A Necessary Difficulty:
The Poethics of Proximity
in John Ashbery and
Michael Palmer

David Mc Carthy

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
University of East Anglia
School of Art, Media and American Studies

September 2015

Table of Contents

Abstract

Name: David Mc Carthy

Submission Date: September 2015

Title: A Necessary Difficulty: The Poethics of Proximity in John Ashbery and Michael Palmer

Both John Ashbery and Michael Palmer are noticeably absent from recent surveys of the ethical turn in innovative American poetry during the latter half of the twentieth century. By analysing the work produced during the first half of their careers as they write a poetic subject into existence, this thesis will demonstrate that the reason for this absence is due to the "necessary difficulty" of their respective poetic projects. Rather than identifying particular personal and political issues that might help explain away the difficulty of their work, my reading of Ashbery and Palmer will illustrate how difficulty is the constitutive feature of the ethical considerations and commitments informing their attempt to call attention to the initiating encounter between self and other that permits ethical praxis in the first place. Using a methodology derived from Mikhail Bakhtin's aesthetic theories and Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenological ethics, Ashbery and Palmer will be shown to enact a "poethic sensibility" that reconfigures reading and writing poetry as a way of living in the social world of others as a responsive and responsible subject. Furthermore, the concern they exhibit regarding their own ethical subjectivity will be shown to extend to the reader's, as s/he is encouraged to realise his/her own "response-ability" through the lived experience of proximity engendered by their necessarily difficult texts. By departing from the presupposition that the poem and the self it represents and/or articulates are intended to be properly comprehended by another person, this thesis will explore the ethical encounter that occurs between the poet and the reader at the very limits of the known and knowable, where "(my)Self" encounters "(an)Other" in its absolute, irreducible alterity as the constitutive moment of ethical subjectivity.

List of Abbreviations

BN……………………..*Blake's Newton*, Michael Palmer (1972)

CA…………………….*Codes Appearing: Poems 1979-1988*, Michael Palmer (2001)

CG…………………….*The Circular Gates*, Michael Palmer (1974)

CP…………………….*Collected Poems 1956-1987*, John Ashbery (2008)

DDS…………………...*The Double Dream of Spring*, John Ashbery (1966)

DI…………………….*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981)

FF…………………….*First Figure*, Michael Palmer (1984)

NFL………………….*Notes for Echo Lake*, Michael Palmer (1981)

OTB………………….*Otherwise Than Being: or Beyond Essence*, Emmanueal Levinas (1981)

RM…………………..*Rivers and Mountains*, John Ashbery (1966)

S……………………..*Sun*, Michael Palmer (1988)

"SPCM"……………..*"Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"* in *SPCM*

SPCM………………..*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, John Ashbery (1975)

ST…………………….*Some Trees*, John Ashbery (1956)

TCO………………….*The Tennis Court Oath*, John Ashbery (1962)

TI…………………….*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Emmanueal Levinas (1961)

TP…………………...*Three Poems*, John Ashbery (1972)

TPA………………....*Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Mikhail Bakhtin (1993)

WM………………….*Without Music*, Michael Palmer (1977)

Introduction: The (Dis)Enchantment of Self with Self

At the very beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, Charles Olson issued a call in "Projective Verse" (1950) that poets would be responding to in myriad different ways for the next fifty years, giving permission *and* obligating poets to "[get] rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego."[1] Olson's announcement of the end of "enchantment of self with self,"[2] the end of poetry as solely a medium of self-expression and self-disclosure, would irrevocably involve the New American Poets and their successors in what is perhaps the most, if not important, then at least defining debate of the period, the need to complicate the traditional binary opposition of self-other and the attendant socio-cultural, political and personal relations it structures. Mikhail Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas are crucial to understanding why this apparently ontological question would prove so influential to literature because they insist that it is always already an ethical question founded on the act of self-creation, both existential and aesthetic. While their philosophies have an immediate application to the concerns of everyday life, their radical thinking derives from how they refocus our attention on what has been forgotten, habitually overlooked, or intentionally ignored in daily life, namely the responsibility I have toward another person that conditions me as a subject in the world. Due to the belief in the rights and freedoms of the individual, society is self-oriented, which both Bakhtin and Levinas blame on the ontological presupposition that prioritises the self as an independent being. This persistent "egology"[3] is challenged by their alternative theses that turn our perspective from the self to an other, thus confirming that ethics is constitutive of our being and all other concerns are derivatives of the question raised regarding my responsibility by the experience of proximity to another embodied, cognisant subject.

While both Bakhtin and Levinas are concerned with concrete human life as it is actually lived and experienced by singular human beings in concrete contexts and situations, there are important differences between them. In their "endeavour to give a cogent account of the same complex, unitary phenomenon, namely sociality," Bakhtin conceives of language as "permeated by [the] traces of intersubjectivity" that "constitute and inform it," whereas Levinas

---

[1] Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 247.

[2] John Ashbery, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," *Collected Poems 1956-1987* (New York, NY: Library Classics of the United States, 2008), 477.

