion in "Signature, Event, Context".[21] Iterability is a structural possibility of language, which means that it is always a virtual potentiality even if an utterance is unique or entirely novel. It inheres, regardless of the content or determinate instance of language use. This means that in every iteration, every act of discourse, there are in fact two modalities of language being deployed: the utterance in the here and now, with determinate content, speaker and receiver; and the virtual capacity of iterability. Likewise with the performance citing a norm: the actual performance

[20] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.
[21] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context", Peggy Kamuf ed., *A Derrida Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

constituting an individual subject; and the possibility that the performance can be repeated, its iterability.

How we understand and define language is important in determining the nature of its conditioning of performances. Language is not only a set of norms which can be induced from a particular speech situation. It cannot be exhausted by its Saussaurean definition as the totality of all possible utterances (*langue*). It is also a virtual, and therefore never extensively realizable, capacity for intelligible utterance. Derrida: "Would a performative statement be possible if a citational doubling did not eventually split, dissociate itself from the pure singularity of the event?"[22] What makes language repeatable, iterable, and thereby extends it beyond any immediate space or context, is also what refutes the conception of language as corresponding to or communicating an existing, external state of affairs. "Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or a large unity, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion."[23] Linguistic performativity thereby introduces—indeed requires as a structural possibility—the capacity for "infelicities", misdirections, recontextualizations, impurities in the speech act which are derived from the aspect of language which is irreducible either to *langue* or *parole*. The speech act includes an excess beyond its unique historical speech situation or content, and beyond the rule which it retrospectively cites into existence.

The performative utterance is therefore split, and not merely between a rule and its example: between the determinate content actualized and the virtual capacity to "engender infinitely new contexts". This is the pure form of language, which is in another way completely impure, because it is present at all times in any deployment of language by anybody. It is not a mark of our alienation from language so much as an index of the fundamental equality of language

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 103.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

users. Rancière calls this literarity. Paolo Virno calls this general "linguistic competence."[24] For Robertson it represents "the potencies of linguistic subjectivity".[25] However we choose to describe it, the equal reality of the virtual and actual modalities of language makes the metaphysics which distinguishes between the material truth and the superfluous artifice obsolete. In the modalities of the virtual and the actual, structure and its individuation coincide, however their relation is one of difference, not identity.

When we experience the relation of this virtual linguistic capacity to the actuality of speaking we discover subjectivity's agency within discourse. As we will see at greater length in the final section on *Cinema of the Present*, that coincidence exists most peculiarly at the level of the pronoun. Saying 'I' calls upon the iterative possibility inherent in the speech act which exceeds its identity with an external subject. Butler thus proposes "that agency begins where sovereignty wanes. The one who acts (who is not the same as the sovereign subject [because acting always exceeds intention]) acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset."[26] But the fact that the act is non-identical with those enabling constraints constitutes the agency of language's virtual capacity in excess of its current deployment: "The disjuncture between utterance and meaning is the condition of possibility for revising the performative, of the performative as the repetition of its prior instance, a repetition that is at once a reformulation…. The citationality of the performative produces that possibility for agency and expropriation at the same time."[27] Denise Riley's discussion of irony usefully clarifies how a rhetorical effect might be derived automatically from the necessity of discursive repetition, and yet still exceed (and thereby be granted an agency

[24] Virno's invocation of the linguistic faculty, and elsewhere of the "general intellect", is not related to the universal grammatical capacity assumed by Chomsky's generative grammar, but to Marx's speculation in the *Grundrisse*. Cf. *Grammar of the Multitude: For an analysis of contemporary forms of life,* trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2004), where Virno outlines his thesis about the valorization of the universal intellectual and linguistic faculties of speaking beings in the post-fordist economy.
[25] Lisa Robertson, "The Collective", *Avant Canada: Poets, Prophets, Revolutionaries* ed. Gregory Betts and Christian Bök (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2018), p. 26.
[26] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: a politics of the performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 16.
[27] *Ibid.*, p 87.

beyond) the conditions which compel it. Her interrogation of irony in *Words of Selves* puts pressure on the metaphor of "irony as a form of dress" to ask whether we could imagine irony's agency beyond the ambivalence between self-fashioning and being fashioned.[28] She imagines ironic repetition as immanently producing difference, comparing "the automatic irony of frequency" (*Words of Selves*, 158) to the estrangement of echo. Riley emphasises the voiced character of repetitions. Echo makes language material so that "the word, now as thing, is wrenched into a novel sense or a nonsense, made strange by the brute fact of its re-presentation alone or because its context has been lopped off." (*Words of Selves*, 157) Repetitions function, like Deleuze's anti-Platonic simulacra, to ironize "something within or about the very repetition that it enacts": not the fact of resemblance to or difference from a model, but the very fact of iterability itself. (*Words of Selves*, 158) It is here, "in the actual operations of irony" (*Words of Selves*, 167) that Riley locates her optimism for its political potential.

But, in habitual usage, this double aspect of language is elided. An utterance or a performance is understood to the extent that it exemplifies or imitates existing norms or usages. This constitutes a foreclosure of the possibility for innovation more generally. Paolo Virno describes the substitution of language's actual modality for its virtual modality as a crisis of historicity, particularly symptomatic of post-Fordist capitalism.[29] We now experience everyday the potentially innovative form of language, not merely language representing states of affairs, but actively producing them as it mediates immaterial labour and financial transactions. However, so Virno's argument goes, this aspect of language is only disclosed to us in the alienated products of the value form. We then misconceive language's potentiality as a universal capacity of speaking beings as a power derived from the value form, coextensive with a series of actually existing products.

[28] Riley, *Words of Selves*, p. 151.
[29] Paolo Virno, *Déjà vu and the End of History*, trans. David Broder (London: Verso, 2015).

Virno explains that at the level of the virtual, "Language is the past-in-general of acts of speaking, the undateable 'before' of every specific, unrepeatable utterance." (*Déjà vu*, 24) This aspect of language is palpable whenever we experience the familiar strangeness of a word, in what Riley calls language's automatic ironization. Yet Virno warns that the predominant mode of contemporary experience at the end of history (capitalist realism) replaces the "experience of the possible" (*Déjà vu*, 47) indicated by ironic repetition with the false recognition of déjà vu; irony degenerates into knowing, blank repetitions of pastiche (which involve the false recognition of the-past-in-general as actual, citable styles). In the experience of déjà vu, the past-in-general is misrecognized as an event that has taken place. "When today's potential is confused for an already experienced act, which we are now constrained to copy unvaryingly, human praxis degenerates into repetitive, predetermined behaviour patterns." (*Déjà vu*, 39) If the same misrecognition is applied to language, all utterance appears familiar, merely the repetition of existing possible utterances. Language's historicity is elided—it is, simply, identical with what is. "History is stopped in its tracks, as our faculties are reduced to a script to which we must conform down to the last detail—a jumble of performances that must be reiterated *ad infinitum*." (*Déjà vu*, 32)

This is precisely the terrain of struggle for Robertson, although, where Virno sees its emergence as part of the teleology of capitalist development, Robertson is more attentive to the ways in which these potentialities are experienced in forms of sociality which are not subsumed by the capitalist value form—that is, she finds this possibility in the affective and intersubjective dispositions of friendship, romance, and collectivity more generally.[30] Of the Kootenay School of Writing, an experimental publishing and teaching collective in Vancouver of which she was a member in the 90s, Robertson writes that "in a sense, time was their medium."[31] The collective aimed "to help the collapse of time as metrics, and encourage its transformation into a luxuriously

[30] As such she answers Silvia Federici's critique of the autonomist elision of reproductive labour in their emphasis on cognitive work. "Precarious Labour: A Feminist Viewpoint", *Variant* issue 37 (October, 2006), https://www.variant.org.uk/37_38texts/9PrecLab.html [accessed 30/04/2020].
[31] Lisa Robertson, "The Collective", p. 21.

shared lubricant, an enticingly shimmering and moving fabric, a shared yet contested décor." ("The Collective", 21) Like Virno, she emphasises the difference between the virtual potentiality of thought, which she speculates "must live in hiding", and its actual instantiation in "official institutionalizations": "Capital gives everything its emptied double—form can't live there so relationships won't change." ("The Collective", 21) Form here is not determinate shape, nor abstract value-form, opposed as it is to the emptied doubles of Capital—instead, form implies potentiality, forming, guided by the idea that "part of political practice is immaterial." ("The Collective", 23) She finds that immaterial potentiality in "people's speech, its self-authorization, its communal autonomy." ("The Collective", 20) Robertson's insistence on the "enunciative rhetorics and artifices of language", its form, intends to draw our attention to language's historicity, its capacity to exceed its actual instantiation and generate new subjectivity.

***

Robertson's work directs attention to the form of language—not only its shape, but its non-actualizable structural possibility, that is, how it forms—in excess of its content. By inhabiting conspicuously obsolete genres Robertson clarifies their formal features, self-reflexively exaggerating their postures. Three books, *XEclogue* (1993), *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), and *The Men* (2006) addressed pastoral, epic, and lyric respectively. Genre represents a sedimented history of rhetoric, informed by strata of epistemological and ontological assumptions governing the identity of the speaker, the propriety of their subject, and their audience; assumptions which negotiated what could be seen and what could be said about it. These assumptions determined how spoken bodies might experience what existed—or, in the case of pastoral, what used to exist—reiterating a set of rhetorical postures that testified to speaking's truth.[32] Inhabiting these generic constraints,

[32] Cf. Robertson, "How Pastoral: A Manifesto" *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s* eds. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), where Robertson sets out the premises of her "seeding" obsolete genres in the hope of their aberrant flowering.

Robertson draws out their ambivalences, dressing anachronisms in obsolete conventions and thereby flaunting generic decorum. Rather than deferring to these historical genres as discrete, unchangeable and irredeemable examples of historical attitudes, Robertson's practice opens them up as sites of potentially alternative and contradictory meanings: even these congealed linguistic products contain evidence that things could have been different. Brian Reed has called this Robertson's "preposterous classicism" which "reverse[s] the usual vector of cultural authority" between contemporary writers and the traditions towards which they look back.[33] We might say that Robertson reads back an aesthetic dissensus—which, for Rancière, we recall, marks the alterability of language within the supposedly unchangeable order it designates—into the ostensibly fixed positions out of which it emerges, perverting rhetorical persuasion from its proper destination to "[disrupt] the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations."[34] The aim is to reanimate agency—the capacity to inaugurate difference—even within the rhetorical forms of genres which had historically functioned to deny it to women, workers and indigenous people. We can see how, in its focus on the rhetoric of identification as well as its engagement with historic poetic practices, this politics of poetic form differs from those of Language poetics which were premised on the refusal and disavowal of the 'Romantic subject' and the 'lyric "I"'.

I'll turn now to Robertson's book *The Weather* to consider this practice at length. In the book Robertson emphasises the form of language not only by reflexively identifying generic conventions, but also the features of prosody even in the supposedly 'neutral' and unremarkable language of weather description. Prosody represents a constraint in language which, by making palpable the articulating force of rhythm and intonation in sense-making, recalls a speaker's participation in language which exists in excess of its instrumentalization as the conveyor of conceptual meaning. This qualifies the metaphysics of the subject prior to utterance underpinning the Romantic concept of poetic expression. It suggests instead a subjectivity in which pleasure is

[33] Brian Reed, "Lisa Robertson, Ezra Pound, and Preposterous Classicism", *Open Letter* 14 No 5 (Spring 2011), p. 43.
[34] Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 72.

derived from the constraints that connect the speaker to a history of "hackneyed words" and the inherent resourcefulness by which a speaker can transform them.[35] In the following section, I'll read this metaphysics of subjectivity in *Cinema of the Present,* a book which applies experimental constraints to Robertson's own language, specifically the pronoun. It thereby imagines even the most intimate and immediate expressions as simultaneously constituting an experience of history and potentiality, and therein situates a speaker's capacity to innovate.

The Weather

Consistent with her rejection of high modernist aesthetic autonomy, Robertson's *The Weather* (2001) discovers linguistic agency even in that most commonplace of social situations, discourse about the weather. The book considers how discursive constraints that organize a habitual and naturalized relation of subjects to the world might already contain the possibility of their overflow. *The Weather* is comprised of seven prose poems (one for each day of the week) interspersed with segments of a free verse poem, "Residence at C", and concludes with another entitled "Porchverse". All of the poems deal in some way with descriptions of the weather. The prose poems aggregate sentences or fragments of sentences of landscape and atmospheric description, some more archaic, some more of a piece with Robertson's conceptually complex yet sensuous and baroque lyric style. Each one is organized around a thematic, syntactic or rhetorical refrain, which makes for writing highly patterned with repetitions, semantic, rhythmic or tonal. These are, as the notes at the end of the book disclose, comprised of material based on, or found during, archival research into "the rhetorical structure of English meteorological description"—and as a reader might already have gleaned from certain familiar, technical, phrasings belonging to, for example, the shipping forecast, or annotations of Constable's cloud sketches from the 1820s. The lineated lyrics, on the other hand, are apparently composed of original material and locate

[35] Lisa Robertson, *The Weather*, p. 14.

themselves as lyric, its attendant connotations of direct expression, the reflections of an 'I'-speaker. The title of "Residence at C" refers to Robertson's six-month fellowship in Cambridge in 2000. The opening stanza of "Porchverse" nods to Romantic lyric's supposedly solipsistic and autonomous position:

> Read my heart: I enjoy
> as I renounce the chic glint
> which politics give to style.