[3] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonson Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 35.

investigates language on a "pre-existential, pre-ontological level."[4] While dialogue for the latter is "both an originary, pre-existential mode of ethical communication, which constitutes the dialogically summoned 'I' *and*...the properly 'discursive' interaction between human beings," the former "conceives dialogue as a universal phenomenon informing human existence *and* as the relation between utterances as manifestations of this existence."[5] However, it is precisely because of these differences that a dialogue between Bakhtin and Levinas is possible. Although the self-other relation is a recurring obsession within many systems of thought in the twentieth century, Bakhtin's and Levinas' preoccupation with the attendant issues of dialogue, alterity, responsibility and the social significance of language make them indispensable for exploring what it means to write and read a self in poetry, for negotiating the "thicket of difficulties"[6] engendered by the ethical considerations and commitments involved in representing and/or articulating "I" amongst other(s') "I's." While Levinas "speaks of [a] first philosophy" as "a philosophy of dialogue that cannot not be an ethics,"[7] Bakhtin is the only figure to use authorship as a paradigm for thinking about self-representation and self-articulation, such that a dialogue between them offers a way of exploring the difficult issue of poetry's ethics. Furthermore, how they write is equally important to what they write because it betrays their concern for the subjectivity of the reader, that the reader him/herself realise exactly what being a responsive and responsible subject actually involves. The consistency in Bakhtin's and Levinas' writings derives from the questions asked regarding the fundamental ethical issue of how the self exists amongst others rather than in the often disorienting array of answers proposed. Continuous repetitions, re-contextualisations and intentional contradictions characterise their arguments because they are trying to make the reader realise the considerations and commitments involved in writing and reading as an ethical subject, hence the multiplicity of perspectives, variations on a term for a particular phenomenon, interruptions and divergences of the argument, and the prevalent sense of incompletion, all of which both permit and obligate the reader's participation in the dialogue.

This concern for the reader's subjectivity, that s/he be responsive to the text and responsible for his/her particular reading, that s/he interpret it but without imposing closure or reducing the otherness s/he experiences as s/he engages with the very limits of the known and

---

[4] Michael Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

[5] Ibid, 18.

[6] Levinas, *TI*, 29.

[7] Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 98.

knowable, is also crucial to appreciating the "poethics" of John Ashbery and Michael Palmer. Similar to Bakhtin and Levinas, the experie3nce of reading Ashbery and Palmer confirms the importance of realising one's own subjectivity but never at the expense of others', the sense of being permitted to interpret a text according to one's own spatial-temporal circumstances but always being obligated to acknowledge the limits of one's capacity to comprehend, that Ashbery and Palmer ultimately resist comprehension and confront us with a difficulty that cannot be reduced but compels us to keep returning and responding to them. Their concern for the reader's subjectivity manifests throughout their work, most explicitly in what Ashbery terms "that other 'I'"[8] and Palmer explains as "I [being] the reader's 'not yet,'"[9] how the reader's sense of self is at stake when s/he reads "I" as much as the poet's is when he writes "I." Just as Ashbery and Palmer enlarge the dialogue to include other readers, this analysis can be expanded to include other poets, predecessors, contemporaries and successors, who display a certain ethical sensibility in their writing. However, what differentiates Ashbery and Palmer is that they are not content with demonstrating how they are ethical subjects but insist on creating occasions where the interdependency of the poet and the reader as constitutive of each others' subjectivity *as* other is apparent. The method of writing and reading as a responsive and responsible ethical subject encouraged by their work articulates a poetics of everyday life, a "poethics" that enacts a way of acting in and interacting with the social world of others.

Thickening Poetics with a H

Since the publication of *New Literary History's* pioneering special issue "Literature and/as Moral Philosophy" (1983), a subgenre of literary criticism has burgeoned around figures who advocate a phenomenological literary hermeneutic, a deconstructive rhetorical philology and an ethically informed mode of textual analysis, most notably J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (1989); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989); Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (1990); Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep* (1992); Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992); Samuel Goldberg, *Agents and Lives* (1993); Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism* (1997); Adam Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (1997); Colin Mc Ginn, *Ethics, Evil and Fiction* (1999); Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading* (1999); and Derek Attridge, *The*

---

[8] John Ashbery, "The Skaters," *CP*, 149.
[9] Michael Palmer, "Left Unfinished Sixteen Times," *CA*, 122.

Singularity of Literature (2004). While each of these texts concentrate on fiction to advance the inherent ethical capacity of literature, the subsequent decade has seen ethical criticism applied to modernism, Lee Osser's *The Ethics of Modernism* (2009); drama, Larry Bouchard's *Theatre and Integrity* (2011); trauma narratives, Martin Modlinger's and Philipp Sonntag's *Other People's Pain* (2011); and autobiographical fiction, Robert Mc Gill's *The Treacherous Imagination* (2013), to name but a few divergences. This trajectory of ethical literary criticism indicates a marked refusal, or perhaps even an inability, to explore the ethics of poetics in English language literature, proof that Socrates' dismissal of poets from the ideal state in Plato's *Republic* has become so entrenched that the social function of poetry and its purpose regarding day-to-day living are almost innately secondary to other forms of discourse, other ways of writing about ethics or even being ethical. Socrates famously critiques poetry as an imitative art that appeals to the inferior, appetitive part of the soul:

> And in the case of sex, anger, and all the desires, pleasures, and pains that we say accompany all our actions, poetic imitation has the very same effect on us. It nurtures and waters them and establishes them as rulers in us when they ought to wither and be ruled, for that way we'll become better and happier rather than worse and more wretched.[10]

As imitators, they are inferior to the real world of making, the implication being that "only activities producing tangible results are to be taken seriously."[11] Another reason for the subordination of poetry to other forms of literary discourse in terms of ethics is the tendency to equate the first-person, singular speaker of a poem with the actual poet, such that any discussion of pertinent ethical issues is misconstrued as prescriptive, absolutist moralising, a practice wholly incongruous with the postmodern relativist climate in which ethical literary criticism germinated. According to this logic, poets are capable of exploring and enacting morality, the rules that determine our social responsibilities and how these are adhered to, whereas authors of other forms of literary discourse can imaginatively engage with ethics, the systematic study of the reasoning framework informing these rules.