And yet, as an insert makes clear, *The Weather* treats as a "serious political question" the "design and construction of these weather descriptions." As with Robertson's earlier work on generic constraints, her interest here is in the way in which the rhetorical postures of description naturalize a certain relation between the subject and the world. What she terms "postpastoral lyric" has imagined a neutral and ahistorical linguistic medium in which the poet's observations of the world are communicated precisely, as unadulterated (and thereby sincere, or un-rhetorical) testament to emotion directly felt. "In the postpastoral poem (in evidence since the English romantics and their modernist successors) the evocation of "feeling" in poet or reader obeys a parallel planting of "nature" in the poem… Appearing to serve a personally expressive function, the vocabulary of nature screens a symbolic appropriation of the Land." As such, "the solipsist's position of singular innocence and sincerity erases all relations of historical difference and, with these, the tactical confrontations and crafty invasions language may deploy."[36]

Before any description of the weather, "Residence at C" begins by immediately undermining the solipsist's position of singular innocence: "It was Jessica Grim the American poet / who first advised me to read Violette Leduc." (6) The first act of the speaker is to defer to a literary lineage. The deferral situates personal expression against the background of a historical tradition; it places a speaker in their environment, and it brings that environment to the

[36] Robertson, "How Pastoral: A Manifesto", p. 26.

foreground. That environment emerges as textual and historical as much as 'natural'. The descriptions of the weather in this first part of the poem parade their literary genesis in this way:

> When I feel depressed in broad daylight
> Depressed by the disappearance of names, the pollen
> Smearing the windowsill, I picture
> The bending pages of *La Bâtarde*
> And I think of wind.

Robertson is aligned with a tradition of feminist ecopoetics which takes as a central site of struggle the politics implied in figurations of nature.[37] The explicit thematization of poetry's figuring the landscape evokes the specular logic by which it was employed as part of an economy of gendered power: either speaking as a reflection of man, or else remaining silent and being thereby feminized. In the reflective mode of the Romantic poem, feeling is projected outwards onto the landscape, which is voiced only by the privative power of metaphor. Metaphor requires the grounding in the visual field's ontological givenness to secure the adequation of its representation to the body it represents. Here, the presiding figure is metonymy, not metaphor: feeling is figured by the silent and textless book, which is pictured, not read. The book is metonymically related to the wind, but it is not a metaphor for the wind; neither is the wind a metaphor for an identifiable feeling. Metonymy, although it might involve spatial contiguity, nevertheless operates only at the level of representations and their substitution: it requires no third term to secure its veracity. Hence, the metonymic chain is potentially infinite. The book is animated by the wind, whose ambient noise and movement extends through the subsequent images:

> The outspread world is
> comparable to a large theatre
> or to rending paper, and the noise it makes when it flaps
> is riotous. Clothes swish through the air, rubbing
> my ears. Promptly I'm quenched. I'm talking
> about a cheap paperback which fans and
> slips to the floor with a shush. Skirt stretched

[37] Cf. the special issue of *Open Letter* Fourteenth Series, No. 5 (Spring 2011) which includes the following three explorations of feminist ecopoetics in *The Weather*: Erin Gray, "'Words are Fleshy Ducts'": Lisa Robertson and the Runnel theory of Poetry", pp. 72-84; Laurel Peacock, "Lisa Robertson's Feminist Poetic Landscapes", pp. 85-95; Indra Singh, "Floating Grammar: Ghosts and Clouds in 'Tuesday' of Lisa Robertson's *The Weather*", pp. 96-102.

> taut between new knees, head turned back, I
> hold down a branch

This is clearly not a refutation of metaphorical language, which is heightened in this sequence. There is an equivalence between the intertext of the book, the action of the wind, the buzz of the theatre, the rending of paper, the swish of the skirt and the shush of the paperback. Feeling depressed by the disappearance of names, the poet seeks reassurance not in the authority of speech but in an anonymous sequence of aural metonymy. Metonymy suggests a different metaphysics of subjectivity. Metonymic subjectivity is relational and ungrounded—as opposed to metaphoric subjectivity based on the adequation of a representation to a body/mind.

The poem also departs from the model of personal expression in the dense patterning of sounds, which structure the poem's subject in voiced performance rather than the expression of an observing consciousness through figure. Of course, this doesn't constitute the vacation of the subject position or the dissolution of the lyric speaker—the position is very much present, only now it is not only a conduit for vision (the reflection is prompted by feeling depressed "in broad daylight") but is tuned to aural atmospheric disturbances. Even as the "I" is deployed, its frequency and its appearance at the end of the penultimate line begin to ironize it. The final two sentences, though paratactic in their sense, are linked formally by a sibilance that rubs the ear in the line "slips to the floor with a shush. Skirt stretched".

The emphasis on the oral and aural aspects of the poem give us pause to reflect on figuration. Paul de Man argues that the figurative structure of language and knowledge means that our access to the world, and to ourselves, is unavoidably privative.

> To the extent that language is figure (metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute. Language, as trope, is always privative… To the extent that, in writing, we are dependent on this language we all are… deaf and mute… eternally deprived of voice and condemned to muteness… As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what

> we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding.[38]

In this passage de Man is responding to a distinction made by Wordsworth between language as the clothing of thought, and language as thought incarnate.[39] Although de Man disagrees with Wordsworth's distinction between these two ideas of language, he assents to their underlying schematization of tropic language as inevitably privative, arguing that they are both metaphorical claims about words as manifestations of the invisible. As de Man, and Robertson, will also argue, Romantic ideology responds to this condition by insisting on sincerity over metaphor, or else by representing figuration's deficiency with tropes of deafness and muteness. Against sincerity, Robertson finds political potentiality in description's formal and rhetorical structures, which bear the virtual capacity of language's iterability. Unlike de Man's emphasis on writing's muteness, Robertson's attention to language's formal inexhaustibility exceeds the specularity of aporetic textuality by focusing on embodied performance and prosody. Tropes and figures, in her poem, are the shape and sense of the world. And more so than this, they are the shape and sense of the world not because of the meaning they convey about it but because what is emphasised is their way of meaning—how they create shape and sense; how they form the world. Where de Man confines the tropic imagination to the field of the visual, Robertson extends it to the sonorous and embodied thinking of prosody.

Prosody represents, for Robertson, not a rarefied pure condition of language (or language deprived of participation in the lived world), but an occurrence in the occasion of vernacular speaking. "The vernacular is the movement for which language is not the state, but the condition of emergence of the subject to and for others. It is grammarless rhythm, a mobile, patterned regime of compromise: Something infinitely vulnerable."[40] Robertson terms this linguistic capacity "a

---

[38] Paul De Man, "Autobiography as Defacement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 80-81.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 79.
[40] Lisa Robertson, *Nilling* (Toronto: Bookthug, 2012), pp. 83.

prosody of the citizen, where the term 'prosody' describes the historical and bodily movement of language among subjects."[41] It is an everyday reality of discourse, a "bodily time".[42]

Simon Jarvis calls poems "singular machines, devices for bodily modification".[43] Their prosody registers a force in speaking that exceeds speaking's habitual identification with the utterance of a subject.[44] It is not the record of a subject's attempted articulation, but articulates and constitutes a subject—it temporalizes, rather than being temporalized. For Robertson it is here wherein a poem's prosody constitutes political agency—an agency that inheres precisely to the extent that it departs from the naturalisation which would imagine language simply to indicate an existing state of affairs. She writes of how prosody cites "protocols we enliven, figure and transform with our bodies and their words, by beginning. This beginning is what anyone belongs to."[45] This prosodic natality is also formulated by John Wilkinson, who notes prosody's peculiar binding and unbinding effect allows the poem to "accompany a reader and not be used up", because rhythm includes something "unmistakeably alien to the reader's creativity."[46] This is how prosody is a realization of speaking's historicity.

In *The Weather* the second-hand nature of language is therefore a resource which exceeds the subject-prior-to-utterance and determines its capacity to generate shape and sense.

> Give me hackneyed words because
> they are good. Brocade me the whole body
> of terrestrial air. Say spongy ground
> with its soft weeds. Say self because it can.
> ("Residence at C___", 14)

---

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 74
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 84
[43] Simon Jarvis, "Superversive Poetics: Browning's *Fifine at the Fair*", *MLQ* 77:1 (March, 2016), pp. 121-141; p. 139.
[44] David Nowell Smith: "we should remember that deafness to prosody is an integral part of the distribution of *our* sensible—such deafness is of a piece not just with political theory's dissolving of voice into speech, or voice into a figure for representation, but also with the model of poetic articulation… whereby one subject transmits their interior thought and experience through language to another subject, and for which prosody is, at best, a vehicle for this transmission: it 'represents'." *On voice in poetry: the work of animation*, pp. 135-6.
[45] Robertson, Nilling, p. 73.
[46] John Wilkinson, "Repeatable Evanescence", *Thinking Verse* IV.i (2014), p. 38.

The anaphoric figure, "say…", which will repeat throughout this section of the poem, is an incitement to reading aloud. The prosody of these lines constitutes a textured patterning beyond the abstracted value of text or phonotext, and is realised in performance. This section of the poem thematizes prosopopeia; but rather than ceding voice to the always already of figure's textuality, voicing here implies the relation between the actual voiced performance and the prosodic constraints by which it is guided, a negotiation between limits derived from the body and from the text; which is restraining and liberating.

> […] Say what happens to the face
> as it gala tints my simple cut
> vicious this afternoon the beautiful
> light on the cash is human to guzzle
> with – go away wild feelings, there you go
> as the robin as the songsparrow go
> the system shines with uninterrupted
> light. It's petal caked. Leaves shoot up. Each
> leaf's a runnel. Far into the night a
> sweetness. Marvelous. Spectacular. Brilliant.
> Clouded towards the south. It translates
> Lucretius. Say cup of your heart rush
> sluice is yellow sluice Kate Moss is Rousseau
> have my arms. Say impasto of
> atmosphere for her fur. Halo open
> her face. Misplace the death. All the truth
> under the tree has two pink oozy
> names. Say trying to possess or not. Say
> if you thought love was ironical. If
> pleasure emancipates, why aren't you some-
> where. Sincerity.
> ("Residence at C___", 14-15)

In these few lines we can begin to outline the shape of a prosodic texture. Though of no fixed length, the lines are generally four or five stresses, and more often than not contain a caesura around punctuation within the line (two thirds of the lines in this section of the poem are broken by a full-stop). In the first four lines above, the caesura which had paced the movement of sense across preceding lines of the poem is no longer marked by punctuation. Reading accelerates, and our intonation of the sound patterns of these words predominates over their syntactical arrangement. A dense texture of consonants (G, T, P, C) marks the four-stress cadence in "As it

gala tints my simple cut", a cadence which marks a regular rhythmic figure from which subsequent lines depart to varying degrees. There is added weight to the line as a unit of value in these sections of *The Weather*: they frequently cut against the phrasing of the sentence, marking the competition of syntax with line—at times completely denaturalizing the conception of the free-verse line as an index of transcribed breath or spoken phrasing.

Given the predominance of the syntactic and rhythmic syncopation, each line-break becomes a point at which we have to make a decision. Do we preserve the integrity of the line in reading or follow the sense over the enjambment? Does "vicious" predicate "cut" or "afternoon"? If the phrasing of "as it gála tínts my símple cút" is complete within the line, should we read the next lines symmetrically: "vícious this áfternóon the beaútiful / líght on the cásh is húman to gúzzle"? This rhythm emphasises the unusual (for the poem) end-rhyme, or half rhyme, beautiful / guzzle. At the level of the line, however, many of these phrases are difficult to parse semantically and their intonation often departs from the regularity of alternating stresses. A phrasal patterning led by intonation can help us disambiguate clauses and achieve a kind of coherence, following prosodic features which exceed the space of the line and segment phrasing in spite of irregularities in spoken rhythm:

> […]||Sáy whát háppens to the fáce
> |as it gála tínts my símple cút
> |vícious this áfternóon || the beaútiful
> líght on the cásh is húman to gúzzle
> wíth – || Gó awáy wíld feélings, | thére you gó

I've marked the phrases as units of sense, clauses with relations of subordination or equivalence—a double bar indicates the beginning of a new clause, a single bar initiates a subordinate phrase. In only one of these lines is the phrase coincident with the line. Yet the regularity of the four-beat line builds the expectation of a falling pitch (which may be coincident with a tonic accent) at the line ending. This is syncopated with the falling pitch at the end of the phrasal units, which more often than not does not coincide with the line. This syncopation is a resource for sense-making:

"beautiful" is poised ambiguously between the falling pitch emphasis of the line-ending, and the rising or neutral intonation it would receive in its place predicating "light" in the next line. The enjambed "guzzle / with" is similar. "The beautiful" wavers between an object in itself and the predicate of "light"; depending on how we intone the lines, the "light on the cash" will be either an object or an instrument of guzzling. Several lines later, observe how competing intonational attitudes vary the voicing of "if" between the imperative, "Sáy / if you thought love was ironical" and the conditional, "Íf / pleasure emancipates, why…", both within the course of a line.

Another example from the passage above is the line: "Sluice is yellow sluice Kate Moss is Rousseau". The line departs from the rhythmic regularity and it is hard to establish an intonational pattern reading it in isolation. Given the difficulty of parsing semantically, in scanning the line we are tempted to forfeit the intonational emphasis which the proper names would usually receive, so that they become just so many phonemes marking sonorous pattern. The predominant four beat pattern would divide the line with a caesura for breath: "slúice is yéllow slúice Kate Móss | is Rousseau". We then have a neat equivalence out of which meaning emerges, between "sluice is yellow" and "sluice Kate Moss", which without too much deformation becomes, "sluice-gate moss". These units take on the function of a musical phrase, pacing reading within and across the line: "sluice is yellow | sluice Kate Moss | is Rousseau | / have my arms." Beyond the alternating four beat rhythm, a distinct rhythmic possibility with an accent falling at the beginning of a triple measure coalesces in the midst of the sibilant procession: rush, sluice, sluice, is, Rouss-eau, arms, impasto. These phrasal possibilities emerge from the way the line frames its words; however, they are neither subordinated to the regular rhythm nor to a grammatical logic. Restraining our reading, this patterning compels us to make use of enunciative possibilities even in apparently familiar words like proper names. Emphasis shifts from the level of name and reference to the "impasto" textures which language makes.