Fortunately, the exception to this general dismissal of poetry from the debates ethical literary criticism seeks to engender is innovative American poetry from the second half of the

---

[10] Plato, "Republic X," *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, Fourth Edition, ed. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), 628.
[11] Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 134.

twentieth century. Beginning with Tim Woods' seminal *The Poetics of the Limit* (2003), which analyses the Objectivists, in particular Louis Zukofsky, and the school of Language poetry to show that "contemporary poetics, through the critique of reference and normative syntax by way of linguistic games and the play of the signifier, are concerned with ethics and the relationship between language and ethics,"[12] and continuing with G. Matthew Jenkins' *Poetic Obligation* (2008) and John Wrighton's *Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry* (2012), innovative American poetry of this period can be seen as being "motivated by an ethical concern for others as a social responsibility."[13] Richard Deming's *Listening On All Sides* (2007) even establishes an ethical practice of writing and reading so that experimental American poets can be appreciated in "their roles as exemplars [of a pragmatist poetics], as close listeners to the words others…use and how they use them" in "a community of those who see participation in meaning – its circulations and implications – as neither settled nor transparent."[14] Woods' suggestion that the "poetics of the limit…[is a] poetics of interruption"[15] is crucial to the understandings of poetics, ethics, proximity and difficulty delineated in my analysis. Both Ashbery and Palmer will be shown, therefore, to explore what happens at this limit, at the point where myself ends and another begins, at the furthest reaches of what can be said in poetry. By reading Ashbery and Palmer as examples of how ethics can be enacted through poetics, arguing ultimately that their poems acknowledge "the possibility…for…otherness beyond the limit [of the known and knowable], a prolepsis in poiesis, that the text holds open and presents as the potential of language use,"[16] my argument deviates from the alternative route pursued by Jenkins and Wrighton.

Firstly, Jenkins' study focuses on three generations of poets, represented by George Oppen and Charles Reznikoff, Edward Dorn and Robert Duncan, and Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian, respectively, who draw on the lessons from their Modernist predecessors to enact an "ethical-linguistic turn," with the primary intention of precisely locating this turn historically, to determine the socio-cultural and intellectual circumstances determining the movement "beyond didacticism and pronouncement toward… [the] indirect ethical inquiry" of a more "nonprescriptive, linguistically self-conscious ethics."[17] He astutely observes that "their poetry

---

[12] Tim Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Contemporary American Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4.
[13] John Wrighton, *Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 2.
[14] Richard Deming, *Listening On All Sides: Toward an Emersonian Ethics of Reading* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 3-5.
[15] Woods, 255.
[16] Ibid, 186.
[17] G. Matthew Jenkins, *Poetic Obligation: Ethics in Experimental American Poetry After 1945* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 3.

is their ethics," that their writings are informed by ethically volatile issues engendered by their lived experiences, for example, the violating and violent judgements perpetrated against communists for Oppen and Jews for Reznikoff, Dorn's insistence on an open, more eclectic community in the face of an increasingly homogenised and paranoid consumption-based technocracy, Duncan's homosexuality at the beginning of the sexual revolution, and Howe's and Hejinian's gender at the height of the feminist movement. While Jenkins' textual analysis concentrates on the formally challenging, engaging with the materiality of the poem in terms of its shape and construction, he aims to demonstrate that this "poetry is not intentionally…difficult"[18] once we accept that "it is incumbent upon us [as readers] to find the ethical theories that best resonate with the ethics of the poetry and poetics."[19] When achieved, readers can identify the ethical themes of the work, i.e. sensitivity to identities and social positions that have been othered by a dominant culture, acknowledgement of linguistic frames used to construct and enforce conventional morals, awareness of complicity in underwriting presupposed identifications, etc., the implication being that the difficulty of these authors can be negotiated when the correct theory is applied to them. While Jenkins acknowledges the impossible task of fulfilling our obligation to others through a close reading of radical alterity in a text, he suggests that the other manifests in these poets' work in the form of "indeterminacy, aporia, contradiction, irony, deixis, multiple meanings, variation, disruption, paratxis, mistake, accident, chance, ambiguous pronoun reference, paradox, equivocation, framing, and so on."[20] In doing so, he demonstrates how the other can be identified, thus compromising the radical alterity that makes it so important as what interrupts the self, the sense of otherness encountered at the very limit of the known and knowable that can be experienced but never explained. The difficulty experienced when reading Ashbery and Palmer, therefore, will necessarily not be explained away but instead shown to be *the* constitutive feature of their poetics as ethical praxis, inseparable from the social function and purpose they assign poetry as part of day-to-day living.

Secondly, Wrighton's study provides what he terms a "poethical trajectory" to supplement Woods' "first phase poethical praxis" with a second and third stage represented by poets "preoccupied with an emancipatory social activism."[21] He identifies a "performative dialogics"[22] at the centre of this praxis as the poets' various ethical engagements align them

---

[18] Ibid, 21.
[19] Ibid, 225.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Wrighton, 1-2.
[22] Ibid, 2.