As well as recalling the standard prosodic resources of metre, stress and line, then, Robertson's verse also activates the potentialities of intonation. These take part in determining

phrasal segmentation, emphasis and attitude, and in this poem, often exceed intention of controlled description.[47] These prosodic elements are not confined to the lineated poetry in *The Weather*. In the prose sections, Robertson's repetitions awaken these intonational and musical elements even within lines of identical syntactical figures and shapes. Even in the constraints of prosaic language, Robertson compels us to hear and desire the erotic excitement of prosody's fluency: "you've always wanted poetry, our slimy harness and soft restraint". (35) These prose poems literalize the notion that post-Romantic verse becomes prosaic (concerned moreover with diction of everyday life than with the ornamentation of prosody). In them, Robertson fashions a prosody from the cadences of sincere rhetoric, emphasising, often by simple repetition, their disavowed musical and affective possibilities. As such the rhetoric of sincerity becomes the historical material which dictate the poems' constraints, which in turn generate expressive possibilities: lexical range, syntactical variation, attitudes, intonations, cadences and modes of address. As we notice their expressive possibilities, these constraints become party to a kind of ornamentation. To transform the rhetoric of sincerity thus refuses to indulge the bad choice between extrinsic ornamentation and intrinsic structure: what were the norms and postures of sincerity's rhetoric—which another politics of poetic form would refuse or reveal—become here components in expression which takes pleasures in the sounds and shapes of language, rather than attesting to a speaker's propriety. This is a dimension of what Robertson will term "soft architecture", a conflation of ornament and structure which I will discuss further below.

"Tuesday" is prose poem compiling sentences which attempt to systematically describe possible permutations of sky states—the historical materials appropriated include Constable's annotations of his sky sketches, and phrases from Alexander Cozen's 1785 text, "A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape": [48]

---

[47] For various accounts of intonation patterns as significant features of prosody, see the special issue of *Thinking Verse* V (2015), ed. Natalie Gerber and David Nowell Smith.

[48] This source is particularly germane to Robertson's poetics, given that Cozen writes, "Too much time is spent in copying the works of others, which tends to weaken the powers of invention; and I scruple not to affirm, that too much time may be employed in copying the landscapes of nature herself"; his solution is to propose his new

> Days heap upon us. All plain. All clouds except a narrow opening at the top of the sky. All cloudy except a narrow opening at the bottom of the sky with others smaller. All cloudy except a narrow opening at the bottom of the sky. All cloudy except a narrow opening at the top of the sky. All cloudy. All cloudy. All cloudy. Except one large opening with others smaller. And once in the clouds. Days heap upon us. Where is our anger. ("Tuesday", 18)

Over five pages the poem accrues these minor variations, while interspersed are sentences containing the names of famous feminists. "Where is Shulamith" "Where is Patricia." "Where is Jane." "Where is Mary." Without question marks, these sentences are ambivalent: on one hand they are congruent with the syntax of the descriptions of skies, such that "where" becomes a predicate of the women's names—they are located, continuous with natural phenomena. On the other hand, the sentences compel an intonation which unavoidably conjures the interrogative, even though it is only a virtual possibility in the written text (given the absence of the question mark).

There is similar ambivalence in the sentences describing skies. These are grounded in an apparently stable visual field with minimal variation in their vocabulary, they convey a sense of the inevitability of a given nature: "The same as the last but darker at the bottom than the top. The same as the last but darker at the bottom than the top. Days heap upon us." ("Tuesday", 21) The phrases repeat mechanically, automatically; it appears "there is no transgression possible." ("Tuesday", 20) But there are two uses of repetition here which inflect each other: that in the description of skies which is flat, unmotivated, sincere; and that in the listing of women's names, in which we hear language's historicity: it's capacity—in spite of the grammatical content of its textual incarnation—to be angry, plaintive, insistent, an accumulation of testimony to an injustice, invisible in the grammar. The first identifies language with what is seen; the other uses sound which conjures the absent. We can hear this possibility in the descriptions of skies, as they are ironized through repetition. Despite their limited vocabulary, they gather force, not only because they repeatedly refer to cloudy weather, but by the sheer fact of their cumulative incantation. A reading

---

method, blotting which would realize by chance different semblances of landscape and skyscape. We might imagine that Robertson is blotting with "hackneyed words", experimenting with what permutations will emerge. See Cozens, "A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape", in *Nineteenth Century Theories of Art*, Joshua C. Taylor ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), p. 64

will return again and again to the same patterns of intonation (often literally reading the words "the same"); they become more and more estranged from their meanings; more and more lyrical. "A seeing can no longer list." ("Tuesday", 32)

In "Sunday", a paratactical arrangement of descriptions probe and sound "an alterior atmosphere" within a common place. (5)

> Here are farms and manors and mines and woods and forests and houses and streets. Here are hill and dell. Here are hill, dell, water, meadows, woods. Line upon line the twist and luck. Here are new enclosures. The chalk and the sand. Here are two. Here tongues. Here be nameless. Here has been the squandering. Here has been the work. Here we close the day. Here upon the edge. Here is a basin. A canal. A church. Here is a church. Here is a deep loam upon chalk. Here is a hill. ("Sunday", 3)

In spite of the sequence of similar phrases, there are competing times and rhythms. Sentences bloat or condense. Their rhythms vary depending on the presence or absence of the definite article, a verb or noun; their tense; on the grammar of conjunction ("and" or a comma); and depending on the rhetorical figure they form, which determines where the stress falls. Almost all parts of the sentence at some point take part in constituting rhetorical figures of repetition: beyond the immediately obvious anaphora with "here", there is epistrophe with the recurrence of "hill" and "dell", mesodiplosis among "Line upon line the twist and luck… here upon the edge… here is a deep loam upon the chalk." While there is an easy regularity in "Líne upon líne the twíst and lúck", when we encounter the syllabically symmetrical "Hére is a déep lóam upón the chálk", linked by a half-rhyme and the repetition of "upon", that rhythm is complicated and compacted by the speech stresses; now it approximates a pentameter, with a silent unstress between deep and loam. The rhetorical figures shape reading's timing; they also vary in time, with different elements of the same sentence being emphasised in the retrospective memory or anticipation of the sentence currently being read. For example, in the following sequence, there is an oscillation between "here and there" or "here" repeated as epistrophe, and the sibilance linking the beginning of each sentence: "Springs start here and there. Streams sift chop up spit out knots or clouds. Still there are some spots here and there. Stuck up here. Such are all the places along here. The thing is not done here." ("Sunday",

4-5) Subtle and various coherences between these phrases emerge in the moment of reading, each time evoking an immaterial history of intonations.

There is also a contrast between discursive times—the repetition of successive "here"'s—and the immutable landscape that they seem to describe. References to "hill and dell" employ nouns worn smooth with use, referring to common places without further elaboration. At the same time, they use and refer to the diction of the pastoral tradition and its tropes—such that the evocation of a landscape derives from a textual history, a tradition and register, more so than from an existing place. Yet the rhythmic variation, deixis and the parataxis constructs a contemporaneity formally, even as the near identical content of the sentences recycles determinate historical material—material which itself refers to specific locations and events: "We speak from memory here all the way along. Whenever. On a pivot. Without conclusivity. Stopped here and there. Endeavoured. Here mentioned. In short, not here." ("Sunday", 4)

To speak from memory, in *The Weather*, is to have two simultaneous experiences of language's past. First, the past of language as a collection of actually realized fragments of description's rhetoric. Second, the past-in-general of language: the experience of possibility, of the faculty for prosodic, vernacular elaboration. That elaboration is inimical to the memory of the individual subject and points therefore to a collective agency in speaking rather than an exemplary individual facility with language.

***

In *The Weather* Robertson investigates prosodic constraints and formal possibilities in the rhetoric of sincerity and post-pastoral lyric. Contrary to the Romantic and modernist tendency to purify language, she aligns supposedly neutral and refined diction with the infelicities of vernacular speech—where vernacular speech is not only a compilation of actually existing linguistic usages or colloquialisms, but describes language's embodied performance. *The Weather* makes the rhetoric of

sincerity ornamental, reconfiguring its material to emphasise its sensuous embodiment. More than merely illuminating a field of constraints, or conditions, in which a subject position emerges, attention to "design and construction" also forms "important decorative work": constraints—rhetorical, conventional, compositional—are like architecture, lived-in structures which delimit possible and expected social interactions, whose inhabitation also describes a style: "we like a touch of kitsch in each room to juice up or pinken the clean lines of the possible."[49]

Significantly, this style is impersonal: contrived from an archive of collective and historical usages. Robertson's poems insistently return to the enunciation of pronouns, the paradigmatic linguistic ambivalence, shifters with one foot in their enunciative context and another in the structure of language. Pronouns are a special case of the performative, as I will discuss below with reference to Benveniste, and mark subjectivity's emergence from impersonal vernaculars. In the midst of the poems' constraints and formal experimentation, these pronouns appear discontinuous, fractured or fragmented. Robertson has said in several places that she aims to construct a "distributed subjectivity." Writing *The Weather*, Robertson "just wanted to see what would happen if… that first person was distributed much as a weather system is distributed."[50] Where does this leave the subject in one's own language? In *R's Boat* and subsequently *Cinema of the Present*, Robertson turns her experimental procedures on her own words, estranging them as an archive of historical utterances. Upon these she imposes procedural constraints which enliven the possibilities in saying "I" beyond the pronoun's habitual subordination to the intending subject-prior-to-utterance. Of the handling of perspective in *R's Boat*, she aimed at "[n]o subject position, but a distribution of subjectivity as equivalently charged at any point."[51] Robertson credits the various techniques of dispersal which she employs with the production of a desired "surface

[49] from the insert to *The Weather*, signed "The Office For Soft Architecture" (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2017).
[50] Robertson and Carr, "An Interview with Lisa Robertson", [online], n.p.
[51] Lisa Robertson and Sina Queyras, "All Sides Now: A Conversation with Lisa Robertson", *Poetry Foundation* March 18 2010 [Online], n.p. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/03/all-sides-now-a-correspondence-with-lisa-robertson [accessed 20/04/20].

effect… the sense of a distribution."[52] There is an ethical aspect to distributed subjectivity. It is positioned as a figure of resistance and autonomy, and thus it cannot be equated with a clichéd postmodernist aesthetics for which there are only appearances; for which autonomy and authenticity are irrecoverable fantasies or mystifications; and whose paralysing limit is the subject's total determination by the existing field of discourse. This limit precludes agency and can result in the double bind where art's response to a lost plenitude—to a lost depth—oscillates between disaffected irony and absolute refusal; pastiche or unintelligibility. Instead, Robertson's distributed pronouns bring to the textured surfaces across which they are dispersed a sincerity, and a conviction in the force of performative iteration.

Cinema of the Present

To elaborate how a distributed subjectivity might remain a figure for agency while conceding a complicity with the constraints in which it is generated, I'll discuss the ways in which *Cinema of the Present* (2014), a book length poem, conceptualises and enacts a subject's distribution. Similar to *The Weather* and *R's Boat*, in *Cinema* there is no subject formally subordinated to a centre, either a singular consciousness or narrative position (unless we read the book's discontinuous sentences as collected utterances by the author Lisa Robertson). The subject does, however, continue to appear in the book's compulsive repetitions of pronouns—mainly the second person, and less frequently the first. Most sentences in the book contain a pronoun. It is these pronoun's prosody, that is, the mechanics or formalization of their repetitions and voicings, which constitutes a provisional design or ornamental armature in which a subject manages some level of consistency. If we do not definitively identify the subject with an invariable central consciousness, we, reading, do become familiar with an outline of the postures in which it repeatedly announces itself: regular/irregular rhythms, syntactical arrangements, rhetorical figures, rhymes, echoes. At the same

[52] Robertson and Carr, n.p.

time, in its dispersal the subject becomes aligned with the all that escapes system, with the embodied, the gestural, the motile: with "lascivious and boundless perceiving" which "blocks or disallows a more centralized narrative construction."[53]

Here is a moment where this distributed subjectivity is theorized and practised by the poem:

> *You always describe potential with your body.*
> Yours was a shabby time, and you felt it as such.
> *You appropriate yourself into the distributive texture of an experimental protocol.*
> But your desire is not an instrument.
> *You are a position effect.*
> The balance shifts, and you care less.
> *You are a structure of comportment.*
> You are Lucretian and self-reliant but sometimes exhausted.
> *You are a theatre, not a machinery.*[54]

In this sequence of lines there are alternating descriptions of the determination of the poem's pronoun. The sequence goes through several descriptions submitting 'identity'—which, here and in much of the poem, is already not identical, given over to the second person—to external determination. "Experimental protocol"; "position effect"; "structure of comportment". On the other hand, there are countervailing descriptions. The posture of self-appropriation implies agency in a moment of dispossession, a desiring investment in being distributed across an experimental protocol. The body "describes potential", possibility which is not reducible to the distribution of the material body in a determined field but remains a virtual excess. "Desire is not an instrument" and therefore exceeds both the volition of a pre-existing self or a matrix of ideological forces supposed to direct it. The descriptions of sensing and feeling relate abstract conceptions of external reality to their embodied affects: feeling a time as "shabby", caring about a shift in balance, and being exhausted by one's intellectual affiliation as a Lucretian (fittingly, given the priority of perceptions to Lucretius, for whom "the senses cannot be refuted").[55] The subject is "a theatre,

[53] Robertson and Queyras, "Interview"; Robertson and Carr, "Interview".
[54] Lisa Robertson, *Cinema of the Present* (Toronto: Coach House, 2014), p. 69. Subsequent in text citations are from this edition.
[55] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. C.H. Sisson (Manchester : Carcanet New Press, 1976), ln. 478.

not a machinery". But, as we read elsewhere in the poem, "this is different than saying that language is volition." (57)

The passage reiterates a dialectic between the structural and the embodied which is at work in the poem more generally. The first line of *Cinema* sets out a query: "What is the condition of a problem if you are the problem?" In one sense, this is a philosophical problem: what are the transcendental conditions of a subject; and, by extension, of intersubjective address? To answer the question would require that 'you' cede immediate or intuitive self-awareness in order to understand yourself conceptually. The contents of the book, however, warn us against a logical approach to this conceptual question, and suggest that the investigation of subjectivity's conditions pursue experimental methods. The poem is a non-linear sequence of sentences, each of which could be considered a transcription: of perceptions, intuitions, concepts, methodological statements, memories, citations, and the material detritus of human civilization (including, very literally, different construction materials). A conceptual understanding could be derived from experimental empiricism: the second line reads, "You move into the distributive texture of an experimental protocol." To make oneself the subject of an experimental protocol is another kind of self-abdication, though one which tempers the presuppositions of the ideal category under investigation with the contingencies of experimentation. The category "you" would not represent a pre-determined subject but would vary depending on the material to which the protocol was applied. Furthermore, staking a subject position on the application of an experimental protocol would foreswear a prior agency: "you would educate yourself to an absolute and unconditional submission to the demands of transcription." (7) Of course, both the sentences I've quoted are ambivalent, and suggest willing submission and self-distribution as much as the coercions of an imposed regulatory framework. As in Robertson's other work, the status of material, structure, and form is important: these sentences articulate an identification with the *texture* of a protocol, rather than conceiving this ambivalently coercive structure as an immaterial, purely conceptual, framework. The demands of transcription, then, could designate an imperative directing a

cataloguing of the material and contingent, the poem's descriptions, both naturalistic ("the huge sky over the working harbour felt home-like" (50)) and surreal ("A gate made of floral foam, beeswax, silver leaf, drywall" (7)); and at the same time, the demands of transcription would themselves be material: felt, exhibited as part of the poem's material practice.

And, indeed, they are, in two senses: firstly, distributed throughout the poem are directives, statements of method: "To construct a velocity is what you want." (59) "You build a catalogue of depletions." (74) "You conducted the documentation of a trembling." (75) "This protocol will show that newness is one of the possible horizons of forgetting." (104) Secondly, the book's material units, its sentences, are distributed according to a formal constraint. Robertson's compositional procedure in *Cinema of the Present* generates two series out of a set of statements. The series are interspersed in alternating roman and italic lines. Both series arrange statements in the form of lists. The form is familiar from *R's Boat* and "Draft of a Voice-Over for Split-Screen Video Loop" (*Magenta Soul Whip*). The statements could be further categorized into types: some sentences set out broader conceptual questions or concerns; these are interrupted irregularly by sometimes surreal descriptions of unlikely collections of materials, or groups of nouns; there are sentences apparently describing observed environments; and finally, there are fragmentary or incomplete sentences, sometimes comprised only of short lists of adjectives. Each sentence appears once in each series: that is, each statement in roman type effectively 'cites' one of those in italics (or vice versa). In the roman series, it is sometimes possible to intuit a kind of continuity or progression between statements—though it is not narrative or logical. The italicized series is the alphabetized version of the same set of statements, spliced in amongst the roman series. Robertson has called the effect "regularized montage":[56] although the statements are organized paratactically, they are connected by repetitions which are sometimes thematic, sometimes echoes or

[56] "Close Listening: Charles Bernstein in conversation with Lisa Roberston" (10/20/16), *Penn Sound* [online] https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Robertson/Roberston-Robertson_Close-Listening-10-20-16.mp3 [accessed 20-04-20].

duplications, and sometimes owing to the rhyming effect at the beginning of the line created by the alphabetical arrangement.

As in Robertson's other book-length projects, the form is organized around investigating its central question. The question of subjectivity's condition is to be answered in some way by the procession of diverse phrases, sentences which succeed each other without any supervening logical continuity. And the empiricism in this succession of sentences—the way in which their procession continually renovates any inductive generalizations which we might want to make—is to be reconciled with the predetermined constraints which limit the scope of what would appear to be philosophy's other, "pure gesture" and "intuition without a concept". (5) In this regard, the poem includes temporally specific and materially detailed description without a unifying perspective: "At the middle of your life on a Sunday"; "A dove, a crowned warbler in redwood, an alarm, it stops." "Today, Thursday…" (12); "2am on Friday…" (13); "A downtown tree, the old sky, and still you want an inventory." (5) "Two doves in the pine; three, and a train; one gone and a dog in honeysuckle: how are you to make choices when perceiving is arbitrary?" (50) These perceptions are accounted for in no particular order; they are clearly not exhaustive descriptions, with no consistent scheme behind their collections of observations, appearing haphazard and directed by imperceptible turnings of attention. Here, in the moment of perception, a fidelity to the present appears to preclude the systematization of perspectival consistency that would give moorings to the philosophical investigation: "Within the concept of the present, the figure-ground relationship effaced itself." (6)

And yet, in the poem it becomes difficult to maintain the schematic separation of, on one hand, formal and philosophical investigation of the conditions of subjectivity, and on the other hand, an idea of personhood and its embodied and contingent concerns. This is evident on several levels. In the first sense, the problem that "you" are pertains to the grammatical subject "you". The grammatical approach proposes a method congruent with the formal approach to the philosophical question: the subject becomes ec-centric so that it might inquire about its own

conditions, and it does this in grammar. In formal terms, 'You' is the object of this inquiry, but it is also the subject of the clause "you are the problem". The "you" also designates an individual recipient of the interrogative statement or accusation. It shifts between the general, grammatical pronoun and the actual moment of the speech act, in which we might infer a hostile attitude from contextual rather than formal properties of the sentence (ie. "What's your problem?" "You are the problem."). In this shifting, the subject moves outside itself to enter into relation with itself as an other. "You are freed from myself." (70) This going out and returning is formally and grammatically encoded into the text; and yet clearly this is not simply a matter of grammar—there is an ethical aspect to confronting oneself as another, to the scene of intersubjective address. The alternating roman and italic lines seem to constitute a dialogue between two voices (although this dialogue is more ambiguous than that in "Draft of a Voice-Over for Split-Screen Video Loop", where each line is in quotation marks). The subject is thereby "distributed across negation" in conversation. (27) This negation hinges both formal and social concerns. Because this work is comprised of sentence units coextensive with its lines, in the construction of the dialogue the formal constraint (grammar; the line) and social constraint (the demand for recognition; dialogue) each play off the other. The poem's formal constraints reveal themselves to be products of language's social practice. Pure gesture, intuition without concept, and the encounter with the other, are at the same time already formalized, and connected with a materially sedimented history of voicings and cadences. We are reminded of this by the poem's repetitions, which create proximal iterations of grammatically similar phrases. The 'you' referred to in many of these sentences occupies the double position of an implied singular addressee in the moment of lyric utterance, and a citation: within the poem (there are two occurrences of every sentence) and also beyond it, echoing an interpellation from either another writer, or else from one of Robertson's earlier poems (for example, "And I am walking in your garments" (13; 26) modifies a line from *R's Boat,* "And I am walking in her garments" (33)—there are several occurrences of these sorts of citations). So, on one hand the dispersed subjectivity is manifest in the transcription of "pure gesture", the

moment of utterance, the present. But on the other, the unprecedented spread of transcriptions is facilitated by the poem's constraint, the concept according to which its statements are arranged and which opens familiar language to novel voicings. "For example, in the noticed friction between thinking and perceiving, your provocation could be built." (25)

The two positions which I have schematically set out reflect a polarity in the theorization of subjectivity which we have returned to throughout the foregoing discussion. In one account, the subject is a discursive construction, brought into being by the performative citation of a set of existing norms whose repetition is required in order to become socially intelligible. In this Foucauldian theorization, the subject gains a power of acting only by implicitly consenting to the norms by which a social configuration is structured; one is subjected to norms which demonstrate a power over the subject in order that the subject can possess a potential power of acting, the latter being limited to the scope of the possible determined by the former. In the other, autonomy is conceived in opposition to structural norms regulating cultural intelligibility (to which subjectivity is conceded). A notion of materiality comes to stand for all that is opposed to linguistic mediation. Embodiment without the subject—pure gesture and intuition seen as the only loci of resistance to linguistic interpellation. I am describing a position which sets itself up against a crude reduction of post-structuralist feminism to a model of exclusive linguistic determination, and counterposes a focus on "the material" understood as intractable and resistant. The introduction to *Material Feminisms,* for instance, establishes itself as redressing a "tendency to focus on the discursive at the expense of the material" which the editors identify as a failing of "the postmoderns".[57] The postmoderns, according to the editors' caricature, by "exclusively focusing on representations" miss "the materiality of the body itself as an active, sometimes recalcitrant force."[58]

A reconciliation between these two positions is possible and desirable. In theory it exists even from corporeal feminism's beginnings: Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*, while wagering that

[57] Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman, "Introduction", *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 3.
[58] *Ibid.,* p. 4.

"bodies have all the explanatory power of minds" denies "that there is the 'real', material body on one hand and its cultural and historical representations on the other."[59] Grosz seeks to map the "primacy of corporeality" while avoiding reproducing a body/mind duality. This is true for Butler as well, whose conception of the body refuses to separate it from its linguistic apprehension: "there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body."[60] Butler has also argued against another kind of materialist reduction by rejecting the distinction between "matters of cultural recognition" and matters of material oppression supposedly more fundamental than social representations: "struggles to transform the social field of sexuality… cannot be understood without an expansion of the 'economic' sphere itself to include both the reproduction of goods as well as the social reproduction of persons," which is mediated by discursive constructions of personhood.[61] We should recall Virno's (among other post-workerist) contention that the production of subjectivity is now a site of valorization, such that the subject is reflected back to itself reified, in a sense. Relatedly, Butler's point is that we should extend our analysis of the commodity to the social field to avoid an undialectical conception of the subject as either a material thing or a social relationship.[62]

Robertson's poem stages this reconciliation at the level of the pronoun. Perhaps the words subject to the most iteration in *Cinema* are its pronouns. They are also the words which bear the weight of embodiment: "For a moment you are the indispensable horizon of all that occurs or appears." (26) Robertson understands the pronoun as the performative link between the extant communal structure of language and its singular embodiment in utterance:

---

[59] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies,* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. vii; x.
[60] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 10.
[61] Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural", *Social Text,* No. 52/53 (Winter, 1997), pp. 271; 272.
[62] This also has the advantage of avoiding the diffusion of power to multitudinous micro-centres to which Foucauldian theorizations can tend; here we can maintain the efficacy of discourse as knowledge-power while simultaneously considering the shapes those discourses compel us to adopt are form-determined by capitalism. The unilateral direction of that determination is put into question through the mediation of language, a faculty of our species being and also the means by which we are interpellated, which makes the direction of power ambivalent. This is less ambiguous, in my view, than the more general Foucauldian claim about the nature of power (ie that it is always coupled with resistance).

> For me [pronouns] are the most animate part of language, the most particular. Whoever speaks the pronoun embodies it fully, for the duration of the utterance. It indicates only the presence and the time of the speaker; it calls each of us into a language that's a movement towards another speaker, who in turn seizes and embodies the pronoun in order to speak. That the pronoun is transferable is what guarantees the continuity and the community of language. This continuity is historical rather than abstract. Iteration is not the same as abstraction. All difference does enunciate itself through the pronoun, which is not an abstraction but a vital ornament.[63]

The pronoun is not an abstraction from a particular self—it embodies fully a subjectivity. The "difference" in pronouns is not between the pronoun and a prior, prelinguistic self, but between one iteration of the pronoun and another. There is no duality between language and the human here; there is only the contention that what might fully embody a subject at one point will nevertheless admit difference in being repeated. If language constitutes the human and the pronoun is fully embodied by the uttering subject, this is only because the parameters of that embodiment and constitution are not totally abstract; they are subject to change when put into a new embodied configuration. According to Emile Benveniste, the capacity to identify oneself by the enunciation of a pronoun is what links language as a purely abstract system preceding all subjects with an idea of subjectivity as singular, evental and therefore non-identical. Benveniste maintains that "language is… the possibility of subjectivity because it contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity, and discourse provokes the emergence of subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances."[64] His conception is therefore on one hand that language contains the abstract possibility for subjectivity, and on the other hand, that its continual re-individuation as discourse assures that these abstract subjective positions are always actualized in ways that are non-referential and non-identical. The peculiar property of the personal pronoun is that "*I* can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone. It has no value except in the instance in which it is produced."[65]

---

[63] Ken Walker, "I want to reclaim every part of living including illness and death: An interview with Lisa Robertson", *Poetry Project Newsletter* No. 237 (2003), p. 20.
[64] Emile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in Language", *Problems in General Linguistics,* trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 227.
[65] Benveniste, "The Nature of Pronouns", *Problems in General Linguistics,* p. 218.

In *Cinema of the Present* pronouns are embodied and iterated over the course of successive lines; the "you" or "I" is continuous because of, not in spite of, variations. When reading I have to think of the repeated pronouns as an indexical arrangement—trace—of personhood, continuous because of historical proximity (ie the contingent arrangement of the lines). But the meaning of "you" also changes as it is embodied in each enunciative position or voice in the alternating dialogue: it is not the same you.