with pertinent political questions of the period. The second phase includes Olson's ethical imperative to "challenge the dehumanising effects of industrialisation," Allen Ginsberg's "ethical response to the consumer culture and capitalist technocracy of the fifties," Gary Snyder's "ecopoetics as instructive of an ethical responsibility in the representation and social production of space," and Jerome Rothenberg's ethnopoetics as a "direct challenge to cultural imperialism."[23] The third phase involves a "turn to language" and is demonstrated by Bruce Andrews' "positively valued re-writings of the social body in a participatory poetics or emancipatory constructivism."[24] All of these poets are shown, in one way or another, to reorient language so it is no longer "the medium of a market-oriented self-identification" through which the individual secures an identity...by gaining purchase on a range of commodified positions within the socio-political totality."[25] Wrighton's analysis is vital to understanding how these poets are involved in the political struggle of reconciling the "disparity between the possibility of language (to maintain an idealised ethical relation) and the reality of language (as the site of political coercion and social conditioning)"[26] through their "poethical praxis." However, his concentration on the practical application of their "poethics" to address particular socio-political issues means ethics and morality are often synonymous in his analyses, even if morality is considered contextually determined rather than absolute. While this might be necessary to prevent such difficult poetry being dismissed as the preserve of an intellectual elite, inane obscurantism or irrelevant and impractical abstraction, my analysis is concerned with a "poethics" that precedes, even exceeds, any practical application. "Poethics" for Ashbery and Palmer is not just a way of "engaging in a specific politics"[27] or a critique of language use but an opportunity for enacting the constitution of subjectivity and exploring how it is represented and articulated, respectively. Theirs is a poetry of fundamentals because they acknowledge that without the reader there is no poet and without the poet there is no reader. Before there can be any practical application of ethics in a particular historical moment, there is the ethical encounter with another person made possible by the experience of proximity to what is unknown and unknowable.

Both Jenkins' and Wrighton's studies are vital for understanding the ethical turn in innovative American poetry of this period but their emphasis on how ethics is historically conditioned fails to properly appreciate its universal, timeless quality, how ethics is always

---

[23] Ibid, 18-20.
[24] Ibid, 20.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid, 180.
[27] Ibid, 2.

already a response to someone elsewhere and otherwise, to someone beyond the limits of one's capacity to comprehend and outside one's ability to control or coerce. In addition, neither gives appropriate attention to Joan Retallack's idea of the "poethical wager," the risk involved in committing oneself to something whose outcome is uncertain, to writing "*as*, not just *about*, a form of living in the real world,"[28] such that the fact one is writing and how one does so is equally if not more significant than what one writes about. Ashbery and Palmer are involved in a project that is at once permissive *and* obligatory but always in a pre-political sense. This analysis of the interconnection between poetics and ethics not only employs Retallack's neologism but is also informed by the similar intention to reveal how Ashbery and Palmer insist on positing the poem as an event in the real world rather than object representing or commenting on the real world. Both poets explore what it means to be social in the first place, not just the ontological question of how one exists in proximity to others but the precedential ethical considerations and commitments involved in acting in and interacting with a social of others. They ultimately demonstrate how ethics can inhabit poetry as more than just subject matter, as the only subject that matters in fact, because it informs not just how but why one writes and reads poetry in the first place.

The End of Friendship with Self Alone: John Ashbery and Michael Palmer

As two poets who have always maintained an active role in the visual arts, Ashbery through his art criticism and Palmer through his collaborations, the creative-cultural environment initiated by Abstract Expressionism would prove hugely influential on the development and emergence of their respective poetics. The paintings of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman collectively, rather than individually, first suggested the possibility of a new aesthetic paradigm that was at once simple and complex, urgent and meditative, abstract and literal, expressive and secretive. While each of these dialectics feature in the poets' work at different stages and to varying degrees, both are aware of the unfortunate incongruence between the potential suggested by Abstract Expressionism and the socio-political reality of the period. The aesthetic features of this art most appreciated at the time, i.e. scale, action, energy, space, etc., served as tacit "operators of sexual difference" that were part

---

[28] Joan Retallack, "The Poethical Wager," *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 40.

of an "informing metaphorics of masculinity." [29] Consequently, it provided a "crucial component of cold war U.S. national identity, differentiating the nation politically and culturally from a Europe portrayed as weakened and effeminate."[30] As a result, Ashbery and Palmer carefully avoid positioning themselves as proponents of oppositional individuation, knowing how easily the individualist existential experiences expressed by these painters were misappropriated to promote the national principles of individualism and democracy both domestically and abroad. The inevitable fate of the Abstract Expressionists explains why Ashbery and Palmer have always sought out artists who are less readily assimilable to the dominant national discourses of the period, the former frequently championing the work of Joseph Cornell, Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher and Joe Brainard, and the latter collaborating with Irving Petlin and Augusta Talbot and foreign artists such as Gerhard Richter, Sandro Chia and Micaëla Heinich. Nevertheless, the creative environment engendered by the Abstract Expressionists confirmed the importance of "outside" for establishing and maintaining an aesthetic paradigm that is as difficult as it is necessary. Palmer identifies this need to decentre identity in Ashbery, to "move beyond the subject – in both senses of the word."[31] Both poets were Harvard educated, which undoubtedly made them aware that positioning oneself inside the postwar American poetic tradition required adherence to the pedantic new critical pedagogy and confessional, expressivist poetics. Ashbery's ten-year relocation to Paris and Palmer's permanent relocation to San Francisco, in addition to their committed refusal to be aligned with any particular poetic movement, indicates, therefore, their burgeoning "poethic" sensibility, how the poetry is a way of living in the real world and how living in the real world reciprocally informs the poetry.