Significantly, the passage from Robertson I have quoted above ends with her redescribing the pronoun as "vital ornament" as opposed to an abstraction. The formulation of performative, living embellishment replaces an opposition between the abstract and the particular which is allied to a logic of essence and superfluity. Pronouns constitute an aspect of the poem's "soft architecture", its recursive and relational surface rather than its determining structure—where surface is understood to imply a meeting of depth and appearance rather than a position that re-states their duality. Architecture—including space more generally—and language are intimately related for Robertson. In an essay on "the idea of the shack"—surveying speculative histories of the origins of architecture—she fixes on Vitruvius' linking architecture with speech: "For Vitruvius the shack follows from the sociality of speech. In his shack story, at the beginning of *On Architecture* (27 B.C.), language facilitated men's first social relations. They gathered together around fire and learned to name by imitating one another. The partition and structure of communicative speech and its mimetic transmission was a necessary precursor to architecture structure."[66] Robertson draws from this an idea that the repeated and imitative history of building is "a form of engaging speech."[67] Elsewhere, Robertson describes the performative iteration of the pronoun as a "spatialization" that "institutes a fiction of subjectivity," drawing on corporeal experience as it is represented in memory:

---

[66] Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Toronto: Coach House, 2011), p. 157.
[67] *Ibid.,* p. 158.

> In terms of subjectivity, if I consider the corporeal memory as an accretion of these instances of surface mediation, a spatialization that institutes a fiction of subjectivity, what seems important repeatedly is the agency of mediation. 'I' mediates."[68]

Architecture, like corporeal memory, is a site of mediation, where "transient and urgent vernaculars" become intelligible according to a shared grammar constituting "collective communicative agency."[69] Robertson extends her understanding of architecture to the space of the book, a site containing "memory [which] is impersonal"; though the book provides a surface and structure for its contents, these do not limit the multitude of relations available to reading: "the tectonics of the book frame chance and its twisting trajectories, not an origin."[70] Each reading is an inhabitation. "A shack tentatively supplies a syntax for temporal passage."[71] Like the shack, the pronoun is a site where performative speech mediates surface; it is a frame in which the 'now' of use intersects with the history of prior uses. In a speculative essay on the embodied theorization of space, Robertson writes that "[t]he problem is not how to stop the flow of items and surfaces in order to stabilize space, but how to articulate the politics of their passage."[72] "Spatial synthetics irreparably exceed their own structure";[73] that is, they account for a thinking of space—and the meanings of space—that includes what is usually thought to be epiphenomenal to such an abstraction: desire, pleasure, chance, appearance, subjectivity. To put it in the terms of *Cinema of the Present*, to think about architectural space this way demonstrates "the remarkable difficulty of compiling a secular index." (51)[74]

---

[68] Lisa Robertson and Steve McCaffery, email correspondence, *PhillyTalks* 17 (Oct. 3rd, 2000): Lisa Robertson / Steve McCaffery, [online], https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/phillytalks/pdfs/pt17.pdf [accessed 30/06/20].

[69] Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture,* p. 158.

[70] Robertson, "Time in the Codex", *Nilling*, p. 14.

[71] *Occasional Work,* p. 158.

[72] Robertson, "Spatial Synthetics: A Theory", *The Office for Soft Architecture* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2011), p. 69.

[73] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[74] NB the proximity of the notion of embodied repetition of structure in Robertson's Vitruvius and the force of rhythm's sociality in Shelley's origin myth for poetry: "In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order. And, although all men observe a similar, they observe not the same order, in the motions of the dance, in the melody of the song, in the combinations of language, in the series of their imitations of natural objects." P.B. Shelley, "The Defence of Poetry", in *The Complete Works of Shelley,* eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, Vol. 5 (London: Ernest Benn, 1965) p. 111.

Ian Davidson has described the relationship between Robertson's conception of poetic form and her interest in the spatial turn in social theory. Notably, he argues that "the structuralist formations of the spatial in language and other experimental writing […] proved inadequate for Robertson's needs"—among other things, because the synchronic relations of causality they assume, and pose their critiques against, preclude the kind of performative identifications that Robertson is interested in.[75] Robertson has made this argument as follows: "Saussurean linguistics fixed language as its object by intersecting language's temporal, changeable plane with the structuring vector of synchrony. But such a materialization of language as structure can be provisional at best, since language's immaterial circulation as relational intersubjectivity is continuously self-innovating."[76] There is a relationship between these "structuralist formations of the spatial" and the treatment of time in the avant-garde tradition against which Robertson stakes her critique in "My Eighteenth Century": what Davidson, after Marjorie Perloff, condenses as "the Pound tradition", whose poetics arrest history's chaotic flow in order to more clearly discern (or reject) its operative principles. As Davidson points out, invoking Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, these postures constitute "representations of space": abstract schematizations or mappings that preclude the embodied experience of space. On the other hand, Lefebvre calls "representational space" that which includes both "spatial practice"—the gestural production of space—and the representations of space; per Davidson, representational space is that in which "mind and body […] work together to keep these concepts in play."[77] Because performativity is temporal—iteration in time—and spatial—dependent on an embodied context of performance and social reception—it accounts for how the poem might be received as a representational space in which a subject fleetingly and variously appears.

These two positions are not synthesized into an overriding unity—rather, they must both be attended to at once. Robertson achieves in her writing what Eva Darias-Beautell calls a

[75] Ian Davidson, "Picture This: Space and Time in Lisa Robertson's "Utopia/", *Mosaic* 40/4 (December 2007), p. 90.
[76] Robertson, *Nilling*, p. 86
[77] Davidson, "Picture This", p. 95.

"linguistic fluidity" that requires a "double response": readers encounter a text that "is both dense with conceptual abstraction and light with the embodied practice of the quotidian."[78] In *Cinema*, conceptually abstract language sits in series with phrases whose construction documents an 'irrational' experience of sensing guided by surface contiguities (here, the association of sound): "you can sense yourself as singular simply because sound is all around you, touching you as a world." (75); "you swam into splendidness" (90); "the whole shirred surface splitting and churning" (52) To read these as the "embodied practice of the quotidian" is to understand their prosody to simulate a kind of authenticity. At the same time, these phrases rhyme, both locally and across the larger space of the book, sharing and repeating vocabulary, rhythm or syntax. They are united by a prosody of regularized montage. In the space of the book, constraints frame the repetitions and juxtapositions constitutive of this prosody. The framing gives line units a double valence as prosodic conventions which are granular moments of a larger totality and as direct index of embodied feeling—(artificial collage, methodological constraint; or mellifluous speaking, a voice's lyric utterance). Prosody, here, would describe not quantifiable form but the shape of disagreement between different possible voicings. It airs competing claims to how speech is heard; competing positions on which speech is grounded. (Prosody itself, then, is ungrounded; it does not have Being in the sense of a Platonic Idea, but is virtual).

As Darias-Beautell suggests, Robertson's thinking and writing about space is informed by Bachelard's focus on the experiential and unquantifiable in *The Poetics of Space*; but its emphasis on prosody also registers the importance of rhythm in the production of space in the architectural and spatial theories that undergird Robertson's poetics.

> And you counted, you counted.
> *You said you can't evade a binary by turning.*
> You proposed a different emotional education.
> *You sallied forth across emptied sidewalks, your fists in your pockets.*
> What you felt was the movement of sound through your body in its bed in the city not your own but particular nonetheless.

[78] Eva Darias-Beautell, "The Softness of Theory: A T(r)opological Reading of Lisa Robertson's *Soft Architecture*", *Mosaic* 49/4 (December 2016), p. 58.

You saw the shadow of the hummingbird and then the hummingbird, from beneath. (88)

In *Cinema,* prosody functions, and is conceptualized, as a point of indistinction between embodiment and structure, or structure and its animation. It is thematized as a kind of soft architecture: "a sonic socio-affective structure" (58), "Your new skin would be prosodic" (23); "*Prosody was the house you sketched around your body*." (43) In the lines quoted above, each sentence is a statement in the second person, describing actions and perceptions. Yet there is prosodic variation which makes this more compelling to read than a simple list of attributes: each line is differentiated, or coheres with other statements, either by syntactical similarity (the caesura marked by a subordinate clause: "you counted"; "your fists in your pockets"; "from beneath"); rhythmic alignment or difference, including differences in scale marked by concision or increasing specificity ("what you felt…"), the different points in the sentence at which the pronoun falls, and the number of times it is repeated. The last line represents temporal progression by following unfolding visual perception across the space of the sentence; the first line makes temporal progression out of repeated utterances—and in all of these lines, the pronoun "you" marks time, recalling a memory of prior utterances and announcing the moment of utterance itself.

The pronoun's rhythmic repetitions make prosody the subject's mode of social appearance. It is a mode of appearance that paradoxically includes disappearance and dispossession. Robertson's notion of prosody is allied to that of Henri Meschonnic, whose "Rhythm Party Manifesto" she has translated. Meschonnic does not conceive of prosody as the poem's form, transmitting its semantic content, the expression of a subject; rather, prosody—the poem's rhythm—is an activity which constitutes a subject, changing its shape and "mak[ing] a space"[79]:

[79] I note that Robertson's translation emphasizes the spatial dimensions implicit in Meschonnic's metaphorical injunction to make "une place" for poems—David Nowell Smith's translation leaves this implicit, translating the word as "place"; the same is true for "une forme de langage" and "une forme de vie", rendered by Robertson as "a shape of language" and "a shape of life". Cf. "The Rhythm Party Manifesto", trans. David Nowell Smith*, Thinking Verse I* (2011), pp. 161-173.

> As for the poem, I claim rhythm's major role in its constitution of language-subjects. Because rhythm is no longer, even if certain illiterates haven't noticed, the back-and-forth play of the metronomic grammarians: rhythm is the language-organization of the continuance we are made of. With all the alterity which founds our identity. Scram, grammarians! All you need is a poem to lose your footing.
>
> Because rhythm is a subject-disposition. The subject-disposition. If it is through rhythm that we get the sense that we have to undo ourselves, as everything around us starts to undo itself, and if in approaching this sensation of the movement of everything we ourselves are a part of this movement, it is because rhythm renovates the meaning of things.
>
> And if the rhythm-poem is a subject-disposition, rhythm is no longer a formal idea, form itself is no longer a formal idea, (that of the sign), but a shape of historicity, a shape of individuation. Down with the old pair, form and meaning. The poem is all that which in language fulfils this recital-the extreme subjectivization of discourse. Prose, verse or line.
>
> A poem is a language act which only takes place once and which ceaselessly re-begins. A poem makes the subject. It doesn't stop making the subject. Of you. Where the subject is an activity, not a product.[80]

If rhythm is the social appearing of a subject in a poem, it is only so because rhythm un-does the subject. Meschonnic's concept of rhythm comes by Émile Benveniste, whose etymology of *rhythmos* describes rhythm as the form of a dynamism: "form as improvised, momentary, changeable."[81] The performed voicing of rhythm is at the same time the articulation of a voice by that rhythm—a kind of abdication of subjectivity—or a way in which the locus of the subject becomes inconspicuous in the moment where it would appear to be so thoroughly self-possessed—the present of articulation.

Rhythm renovates the meaning of things because it changes the relation of the subject to the forms which precede it. It indicates how an utterance is not coincident with its formalised or generalizable meaning. The discursive system is changed by its elaboration, and the subject, coming into being through that movement of change, is also changed, because it is no longer reducible to a position in the discursive system. That noncoincidence is also what leads Butler to see the performative as indicative of the possibility of agency even as its condition is citation and repetition: "The disjuncture between utterance and meaning is the condition of possibility for

---

[80] Henri Meschonnic, "A Rhythm Party Manifesto", trans. Lisa Robertson and Avra Spector, *Capilano Review* Vol. 3 No. 13 (Winter 2011), p. 141.

[81] Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics,* trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971) p. 285.

revising the performative, of the performative as the repetition of its prior instance, a repetition that is at once a reformulation…. The citationality of the performative produces that possibility for agency and expropriation at the same time."[82] This possibility is inherent in Benveniste's model, which, while it understands the subject to be constrained by a social history of discursive articulations, constantly innovates this history. Kaja Silverman puts it this way:

> Benveniste's discontinuous subject may depend for its emergence upon already defined discursive positions, but it has the capacity to occupy multiple and contradictory sites. This descriptive model thus enables us to understand the subject in more culturally and historically specific ways than that provided by Lacan—i.e. in terms of a range of discursive positions available at a given time, which reflect all sorts of economic, political, sexual, artistic, and other determinants, instead of in terms of a monolithic symbolic order. It also holds open the possibility of change, since the generation of new discursive positions implies a new subjectivity as well.[83]

In the thought of Meschonnic and Benveniste, performative subjectivation is not just a matter of discursive positions, but by the rhythmic articulation of that discourse. The possibility of change is figured by rhythm for these thinkers, marking as it does the distinctiveness of the performative instance: the animation of structure which cannot be entirely predetermined. Benveniste thus describes rhythm according to the Epicurian concept of the clinamen: a swerve. Robertson invokes the same concept when she writes of reading as a spatializing performance of self-abdication, a way of becoming inconspicuous: "Reading's topos, its place of agency, is invisible, and necessarily so. Reading resists being seen. This is not to say that it has no effects on public life, but that those effects cannot be predetermined… if reading could be said to have broader worldly effects, they might be modelled on the random agency of the Epicurean clinamen, that wide-open and troubling proposition of utterly uncaused and spontaneous material change."[84] The performative force of reading, rhythm's phenomenology, is that it undoes the subject at the same time as being the manifestation of a kind of agency, of subject-forming—differing from the habitual interpretation of language products as signs of a prior subjectivity. The condition of this agency is a continual

---

[82] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: a politics of the performative*, p. 87.
[83] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 199.
[84] Robertson, *Nilling*, p. 23.

de-forming, dis-appearance, or becoming inconspicuous of the subject in the fluid space its utterance institutes.