Such early awareness of the importance of what is and must remain outside also explains both poets' continued interest in translation or perhaps their interest in translation affirmed the importance of what is beyond articulation in one's native, habitual language and what cannot be appropriated into America's vernacular epistemology. The recently published *Collected French Translations: Poetry* (2014) and *Collected French Translations: Prose* (2014) suggest that Ashbery's translations are not just an addendum to his other creative-critical projects but rather a conduit for them, as "the very curious style of [what he was

---

[29] Timothy J. Clark, "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," *Reconstructing Modernism*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 229.
[30] Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 256.
[31] Michael Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Thomas Gardner**,"** *Regions of Unlikeness: Explaining Contemporary Poetry* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 279.

translating often] got into [his] own work and would keep recurring long after [he] had done this translation."[32] He admits "that there are echoes [of others' voices]…even today in my poetry"[33] and they allow him to avoid ready-made word patterns and associations that he might otherwise fall into when writing though he is never aware of these echoes while actually writing. Developing on his graduate studies in comparative literature, Palmer, like Ashbery, sees translation as the opportunity for a poetic encounter with hitherto unnamed and unknown others. His most notable translations include those of Vincente Huidobro, Alexi Parshchikov and Emmanuel Hocquard, and his co-editing of *Nothing the Sun Could Not Explain: Twenty Contemporary Brazilian Poets*, demonstrating his abilities across multiple languages. Palmer's own poetry is characterised by its complex intertextuality, which "[manifests] in the borrowing…of other people's words,"[34] hence his claim to "have been writing a book, not in my native language."[35] Because translating is always an interpretation, it complicates the notion of reading and writing as separate activities, explaining his suggestion that "writing is also a kind of reading"[36] and by extension reading is also a kind of writing.

Translating also raises important questions about how readers should respond to a text. By interpreting the text, readers create another, different composition for which s/he, like any translator, is ultimately responsible. For both Ashbery and Palmer, the act of translating is crucial to their "poethics" since it represents both the permission to be responsive but also the obligation to be responsible. Furthermore, Palmer insists that:

> All poetry is, of course translation, a bearing across from one region to another, a crossing of borders, a conjoining of same with other. It is a voyage out of the self-same or the self-identical…into a fluid semantic and ontological field. That is, to translate is also to be translated, to commit to an act of becoming…human perhaps.[37]

Translation makes Ashbery's and Palmer's intended "poethics" explicit, that we are reading poets who are always not only reading others but responding to them in their own writings. By extension, we as readers are given permission but are also obligated to respond to Ashbery and Palmer as others and to remain responsible for our interpretative responses. Translating allows

---

[32] John Ashbery, "Interview: Conducted by David Remnick," *Bennington Review* 8 (1980): 16.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 286.
[35] Palmer , "Sun," *Codes Appearing: Poems 1979-1988* (New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2001), 234.
[36] Ibid, 283.
[37] Palmer, "Poetry and Contingency: Within a Timeless Moment of Barbaric Thought," *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks* (New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008), 55-56.

for "extensions of voice, beyond that one with which we come into the world. The elsewhere so necessary to any understanding of the here-and-now."[38] It is not simply speaking through others' voices but speaking with them, entering into a "timeless, borderless dialogue with…other[s]"[39] in the groundless ground of the poem. This is "an 'elsew(here) that includes the word 'here,' as well as a 'nowhere' which can be read 'now here,'"[40] since the "time of the reading [and/as writing] is here-and-now: a now which happens at any moment, and hence a here which exists anywhere."[41] Perhaps their shared interest in Raymond Roussel (Ashbery researched him for a never-completed doctoral project in the late fifties and Palmer completed an undergraduate thesis on his work in 1965) explains the strange temporality of the "now here" in their poetry, what Palmer describes as "songs in the future-past."[42] The effect of Roussel's work depends on the "correspondence of the present and the absent" and the "spatialisation of time and memory" by "subjecting the temporal to various structures of simultaneous juxtaposition or succession of image-like scenes without context."[43] Both poets self-reflexively acknowledge this sense of "nowhere – now here" in each other's work, Ashbery observing how:

> we [are encouraged to] follow the movement of the argument…intently…[as] it appears…urgent to do so, but, as they say, where it stops nobody knows. That 'where' is the delightful, dangerous, and ultimately generous place where we end up if we follow Palmer.[44]

While in his review of *Shadow Train* (1981), Palmer identifies how:

> we are left with…neither territory nor map but an oscillation between them, a dialectical shadow play of presence and absence. Echoes and quotations surface and are reabsorbed…A series of 'first persons' is projected and erased. The speaker is not only masked but destabilised as a reference point.[45]

---

[38] Ibid, 56.

[39] Rosanne Wasserman and Eugene Richie, "'Curious Resemblances:' John Ashbery Translates French Poetry," *Collected French Translations: Poetry*, ed. Rosanne Wasserman and Eugene Richie (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014), xliv.

[40] Michael Palmer, "Active Boundaries: Poetry at the Periphery," *Active Boundaries*, 208.

[41] Michael Palmer, "Octavio Paz: Circulations of the Song," *Active Boundaries*, 121.

[42] Michael Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 226.

[43] Kai Mikkonen, *The Plot Machine: The French Novel and the Bachelor Machines in the Electric Years (1880-1914)* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 234-235.

[44] John Ashbery, "Introduction to a Reading by Michael Palmer and James Tate," *Selected Prose*, ed. Eugene Richie (Manchester, Carcanet Press, 2004), 218.

[45] Michael Palmer, "Review: Shadow Train," quoted in Lee Bartlett, *The Sun Is But a Morning Star* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 153.