> *How does it look?*
> Your problem again is your own transformation.
> *How does that work?*
> You couldn't again submit your own name.
> *How else do you construct a pause in cognition?*
> But you'll wedge open the artificial and malleable caesura for a moment longer.
> *How many indices must you write?*
> You could never decide about will and using it.
> *I can't do a thing when I am in your presence.*
> Your new skin would be prosodic – that is, both esoteric and practical.
> *I don't know how to solve your loneliness.*
> You are a transitional figure who sees yourself as such.
> *I don't know what you felt.*
> With ruffles cascading from shoulders. (28)

There is a conceptual proximity to these sentences: they address in some way subjectivity as a situation of linguistic reference (How many indices must you write?"), phenomenal appearance ("How does it look?"; "With ruffles cascading from shoulders.") and social appearance and disappearance ("I don't know how to solve your loneliness"), a relation between an "I" and a "you". To read the passage as a dialogue about subjectivity is contradicted on the other hand by the fact that the conceptual continuity arises at least in part because the alphabetical indexical system groups similar phrasal constructions together regardless of their meaning. The insistent questioning and the sequence of answers in the negative exists at this point in the text because page 28 of the book sees a transition in entries between H and I: "How does…" "How does…" "How else…" "How many…" "I can't…" "I don't…" "I don't…". The other series of roman lines then merely appears to respond directly to this one; at a different point in the alphabetical index the alternating lines enter into different relations. Other rhetorical techniques are produced by the alphabetical arrangement, most commonly anaphora. With a certain felicity, anaphora can in turn become available for interpretation as narrative progression: alternating lines from pages 52 to 54 all begin with the adverbial "then." At other moments, rhetorical *topoi* appear to clarify

the preceding phrase. "You've entered into the surplus. / *You knew that already, but had once again forgotten.*" (82) "You are a structure of comportment. / *Similarly, that is.*" (44)

These rhetorical techniques interpolate a subject position; they manifest speech, shaping discourse from an arrangement of arbitrary language. Understanding these phrases to be clarifying or elaborating those before them, by acknowledging their performative force coalescing around a speaking subject, helps us in the process of composing a new, temporary, unity of the book in the present of reading. These unities are temporary, because the rhetorical techniques are effective without being subordinated to an already determined conclusion—which would suggest a teleology foreclosing the present's contingency. Rhetorical coherence emerges in the present of utterance, responsive to context, in a manner which exacerbates a distinction between the performative situation of address and the language system which is its condition. The poem's rhythmic movement is what gives that coherence and manifests its subjectivity: the pronouns, and the rhetorical postures which put them in dialogue, are animated each time the poem is performed or read, rather than being instances which refer back to an existing subject position. The poem cycles through its sequences of phrases, and a reader could enter it at any point. As such the book undertakes an insistent questioning about subjectivity without the direction of a central subject on whose conditions that questioning would finally converge: "the perceiving is for yourself but meets at no doctrine of the subject." (50) Reading, we begin to grasp subjectivation as the performative animation of a system which is generated by felicitous rhythmic alignments and dis-alignments around which we continuously modify the presiding idea of the subject.

These performances of subjectivity are invested in rhetorical and prosodic displacements.

> You take shelter in a figural sensation.
> *You seek a coat for intellectual ampleness.*
> Then you are a memory of her dress. (90)

A figural sensation is non-identical: the subject shelters in its tropic displacement; a garment provides a surface that amplifies intellect; another garment is a memory with which the subject is

identified. These articulations of subjectivity span the material and immaterial. "Then you are a memory of her dress" contains the immaterial memory of the same line from page 53; here, it also anticipates becoming the embodied material for a new configuration of meaning in performance. We read the line two ways: the memory of itself, and the actual instance of a line intoned in time.

Central to *Cinema*'s displacements is the line-break. The line-break is the interval across which the accretion of meanings is carried, as well as the occasion for their changing. It is purely mechanical, not subordinated to breath or personality. In one sense it introduces discontinuity: it segments sentences, and it spatializes the distinction between the two series. In another sense, however, it adds a measure of continuity, confirming the sentence as a unit of sense—there are no enjambments in the book. And yet, the sentences whose integrity the line-endings preserve are divorced from any context other than that provided by their serialisation. The lines' continuous turning becomes that which reading looks forward to, what performance is invested in, as a figure of the present, more so than a final resolution (the last lines of the poem on page 106 we will have read, its closing sentence appearing on page 40). They provide the recurring experience of putting into context—without amounting to any determinate or measurable instance. While it heightens the poem's parataxis, the line-break provides the apparatus that facilitates a subject's continuous re-beginning, rather than figuring subjectivity's limit.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to *Cinema's* title. We can see now how cinema might stand for a certain relationship between the contingency of the present and the conceptual apparatus in the midst of which it emerges. The book's montage recalls cinema's metonymic aspect, as a composition based in horizontal contiguities between 'shots'. Cinema might be thought of as a way of subjecting the intuitive experience of dailiness to the technical protocols of cinematic mediation. Although the problem under investigation is personal and pertaining to experience, the interrogation does not proceed according to a naturalized narrative logic (development, discovery), but by the legislation of the arbitrary formal constraint. That constraint makes us read statements 'about' a subject only in relation to each other, according to their various formal contiguities. As

such, this kind of experiment is, like the prosodic texture of *The Weather*, a foray towards a metonymic metaphysics of subjectivity. It is an experiment in expanding a relational and ungrounded personhood across a "distributive texture": in spite of the poem's parataxis and procedural determination, keeping something like an embodied subject 'in view', with its desires, expectations, frustrations and identificatory pleasures—another way in which cinema makes for a useful analogy: the movie screen, like the line-ending, is not only the vehicle of narrative's unfolding, but also the bearer of identificatory investments (something feminist film criticism has maintained). The book is an exercise in holding together the pleasures of these investments with technical mediation.

Cinema is a technology that can simulate the unmediated experience of reality, while this simulation is inseparable from the apparatus that creates the conditions for that perception. This is the idea behind Benjamin's well-known description of the novelty of cinema:

> In the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones. The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology…
> …Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment.[85]

Benjamin's argument clarifies the proposition that contingency emerges *in the midst* of the apparatus which conditions it: this is distinct from saying that the reality of the present's "pure gesture" is opposed to, or side by side with, technical apparatus. They cannot be separated. It is not difficult to see how Robertson's montage procedure bears analogy with cinema; but more so than this, if cinema is conceived of as a technological apparatus which produces contingency, could we not also understand the poem's rhetorical construction of presentness as a technology? That is, a

[85] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 226; 227.

technical method that has penetrated so deeply into reality that it is part of reality's authentic experience. The present in this sense would be an artificial rhetorical construction that nonetheless offers a representation of reality that is "significant" to its audience, affecting and thus thoroughly enmeshed with life.

The constructed frame then becomes the site where the subject appears, as a certain style in excess of determinate content; rather than the frame being that which inhibits subjectivity. The subject's presentness depends upon the poem's patterned surface, on the unanticipated and contingent arrangements facilitated by the design. Like a soft architecture, the design absorbs and generates multiple temporalities: memories of prior usages, determinations of future correspondences, chance alignments. These inhabitable patterns link the necessary and the contingent: they inhere in a material configuration of sentence units and are not superfluous to an imagined content. Where Benjamin had feminized style as the ephemeral "dream of social revolution" misrecognized in the commodity's novel appearance, whose conditions were to be discovered by detaching the object from the continuum of affective and ideological investments, Robertson's necessary style makes identification with technical procedure integral to the architecture of the poem.

***

Robertson's work is important because it opens out the complexities of a dialectical materialist view of subjectivity. That is, one which is neither voluntaristic at the level of the individual nor cedes power entirely to structures which dominate position, but takes account of both. Clearly as individual subjects we are shaped by constraints not of our own making. Collectively, however, we reproduce these constraints as we act. At the same time, we reproduce the potential to change them. If we did not, then our relation to our environment would be predetermined and inflexible. What makes us the locus—both cause and effect—of the reproduction of constraint in social

practice is also what makes us capable of innovating: a faculty for language and for creation which exceeds its determinate instantiations; and which is in evidence any time a practice becomes expressive (non-instrumental). The potential to become expressive exists in any technique we have for dealing with our environment. That we must institutionalise a set of rules—techniques, or technologies—for reproducing ourselves means also that those rules are not absolute or necessary (at least in terms of their content).

But we will only experience the arbitrariness of constraints if we can distinguish between their content and their form—or, between a particular technical apparatus and the capacity to institutionalise technique. That distinction denaturalises the contingent content of constraint—the rule dictating that the meaning of utterances are determined by a subject prior to them, for instance. In Robertson's books, the content of rhetorical techniques or technologies of subjectivity is ironized. It becomes the material in which other constraints announce themselves—impersonal prosodic effects; the technical arrangements of montage, alphabetization. In *Cinema*, for example, we have the experience of reading a series of utterances dispossessed of their original context and author by the application of an arbitrary procedural constraint, which are nonetheless still able to cohere in fleeting and novel arrangements according to another constraint embedded within them: the sentence and its prosody. Here we perceive constraints attendant on subjectivity which are not simply determined by the predominant social relations of a particular historical moment—for example, the performative mediation of subjectivity in language, which, although it might occur within the field of capitalist discourses, is not a linguistic capacity inaugurated by them. This is the significance of prosody, that strange interaction between the conditioning constraints of human biology, breathing, the timbre and pitch of the voice, a faculty for producing and adapting to rhythms—and the social practice and products of language. It implies the mutual implication of the social and the natural, and thus is fruitful for clarifying a kind of humanist materialism without the hard-edged reductions of which Robertson is critical. It also suggests that there exist collective,

social constraints in language which are distinct from the harmful, standardizing and future-inhibiting constraints that reify our creative capacities.

Conclusion

In "Writing as a General Economy", Steve McCaffery opposes a notion of writing open to excessive irruption and indeterminacy to language use as recuperable by, or valuable to, any human system. The latter he terms writing's restricted economy, "the language of instrumental reference" and of conscious mastery.[1] Even procedural works do not escape this economy. He notes that Jackson Mac Low, John Cage and Ron Silliman all subordinate chance, contingency, difference—in short the aspects of language which escape intention, which are identified with its materiality as disavowed structural possibility—to a transcendental design or system.[2] For McCaffery, even as he acknowledges that they might produce important works, the constraint-based nature of these procedures does not allow for a productive or generative thinking which would question the terms on which their systematicity is based. The restrictive economy is so relentless that nothing cannot be turned to profit. McCaffery can only oppose radical negativity, a poetics which might result in fleeting but insubstantial moments of departure: "there are doubts as to whether a general economic writing could actually be sustained beyond a fleeting instant, registering its effects as anything more than a momentary rupture."[3] But what of works like Robertson's *Cinema of the Present*, which transform the concepts motivating them, which they take into themselves and alter—in Robertson's case, subject, utterance, synchronic structure, instantaneous present? Surely these indicate that restricted economy is not immune to innovative engagement. But more than this, we should question what is assumed to mark the difference between these two economies of writing. For McCaffery, it is the structure of the text that coerces us to read it in a certain way and thus to consent to a certain system of values. But a work like Robertson's shows that a text's economy is not determined solely by its 'material conditions'—by which I mean, in this case, its lexical, graphemic and phonemic constituents and the conventions or rules with which we

[1] McCaffery, "Writing as a General Economy", p. 203.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 209.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 210.

apprehend them. It involves a reader's performance, which includes their cognitions, rhythms and desires; and these do not alter a text's economy because they bring to bear some purely volitional readerly engagement, but because they alter, by participating, the system whose constraints they must reproduce. They also alter themselves.

Attempts to account for constraints binaristically, opposing the systemic to the anti-systemic, the collective to the individual, tradition to innovation, or determinism to agency, fail to do justice to the kinds of writing I have addressed. Each of the poets in this study have offered a way to think about constraints which are never wholly determining, and which can constitute and reconfigure rather than simply limit pre-existing entities. We have seen that constraint is not reducible to particular structures or formal dispositions: depending on historical circumstances, certain forms will be felt to be constraining, and others not. The reservation of writing as a zone of free play and individual liberty which must be defended against the transgressions of instrumental reason belies the division of areas of experience (the economy; the state; the private; the public; work; free time) internal to the development of capitalism; in other words, to propose a general economy of writing does not exempt it from the constraints of its historical conditions.

A recurring question over the course of this study has been, What is a constraint made of? By asking this question we can avoid the reductive materialism of McCaffery which attempts to distinguish mystified textual materials from their revealed true forms. It is clear that they can be both conventional, ideological (in the neutral sense), and material, in the performative practices that mediate intersubjectivity, and also on a more granular level, in the sounds, rhythms, pitch and intonational structures that define our utterances. What we also know is that constraint is never solely material or ideal, structural or superstructural. Some of those granular structures can inform our imaginaries, evidently also participating in cognitive processes, underwriting metaphors by which we understand selfhood and expression, for example. This is what we mean when we say that the linguistic medium becomes itself an object of meaning. In other ways, habits of

pronunciation and voicing can also come to have political meanings—this is obvious in terms of accent, but it is also clear at the level of rhythm and other areas of prosody.