Ashbery and Palmer might be irreconcilable opposites in terms of the economies of their writing, with the former "much more engaged by the permanency of the ephemeral…and of those eruptions of the trivial into consciousness" conveyed through a gradually more expansive "generative [and] exploratory sense" of allowing the poem "to carry on…through an idea of extension,"[46] whereas the latter's "poetry has not so much developed as refined and reduced itself to the elements that were always there"[47] through its "[involvement] with some sort of implosive intensification."[48] Palmer could easily be speaking about his own work when he praises Ashbery for the "remade" quality of his language and how his voice is always only "placed along and within the voices of others,"[49] highlighting the importance of the dialectic of absence and presence that informs both their work and is so crucial to appreciating the ethics motivating their poetics of proximity, of always already being just one amongst many others. However, where Palmer directly alludes to the "possibility of a life entirely given over to the poem. A life that was not referential to 'the literary,' what qualifies as literature, as to the actual exigencies and demands of the poetic vocation,"[50] Ashbery, typically, is more hesitant, suggesting that since his prose writing is the "[result] of an activity that has always been something more than a hobby, if less than a calling,"[51] then by a process of limitation his other activity, poetry, is closer to a vocation. Translation and vocation both help conceptualise poetry as the response to a preliminary call from another person, entering into a conversation with a voice that originates outside the self. Furthermore, Ashbery and Palmer are largely responsible for provoking the recent interest in "cross-pollination" between "traditional [forms]...and more experimental modes of writing."[52] For example, Ashbery combines the meditative enquiries of the Transcendentalists with the capacious French prose poem and reinvigorates conventional forms like the pantoum and the sestina using ekphrasis, while Palmer uses a hermeneutics of scepticism to enlarge the capacities of the confessional, expressivist poem and introduces a continental lyricism and philosophy to the explorations of a truncated self engendered by the example of Emily Dickinson. Through these combinations, they engender "productive encounter[s] that [answer] most frequently to the name 'innovation.'"[53] The sense of encounter, however, is further utilised to accentuate the ethics inherent in their poetics because these

---

[46] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 288.
[47] Ashbery, "Introduction to a Reading by Michael Palmer…," 217.
[48] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 288.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practice," *Active Boundaries*, 242.
[51] John Ashbery, "Preface," *Selected Prose*, v.
[52] Andrew Zawacki, "'Relation Without Relation:' Palmer, Celan Blanchot," *New German Critique* 91 (2004): 118.
[53] Ibid.

innovations highlight the "obscurity [read: difficulty] of poetry...[an] obscurity, if it is not congenital, has been bestowed on poetry by strangeness and distance (perhaps of its own making) and for the sake of an encounter."[54] If writing poetry is both to translate and be translated, the poetic vocation is extended to the reader who is called to respond by the voice of another person, in this case the poet, which means the difficult poem is a site of potential encounter between self and other. Because the difficult poem requires "an effort of attention [by the reader] that is as active as that which goes into the writing,"[55] the reader becomes a translator, not only transforming the poet's original work but rewriting the poems so they might be "closer to the originals than the originals themselves."[56] Writing poetry, therefore, is to be interpreted by another person, to be always already put into question by the reader but Ashbery and Palmer are equally concerned with how the reader might be put into question, might be called to respond as a responsive and responsible subject by the voice of another person and removed from the self-same, the "enchantment of self with self."

Despite these "curious resemblances,"[57] my analysis of Ashbery and Palmer is not an attempt to enforce complete consensus or correspondence between them. Even disregarding the influence their particular geographical locations, New York and San Francisco respectively, and the attendant personal and poetical relationships, have on their projects, vital differences exist between them. For example, Ashbery's homosexuality resulted in an immediate disconnect from the containment culture of fifties America, whose virulent homophobia required careful negotiation for reasons of self-protection, while his expatriate experience in France, "living in a country where the language spoken was not [his] own,"[58] forever changed his relationship to language as a medium of expression and self-disclosure. Working as an art critic meant he was acutely aware of the appropriative tendency of mainstream American culture, which readily neutralised whatever was remotely other about innovations in the visual arts, while his phenomenology of everyday life involves tracing thoughts voicing themselves and inscribing a social world. Palmer, on the other hand, lost faith in language after witnessing its complicity in the intentional misremembering and misleading re-presentation of events

---

[54] Paul Celan, "The Meridian," *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999), 46.
[55] Michael Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Lee Bartlett," *Talking Poetry: Conversations in the Workshop with Contemporary Poets* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 126-127.
[56] John Ashbery, "Jerboas, Pelicans, and Peewee Reese: Marianne Moore," *Selected Prose*, 86.
[57] John Ashbery, "Interview: Conducted by Guy Bennett," *Charting the Here of There: French and American Poetry in Translation in Literary Magazines, 1850-2002*, ed. Guy Bennett and Béatrice Mousli (New York, NY: Granary Books, 2002), 144.
[58] John Ashbery, "John Ashbery In Conversation with John Tranter," *Jacket* 2 (1988) <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html > Accessed: 7th April 2015.

associated with America's neo-imperialist expansion during the sixties, while his active involvement in experimental dance confirmed the possibility of an embodied form of non-linguistic signification. His attendance at the Vancouver Poetry Conference (1963) first introduced him to a new conceptualisation of community, eventually resulting in his own idea of the imagined community consisting of different poets and readers involved in the same timeless project. Furthermore, his interest in Wittgenstein, particularly his argument that "ordinary language is all right"[59] and suggestion that "Philosophy ought really to be written only as a *form of poetry*,"[60] explains why Palmer's "poetics of everyday life is thus not simply the empirical record of the actual words of this or that person," not the "*expression* or externalisation of inner feeling" but the critique of that expression" to affirm that poetry ought really to be written as philosophy.[61]

Nevertheless, they share a "poethic" sensibility, a concern for what poetry can do as a way of living in the social world of others and a concern for the subjectivity of the reader that warrants analysing them, if not comparatively, then at least in proximity to each other. At the heart of this is not just a reappraisal of why one should write and read poetry but also a radical reconfiguration of how one does so. Because their work is founded on exploring the ethics that precedes any politics, my readings of Ashbery and Palmer are intended to demonstrate how they realise what I term a "poethics of proximity," which requires an extended analysis of the various considerations and commitments that both permit and obligate this as they manifest in the collections up to that point. Ashbery's work up to and including *SPCM* will be analysed to illustrate how he engages with the question of self-representation in poetry, while Palmer's work up to and including *Sun* will be analysed to reveal how he explores self-articulation in poetry. Both these questions are motivated by their concurrent interest in exploring how the subject author's a self, how it writes itself into existence as one subject amongst others, and determining whether or not this can be done in an ethical, that is, in a responsive and responsible, manner. While their projects don't exactly share a common trajectory, there are important parallels in how they move away from "the enchantment of self with self" and turn toward the other in order to realise a "poethics of proximity." Firstly, this movement involves undermining the poetic subject as autotelic by recognising the importance of what lies outside the self and in doing so affirming its status as a heteronomic entity. This turn toward what is

---

[59] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1958), 28.
[60] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 24
[61] Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 184.

outside the poetic subject will be discussed in relation to Ashbery's *Some Trees* (1956) and *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) and Palmer's *Blake's Newton* (1972) and *The Circular Gates* (1974). Secondly, Ashbery and Palmer will be shown to welcome what is outside into their poetry through a process of self-erasure and the dialectic of presence and absence in *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) and *The Double-Dream of Spring* (1970), and *Without Music* (1977) and *Notes for Echo Lake* (1981), respectively. In this case, what is outside manifests in another person and both will be shown to extend the permission and obligation to become ethical subjects to the reader by allowing him/her to inhabit the poem and become responsible for his/her interpretation. Thirdly and finally, Ashbery's act of self-representation in *Three Poems* (1972) and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) and Palmer's act of self-articulation in *First Figure* (1984) and *Sun* (1988) will be addressed to demonstrate how a "poethics of proximity" informs the constitution of ethical subjectivity, a process coextensively undertaken by both the poet and the reader as they respond to each other *as* other, an experience signalled by being at the very limits of the known and knowable.

To help further differentiate between Ashbery and Palmer, their concern for how an ethical subject is authored through the writing and reading of poetry will be analysed according to the trajectory of Bakhtin's "aesthethic" theories and Levinas' phenomenological ethics. Firstly, there is a noticeable shift from ethics to aesthetics when Bakhtin's texts are read in the order in which they were written rather than the order of their publication in English, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (written: 1919-21/published: 1993), *Art and Answerability* (1919-1924/1990) and T*he Dialogic Imagination* (1934-41/1981). However, when his "overriding goal…is seen as a philosophical [inquiry],"[62] there is an undeniable continuity in his work engendered by his study of how a self is authored through performed acts. In *TPA*, Bakhtin argues that the subject comes into existence by performing actions in the presence of others and being irreducibly answerable for them. In *DI*, his attention turns to literary discourse as he develops his principle of dialogism to explain how language always already consists of the voices of others and to use language is to always already be responding to others. Therefore, every utterance inherently involves the speaker in relations with other speakers, thus precluding the autonomous, self-sufficient monologue in favour of a dialogue. This trajectory proves crucial to appreciating how Ashbery utilises his knowledge of visual art aesthetics to configure the poem as an event between embodied subjects during which answerable acts are performed, whereas dialogism helps explain Palmer's understanding of the poem as a conversation

---

[62] Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4.

between a community of different speakers. Secondly, there is an important change in how Levinas conceptualises ethics between his two mature philosophical works, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961) and *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence* (1981). In this first text, he argues that the face-to-face encounter with another person constitutes subjectivity, the occasion when the self encounters an other and responds to the question posed by him/her by answering for oneself. In the second text, Levinas reconfigures ethics to refer to a pre-linguistic experience of ethical encounter. He distinguishes between the said and the saying, where the said refers to the self's actual response to another person while the saying refers to a response prior to anything articulated in language, a gesture that orients oneself toward another. This trajectory is key to understanding the difference between self-representation in Ashbery and self-articulation in Palmer. In *SPCM*, Ashbery realises a "poethics of proximity" through the fact-to-face encounter with another person's self-portrait, thus revealing how self-representation is dependent on the presence of an other who instigates it, who permits and obligates a response. In *S*, Palmer's "poethics of proximity" are realised through the act of listening, an originating, pre-linguistic gesture before anything is spoken that opens the self to the presence of an other and makes response not only possible but necessary. Most importantly, while both Ashbery and Palmer explore how responding to another person is crucial to the acts of self-representation and self-articulation, their poetry provides an occasion for the reader to consider how s/he might author him/herself as an ethical subject by responding to the poet, how s/he can realise a "poethics of proximity" in the face-to-face encounter with Ashbery and by listening to Palmer both as unknown and unknowable others.

In terms of structure, to illustrate how Ashbery and Palmer employ different strategies to realise their "poethics of proximity," this analysis consists of two separate sections. Nevertheless, despite the differences in how they realise the ethical potential they identify as informing poetry, a number of theoretical terms, methodological proposals and contextual issues are utilised to explain the corresponding trajectories of their work. Accordingly, Chapter 1 explains the primary concepts of "poethics," proximity, "response-ability" and necessary difficulty using the aesthetic theories of Bakhtin and the phenomenological ethics of Levinas. In addition, Ashbery's and Palmer's works will be posited as responding to the pedagogical practices of New Criticism, which will be shown to embody the strategies of containment and discourses of consensus associated with the Cold War, thus lending both personal and political immediacy to each poet's decision to compose in open rather than closed forms, and to distance themselves from normative poetic standards in favour of more innovative approaches to how a poem is initially composed and subsequently interpreted.