Constraint also has an ambivalent affective valence. Certain forms will appear to diminish the power of acting, and others to augment it. The condition of being constrained can either be felt as positive or negative; betokening comfort and security, or restriction, boredom or repression. Of course, at various moments in history writers will feel the stifling constraints of convention that limited the appropriate subjects of art and corresponding forms of presentation, like those against whose bounds Romanticism and then modernism chafed. But even within this affective orientation we find writers like Pope, Byron, Swinburne, and now Riley and Robertson: those for whom an obsequious deference to conventional constraint could be a mode of parody, and therefore a kind of liberation from the law in its repetition. It is clear that there are various senses of freedom to be derived from formal experiments that strictly obey procedures or adhere concertedly to conventions and affordances of medium; experiments which generate chance, incoherence, difficulty or opacity, but also cultivate a rewarding attention to form which is not 'purely aesthetic' in some autonomous or precious way. Lyn Hejinian's deference to a procedural constraint, rather than inhibiting the circulation of value in form, attempts to bridge formal artifice with the social practice of self-definition by admitting textual contingencies. In a different way, Anne Carson finds in the constraining strangeness of the poetic medium the means to facilitate the humanistic efforts of memorialization, translation, and the inauguration of difference.

Constraint is evidently connected to the question of agency: the condition in which we have the potential to act or cause a state of affairs. It may be that constraint removes agency; it may be that we derive agency from it—as Philip's prosodic innovations do. Indeed, *Zong!*'s poetics manage to combine Moten's universalist defence of aesthetic creativity as the lawlessness which originates and radically questions the law with a valuation of prosodic constraints as restrictions and shapings of the voice in which that lawlessness can be felt. Constraint might reformulate the very categories on which it is supposed to work—evidently an important aspect of constraint for

those poetries seeking to value identifications and expressions which do not conform to existing forms of intelligibility; and seeking to call into question those forms of intelligibility. To derive agency from constraint suggests that we are constituted by a kind of self-departure, a self-departure enacted in Robertson's questioning of subjectivity. Having the limits of our thinking tested, our notions of ourselves exceeded, suggests the possibility of arriving at a new conception only in being articulated through constraints. To think about constraint this way is to reformulate what we think of as agency. We move from an idea of agency as the free expression of the already constituted to a performative and transformative conception of agency, admitting a moment of negation, that understands that our capacity to occupy and recapitulate constraints will always exceed their actualized or objective forms. Without appealing to an idea of necessary and conservative restraint, if we complicate our notions of constraint we will have a productive category through which to think poetry's relation to the social world. Constraints dynamize those moments of latency and polyvalence that arise when we articulate ourselves in language's manifold social practice.

Where this study was itself constrained to review the work of five poets, I hope the sustained readings and theoretical contexts which I have brought to their work suggests a variety of aspects of constraint. Future work on constraint might turn to other areas where it can question and transform the categories which it presupposes. In sound and performance work the frame of constraint would admit the kinds of phonetic, intonational materials both within and adjacent to speech that can be developed into prosodic constraints; it would also consider the kinds of gestural figures by which we are constrained to become intelligible, and the way in which poetry might represent the capacity to depart from them—the work of Holly Pester, cris cheek and Caroline Bergvall, for example, is concerned with these sorts of constraint. Performance work would also incorporate the constraints of the environment in which it is realized, as well as the constraints represented by the demands on voicing, pronunciation, pacing and collaboration that interpreting a script for performance inevitably includes. In these very literally discursive situations, a whole

array of cognitive and embodied capacities become open to aesthetic reflection once they are registered as constraints.

Far better than designating the summit of aesthetic transports to be unconstrained freedom available only in activities distinct from the social world, to turn our attention to constraint in poetry can help us locate those instances analogous to and continuous with everyday life where our dwelling in constraint does not foreclose our capacity to transform the prevailing conditions of our existence. This is vitally important if we are not to imagine ourselves reduced to drones—and not only readers of poetry, but anyone who thinks, speaks and acts in the world—whose cognitive and linguistic capacities are merely conduits for the production of value and the coercions of ideology. For, if the way we use and language and are constrained by it is not simply indexical of our determination by social forces, then we preserve the possibility that even in those areas in the conduct and reproduction of life where we seem to be most constrained by conditions which exceed us, we nevertheless carry with us the capacity for change.

Bibliography

Alaimo, Stacy and Heckman, Susan eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008)

Andrews, Bruce, "Text and Context", in Andrews and Charles Bernstein ed. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984)

Andrews, Bruce, "Writing Social Work and Political Practice" in Andrews and Charles Bernstein ed. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984)

Armstrong, Isobel, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

Attridge, Derek, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982)

Auden, W. H., "The Poet and The City", *Massachusetts Review* Vol. 3 No. 3 (1962), pp. 449-474

Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953)

Barrett, Lindon, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida* trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000)

Baudrillard, Jean, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2009)

Benjamin, Walter, "Ten Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999)

Benjamin, Walter, "The Task of the Translator", *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 71-82

Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility (Second Version)", in Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin eds., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn

Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 226; 227

Benveniste, Emile, *Problems in General Linguistics,* trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971)

Bernstein, Charles and Robertson, Lisa, "Close Listening: Charles Bernstein in conversation with Lisa Roberston" (10/20/16), *Penn Sound* [online] https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Robertson/Roberston-Robertson_Close-Listening-10-20-16.mp3 [accessed 20-04-20]

Bernstein, Charles, "Living Tissue/Dead Ideas", *Social Text*, No. 16 (Winter, 1986-1987), pp. 124-135

Bernstein, Charles, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992)

Bernstein, Michèle, "In Praise of Pinot Gallizio", [1958] trans. John Shepley, [online] The situationist international archive https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/inpraise.html [accessed 20/04/20]

Bök, Christian, *The Xenotext: Book 1* (Toronto: Coach House, 2015)

Brady, Andrea, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Poet" in Peter Robinson ed., *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2013)

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau, "History of the Voice", *Roots* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993)

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau, *History of the Voice: the development of nation language in Anglophone Caribbean poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984)

Breiner, Laurence, *Introduction to West Indian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Brown, Bill and Cormack, Bradin, "Medium, Essays from the English Institute", *ELH*, Volume 83, Number 2, (Summer 2016), pp. 293-297 [special issue on Medium]

Brown, Bill, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

Brunton, James, "Whose Metamodernism?: Metamodernism, Race, and the Politics of Failure", *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 41, No. 3 (2018), pp. 60-76
Burrows, Stuart, *A Familiar Strangeness: American Fiction and the Language of Photography 1839-1945* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008)
Burt, "Close calls with nonsense" *Believer* 13 (May 2004), np., https://believermag.com/close-calls-with-nonsense/ [accessed 19/04/20]
Burt, Stephanie, "Professor or Pinhead" *LRB* Vol 33 No 14 (14 July 2011)
Butler, Judith, "Merely Cultural", *Social Text,* No. 52/53 (Winter, 1997), pp. 265-277
Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993)
Butler, Judith, *Excitable Speech: a politics of the performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997)
Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004)
Carson, Anne and Peter Constantine, "Ancient words, modern words: a conversation with Anne Carson" *World Literature Today* (January/February 2014) p. 37
Carson, Anne and Will Aitken, "Art of Poetry No. 88", *Paris Review* Issue 171 (Fall 2004) [online]
Carson, Anne, *Autobiography of Red* (Toronto: Knopf, 1998)
Carson, Anne, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2009)
Césaire, Aimé, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001)
Chivers, Tom ed., *Adventures in Form: A Compendium of Poetic Forms, Rules & Constraints* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2012)
Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993)
Conte, Joseph, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991)
Cozens, Alexander, "A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape", in *Nineteenth Century Theories of Art*, Joshua C. Taylor ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987)
Crozier, Andrew, *Free Verse as Formal Restraint: an alternative to metrical conventions in twentieth century poetic structure* ed. Ian Brinton (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2015)
Culler, Jonathan, "Why Lyric?", *PLMA* 123.1 (2008), pp. 201-206
Culler, Jonathan, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975)
Culler, Jonathan, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015)
Darias-Beautell, Eva, "The Softness of Theory: A T(r)opological Reading of Lisa Robertson's *Soft Architecture*", *Mosaic* 49/4 (December 2016)
Davidson, Ian, "Picture This: Space and Time in Lisa Robertson's "Utopia/", *Mosaic* 40/4 (December 2007)
Davie, Donald, *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1955)
De Man, Paul, "Autobiography as Defacement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984)
Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane (London: Bloomsbury, 2013)
Derrida, Jacques, "Signature Event Context", in Peggy Kamuf ed., *A Derrida Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991)
Du Bois, W. E. B., "Of the Faith of the Fathers", *The Souls of Black Folks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Dubrow, Heather, "Neither here nor there: Deixis and the sixteenth century sonnet", *The Lyric Poem, Formations and Transformations* ed. Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)
Duncan, Andrew, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003)
Dworkin, Craig and Goldsmith, Kenneth eds., *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 2011)
Dworkin, Craig, "Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork, Writing and Lyn Hejinian's "My Life", *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 58-81
Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983)
Easthope, Anthony, *Poetry as Discourse* (New York: Methuen & Co, 1983)
Edmond, Jacob, *Make it The Same: Poetry in the Age of Global Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019)
Eliot, T. S., *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)
Etherington, Ben, "Cellular Scansion", *Thinking Verse* III (2013), pp. 186-209
Etherington, Ben, "What is Materialism's Material? Thoughts towards (actually against) a materialism for 'world literature"', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48.5 (2012), 539-551
Evans, Steve, "The Resistible Rise of Fence Enterprises", http://www.thirdfactory.net/resistible.html [accessed 20/04/20]
Federici, Silvia, "Precarious Labour: A Feminist Viewpoint", *Variant* issue 37 (October, 2006), https://www.variant.org.uk/37_38texts/9PrecLab.html [accessed 30/04/2020]
Fehskens, Erin M., "Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold: *Zong!* and the Catalogue" *Callaloo* 35(2) Spring 2012, pp. 407-424
Felski, Rita and Anker, Elisabeth eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017)
Felski, Rita, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989)
Ferreira da Silva, Denise, "Towards a Black Feminist Poethics", *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 44:2 (2014), 81-97
Fisher, Roy, interviewed by John Tranter, 29 March 1989, http://jacketmagazine.com/01/fisher-iv.html, [accessed 06/04/2020]
Forrest-Thomson, Veronica, *Poetic Artifice: A theory of twentieth-century poetry* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1978)
Fried, Michael, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago,1998), pp. 148–72
Gates, Rosmary, "Forging an American Poetry from Speech Rhythms: Williams after Whitman", *Poetics Today*, Vol. 8, No. 3/4 (1987), pp. 503-527
Georgis, Dina, "Discarded Histories and Queer Affects in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*", *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* (April 2004), pp. 154-166
Glissant, Édouard, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* trans. Michael J. Dash (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1989)
Glissant, Édouard, *The Poetics of Relation* trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997)
Goldsmith, Kenneth, "Provisional Language", *The Poetry Foundation* (2010), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/04/provisional-language [accessed 07/12/20]
Golston, Michael, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science: Pound, Yeats, Williams, and Modern Sciences of Rhythm* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)
Golston, Michael, *Poetic Machinations: Allegory, Surrealism, and Postmodern Poetic Form* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015)

Gray, Erin, "'Words are Fleshy Ducts'": Lisa Robertson and the Runnel theory of Poetry", *Open Letter* 14, No. 5 (Spring 2011), pp. 72-84
Grosz, Elizabeth, *Volatile Bodies,* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994)
Gündoğdu, Ayten, "Disagreeing with Rancière: Speech, Violence, and the Ambiguous Subjects of Politics", *Polity*, volume 49, number 2 (April 2017), pp. 188–219
Hamilton, Nathan ed., *Dear World and Everyone in it* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2014)
Harryman, Carla, "Rules and Restraints in Women's Experimental Writing" in Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue eds., *We Who Love To Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics* (Tuscaloosa, AB: University of Alabama Press, 2002)
Harryman, Carla, "Toy Boats", *Poetics Journal Online Archive* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2014)
Harryman, Carla, *Vice*, (Elmwood, CT: Potes and Poets, 1987)
Harryman, *The Middle* (San Francisco, CA: Gaz, 1983)
Hartley, George, "Jameson's Perelman: Reification and the Material Signifier", *Poetics Journal Digital Archive*, pp. 685-697
Hartman, Charles O., *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996)
Hartman, Saidiya, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)
Hayes, Terrance, *Ameican Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (London: Penguin, 2018)
Hayles, N. Katherine, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002)
Haynes, John, "Metre and Discourse", in Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson eds., *Language, Discourse and Literature* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989)
Hejinian, Lyn, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2000)
Hejinian, Lyn, *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013)
Hilson, Jeff ed., *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2008)
Hoover, Paul ed., *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994)
Huk, Romana, "New British Schools", in David Nowell Smith and Abigail Lang eds., *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 59-78
Huntsperger, David, *Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry* (London: Palgrave, 2010)
Jameson, Frederic, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2009 [1991])
Jameson, Frederic, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009)
Jarvis, Simon, "Bedlam or Parnassus: The Verse Idea", *Metaphilosophy* Vol 43 Nos 1-2 (Jan 2012), pp. 71-81
Jarvis, Simon, "Prosody as Cognition", *Critical Quarterly* Vol 40 No 4, pp. 3-15
Jarvis, Simon, "Superversive Poetics: Browning's *Fifine at the Fair*", *MLQ* 77:1 (March, 2016), pp. 121-141
Jarvis, Simon, "The Poetry of Keston Sutherland", *Chicago Review* 53:1 (Spring 2007), pp. 139-145
Jarvis, Simon, "Unfree Verse: John Wilkinson's *The Speaking Twins*", *Paragraph* 33:2 (2010), pp. 280–295
Jarvis, Simon, *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
Jesse Matz, "Cultures of Impression" in *Bad Modernisms* ed. D. Mao & R.L. Walkowitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010)
Johnson, Kent and Ashby, Steven M. eds), *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992)
Jones, Tom, *Poetic Language* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012)
Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
Katz, Daniel, *American Modernism's Expatriate Scene: The Labour of Translation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007)

Kirby Smith, H. T., *The Origins of Free Verse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998)
Krauss, Rosalind, "Reinventing the Medium", *Critical Inquiry* Vol 25 No 2 (1999), pp. 289-305
Krauss, Rosalind, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *OCTOBER* Vol. 8 (Spring, 1979), pp. 30-44
Krauss, Rosalind, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition", *OCTOBER* 116, (Spring 2006), pp. 55-62
Kristeva, Julia, *Revolution in Poetic Language* trans. Margaret Waller in *The Kristeva Reader* ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987)
Ladkin, Sam, "Lyric Versus Audit in the Virtual Society", *Forum for Modern Language Studies,* Vol. 47, No. 4 (2011), pp. 454-467
Leighton, Angela, *On Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)
Lessing, G. E., *Laocoon,* trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957)
Levine, Caroline, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015)
Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. C.H. Sisson (Manchester : Carcanet New Press, 1976)
Macherey, Pierre, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006)
Mallarmé, Stéphane, "Crise de Vers", *Divigations,* trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), pp. 201-211
Mao, Douglas and Walkowitz, Rebecca L., "The New Modernist Studies", *PLMA* 123.3 (2008)
Marks, Emerson, *Taming the Chaos: English Poetic Diction Theory Since the Renaissance* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998)
Marx, Karl, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1975)
Mathews, Harry, and Brotchie, Alastair eds., *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas Press, 2011)
McCaffery, Steve, "Writing as a General Economy", in Christopher Beach ed., *Artifice and Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics* (Tuscaloosa, AB: University of Alabama Press, 1998), pp. 201-221
McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989)
McHale, Brian, *The Obligation to the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa, AB: University of Alabama Press, 2004)
McHale, Brian, "Telling Stories Again: On the Replenishment of Narrative in the Postmodernist Long Poem", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 30, Time and Narrative (2000), pp. 250-262
Mclure, Michael, "Statement on Poetics", *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, ed. Donald Allen (London: Evergreen Books, 1960), p. 423
Mellors, Anthony, *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)
Meschonnic, Henri, "A Rhythm Party Manifesto", trans. Lisa Robertson and Avra Spector, *Capilano Review* Vol. 3 No. 13 (Winter 2011)
Meschonnic, Henri, "The Rhythm Party Manifesto", trans. David Nowell Smith*, Thinking Verse I* (2011)
Middleton, Peter, "Warring Clans, Podsoilized Ground" in *Modernist Legacies*
Miller, Geordie, "'Shifting Ground' Breaking (from) Baudrillard's 'Code' in *Autobiography of Red*." *Can Lit* (Autumn/Winter 2011), Issue 210/211, p152-167 [online, n.p.]
Moise, Myriam, "Grasping the Ungraspable in M. NourbeSe Philip's Poetry" *Commonwealth* 33:1, pp. 23-33
Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), p.19 http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf [accessed 24/05/2017]
Moten, Fred, "Blackness and Poetry", Evening will come: A monthly journal of poetics (Affect Feature—Issue 55, July 2015) online http://www.thevolta.org/ewc55-fmoten-p1.html [accessed 24/05/2016]
Mouré, Erin, *Furious* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2018)

Norris, Christopher, "Verse Crisis: Mallarmé", *Textual Practice* Vol. 28, No. 4, 557–569
North, Joseph, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017)
North, Michael, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)
Nowell Smith, David, "Langwij a thi guhtr" in David Nowell Smith and Abigail Lang eds., *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 177-191
Nowell Smith, David, *On Voice in Poetry: the Work of Animation* (London: Palgrave, 2014)
O'Rourke, Meghan, "The Unfolding", *New Yorker* (12 July 2010), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/07/12/the-unfolding [accessed 20/04/20]
Oliver, Douglas, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1989)
Olson, Charles, "Projective Verse", *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1997)
Paolo Virno, *Déjà vu and the End of History*, trans. David Broder (London: Verso, 2015)
Paolo Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude: For an analysis of contemporary forms of life,* trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2004)
Patrick Heron, "Space in Contemporary Painting and Architecture," in *The Changing Forms of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955)
Peacock, Laurel, "Lisa Robertson's Feminist Poetic Landscapes", *Open Letter* 14, No. 5 (Spring 2011), pp. 85-95
Perloff, Marjorie, *The Dance of the Intellect Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1996)
Perril, Simon, "Hanging on your every word: J.H. Prynne's *Bands Around The Throat* and a dialectics of planned impurity", in Ian Brinton ed., *A Manner of Utterance: The Poetry of J.H. Prynne* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2009)
Pester, Holly, "The Politics of Delivery: Against Poet-Voice", *Poetry Review* 109 (2) (Summer 2019), [online] https://poetrysociety.org.uk/the-politics-of-delivery-against-poet-voice/ [accessed 20/04/20]
Philip, M. NourbeSe, *Genealogies of Resistance* (Mercury: 1989)
Philip, M. NourbeSe, *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Welsleyan University Press, Middletown, CT: 1989)
Philip, M. NourbeSe, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008)
Plate, Ledieke, "How to Do Things with Literature in the Digital Age: Anne Carson's *Nox*, Multimodality, and the Ethics of Bookishness", *Contemporary Women's Writing* 9:1 (2015), pp. 93-111
Pound, Ezra, *Gaudier Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1974)
Pound, Ezra, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954)
Pound, Ezra, *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (London: Faber and Faber, 1973)
Pound, Ezra, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971)
Prynne, J. H., "A letter to Steve McCaffery (January, 1989)", reprinted in *The Gig* 7 (November, 2001)
Prynne, J. H., "A quick riposte to Handke's dictum about war and language", *Quid* 6 (2000)
Prynne, J. H., "English Poetry and Emphatical Language", *Proceedings of the British Academy* LXXIV (1988), pp. 135-169
Prynne, J. H., *Poems* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2005)
Rae, Ian, *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada* (Montreal: MQUP, 2008)
Rancière, Jacques, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2010)
Rancière, Jacques, *Mallarmé: La politique de la siren* (Paris: Hachette, 1996)
Rancière, Jacques, *Mute Speech* trans. James Swenson (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011)
Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2011)
Rancière, Jacques, *The Future of the Image,* trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007)
Rancière, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004)
Rankine, Claudia and Sewell, Lisa eds., *Eleven More Women Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics across North America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 2012)
Rasula, Jed, "A Gift of Prophecy", Canlit 161/162 (Summer/Autumn, 1999) pp. 187-9
Reed, Brian M., *Nobody's Business: 21st Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013)
Reed, Brian, "Lisa Robertson, Ezra Pound, and Preposterous Classicism", *Open Letter* 14, No. 5 (Spring 2011), pp. 42-52
Riley, Denise, Oliver, Douglas and Sinclair, Iain, *Penguin Modern Poets* 10 (London: Penguin, 1996)
Riley, Denise, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000)
Robertson, Lisa and Carr, Julie "An Interview with Lisa Robertson", EVENING WILL COME: A MONTHLY JOURNAL OF POETICS (ISSUE 25, JANUARY 2013—FEMINIST ISSUE) [online], n.p. http://www.thevolta.org/ewc25-jcarr-p1.html [accessed 20/04/20]
Robertson, Lisa and McCaffery, Steve, email correspondence, *PhillyTalks* 17 (Oct. 3rd, 2000): Lisa Robertson / Steve McCaffery, [online], https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/phillytalks/pdfs/pt17.pdf [accessed 20/04/20]
Robertson, Lisa and Queyras, Sina "All Sides Now: A Conversation with Lisa Robertson", *Poetry Foundation* March 18 2010 [Online], n.p. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/03/all-sides-now-a-correspondence-with-lisa-robertson [accessed 20/04/20]
Robertson, Lisa, "How Pastoral: A Manifesto" *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s* eds. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002)
Robertson, Lisa, "My Eighteenth Century", in *Assembling Alternatives* ed. Romana Hük (Wesleyan UP, 2003), pp. 389-397
Robertson, Lisa, "The Collective", *Avant Canada: Poets, Prophets, Revolutionaries* ed. Gregory Betts and Christian Bök (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2018)
Robertson, Lisa, *Cinema of the Present* (Toronto: Coach House, 2014)
Robertson, Lisa, *Nilling* (Toronto: Bookthug, 2012)
Robertson, Lisa, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2011)
Robertson, Lisa, *R's Boat* (Berkley, CA: New California Poetry, 2010)
Robertson, Lisa, *The Weather* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2001)
Rockhill, Gabriel and Watt, Phillip, *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009)
Russell, John, "Return of the Living Dead III: Clement Greenberg is a Conceptual Artist: Flatness and Shapeism" in Robert Garnett, Andrew Hunt (eds.), *Gest: Laboratory of Synthesis* (London: Book Works, 2008) pp. 81-99
Scott, Clive, *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)
Sedgewick, E. K., *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003)

Sharpe, Christina, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016)
Shelley, P. B., "The Defence of Poetry", in *The Complete Works of Shelley,* eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, Vol. 5 (London: Ernest Benn, 1965)
Shklovsky, Viktor, "Art as Technique", *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2012)
Silliman, Ron, "Disappearance of the word, appearance of the world", in Andrews and Charles Bernstein ed. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984)
Silliman, Ron, "The New Sentence", *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987), pp. 63-93
Singh, Indra, "Floating Grammar: Ghosts and Clouds in 'Tuesday' of Lisa Robertson's *The Weather*", *Open Letter* 14, No. 5 (Spring 2011), pp. 96-102
Snedicker, Michael, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)
Solt, Mary Ellen, "William Carlos Williams: Idiom and Structure", *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter, 1962), pp. 304-318
Spahr, Juliana and Young, Stephanie, "Foulipo", talk for CalArts Noulipo Conference, Fall 2005, http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/foulipo.html [accessed 20/04/20]
Spahr, Juliana ed., *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002)
Sparks, Holloway, "Quarrelling with Rancière: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Democratic Disruption", *Philosophy and Rhetoric* Volume 49, Number 4 (2016), pp. 420-437
Staten, Henry, "The Origin of the Work of Art in Material Practice", *NLH* Vol. 43, Iss. 1 (Winter, 2012), pp. 43-64
Stefans, Brian Kim, *Word Toys: Poetry and Technics* (Tuscaloosa, AB: University of Alabama Press, 2017)
Stein, Gertrude, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Penguin, 2001)
Sutherland, Keston, "Blocks: Form Since the Crash", a seminar at New York University, 13 November, 2015, recording: https://archive.org/details/BlocksSeminarAtNYU13November2015/Blocks+seminar+at+NYU+13+November+2015.mp3 [accessed 20/04/20]
Sutherland, Keston, "Veronica Forrest-Thomson for Readers", *KR Online* Veronica Forrest-Thomson: A Retrospective (2008, Special Issue) https://kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/index-2/selections/veronica-forrest-thomson-for-readers/ [accessed 09/04/2020]
Swenson, Cole and St. John, David eds., *American Hyrbid* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009)
Symons, Arthur, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co, 1958)
Terry, Philip ed., *The Penguin Book of Oulipo* (London: Penguin, 2019)
Tiffany, Daniel, "Speaking in Tongues: Poetry and the Residues of Shared Language", *Tupelo Quarterly* 20 (2020), http://www.tupeloquarterly.com/speaking-in-tongues-poetry-and-the-residues-of-shared-language/ [accessed 06/04/2020]
Tiffany, Daniel, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2000)
Tschoffen, Monique, "'First I Must Tell About Seeing': (De)Monstrations of visuality and the dynamics of metaphor in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*", *Can Lit* 180 (Spring 2004)
Walker, Jo Lindsay and Luker, Ed eds., *Poetry and Work: Work in Modern and Contemporary Anglophone Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2019)
Walker, Ken, "I want to reclaim every part of living including illness and death: An interview with Lisa Robertson", *Poetry Project Newsletter* No. 237 (2003)
Wasser, Audrey, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism and the Production of Literary Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016)

Weber, Samuel, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008)
Whitman, Walt, "Preface to *Leaves of Grass*", *Poetry Foundation* (2009 [1855])
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69391/from-preface-to-leaves-of-grass-first-edition [accessed 07/12/20]
Wilkinson, John, "Repeatable Evanescence", *Thinking Verse* IV.i (2014)
Wilkinson, John, "Repeatable Evanescence", *Thinking Verse* IV.i (2014), pp. 23-49
Wilkinson, John, *Schedules of Unrest: Selected Poems* (Cromer, Norfolk: Salt, 2014)
Wilkinson, John, *The Lyric Touch* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007)
Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977)
Williams, W. C., "The Poem as a Field of Action", (1948)
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69393/the-poem-as-a-field-of-action [accessed 20/04/20]
Williams, W. C., *I wanted to write a poem: the autobiography of the works of a poet,* ed. Edith Heal (New York: New Directions, 1978)
Winters, Yvor, *In Defence of Reason* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1960)
Wolfson, Susan, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997)
Wordsworth, William, *The Prelude,* (London: Penguin, 1995)
Wordsworth, William, "Preface 1800 Version", (*Lyrical Ballads*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2005 [1800])
Wurth, Kiene Brillenburg, "Re-vision as Remediation: Hypermediacy and Translation in Anne Carson's *Nox*", *Image and Narrative* Vol. 14, Iss. 4 (2013), pp. 20-33