Part I focuses on Ashbery's work from the fifties up to the mid-seventies, beginning with *ST* and concluding with *SPCM*, where, it will be argued, the poet realises his "poethics of proximity" through the face-to-face encounter of the aesthetic event. Chapter 2 addresses Ashbery's first two collections to identify how he problematizes the notion of the autotelic poetic subject and introduces a heteronomic alternative, that is, a subject that is not self-contained and autonomous but rather open toward, even constituted by, difference and otherness. Ashbery will be shown to challenge strategies of containment and discourses of consensus in both collections by engaging with the aesthetics of contemporaneous artists, avoiding oppositionality through indifference, preventing the appropriation of otherness by positioning himself as an outsider and using repetition to accentuate the sense of irreducible difference informing his early work.

Chapter 3 concentrates on *RM* and *DDS*, collections in which Ashbery displaces himself as the subject of his poems in order for the reader to make the poem correspond to his/her perspective. For this reason, the poem will be shown to be an event rather than an object, while Bakthin's theory of the performed act will be used to explain how Ashbery envisages a situation where each instance of interpretation is an instance of composition for which the reader is responsible. Ultimately, Ashbery is both absent and present in these collections as he encourages the reader to consider how the poem is a site where multiple consciousnesses encounter each other, how the poem allows for a sense of proximity because it is an event where both the poet and the reader can realise their "response-ability," the constitutive moment of a "poethics."

Finally, using Levinas' analogy of the face-to-face encounter, Ashbery will be shown in Chapter 4 to realise a "poethics of proximity" in the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" in the event of the poem. Firstly, *TP*'s immersive, environmental quality will be addressed to illustrate how Ashbery is concerned with making the acts performed during the writing and reading of his work readily applicable to how one lives in the extratextual, social world. Developing on the "response-ability" realised in the previous collection, the experience of reading *TP*, of being confronted with innumerable choices regarding how one should proceed with the text, is intended to replicate the lived experience of acting in and interacting with the social world of others. This poem is characterised by a necessary difficulty that requires a new way of reading, one that allows for an appreciation of the encounter that occurs between the poet and the reader in conversation with each other rather than one solely concerned with the teleological process of determining meaning. Secondly, in *SPCM*, Ashbery uses ekphrasis to explore how proximity between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" is realised in the

face-to-face encounter. The eponymous poem in this collection sees Ashbery responding to "(an)Other" in his act of self-representation, an act he encourages the reader to similarly perform a s/he responds to the poet as "(an)Other" when interpreting the poem and realising his/her ethical subjectivity. Just as the poet responds to the face of the painter in the self-portrait as "(an)Other," someone who cannot and must not be completely known, the reader responds to Ashbery as "(an)Other" and in doing so realises his/her "response-ability" as an ethical subject. This encounter is intended to model how "(my)Self" acts in and interacts with the social world of others in a way that acknowledges the alterity of "(an)Other" without appropriating or reducing it, it is a relation of proximity rather than complete identification that constitutes one's ethical subjectivity.

Part II focuses on Palmer's work from the early seventies to the late eighties, starting with *BN* and finishing with *S*, which documents the poet's realisation of a "poethics of proximity" as he explores the encounter between individuals that occurs in conversation prior to anything being said. In Chapter 5, Palmer will be shown to challenge strategies of containment and discourses of consensus in *BN* and *CG* as he attempts to reconfigure the poetic subject, and the poem itself, as open to difference and otherness. This intention might be similar to Ashbery, but Palmer pursues it in an entirely different way by collapsing the distinction between the inside and outside of the poem through serial compositions and derivations from other sources. Furthermore, Palmer uses these collections to investigate the possibility of positioning himself outside the body politic and in doing so creating a community of difference, thus indicating the ethical concerns informing his poetics at this early stage.

Chapter 6 addresses the next two collection, *WM* and *NEL*, where Palmer seeks to explore the conventions of the lyric poem to reveal that it is informed by the presence of multiple voices rather than the singular voice of a speaker or poetic subject. Through a process of self-erasure, Palmer creates a vacant subject position that the reader can inhabit as an embodied consciousness when s/he reads the poem. In doing so, he returns the lyric to its original function as a text to be performed, thus providing a model for how the reader realises him/herself through performed actions in the extratextual, social world. Such lyrics he terms "analytical," as they investigate how embodiment occurs during the writing and reading of poetry, a process that involves both presence and absence as the poet and reader encounter each other within the poem. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism will also be reconfigured to explain how the lyric is a dialogic rather than a monologic utterance, thus allowing for a method of composition and interpretation in which the poet and reader respond to "(an)Other" in the poem. Consequently, writing and reading in this manner become gestures extended toward

another person in the event of communication rather than being concerned with the transfer of meaning or the reduction of uncertainty between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other."

Finally, in Chapter 7 Palmer will be shown to realise his "poethics of proximity" as he explores the encounter that is possible between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" in *FF* and *S*. In these collections, Levinas' theory of the saying and the said will be used to explain how the poet conceptualises the poem as a gesture, a performed act that presupposes an encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" before anything is communicated. Palmer's concern here is with a language of the unsayable, a language that communicates prior to speaking, and his collaborations with the choreographer Margaret Jenkins will be addressed in the analysis of *FF*. With *S*, Palmer realises his "poethics of proximity" by foregrounding the act of listening to "(an)Other," a gesture that welcomes and communicates to "(an)Other" prior to anything being communicated but which is the prerequisite of all communication. Because listening requires proximity while not necessitating complete identification between the subjects involved, it provides a precise example of the originating experience of ethical subjectivity, an experience Palmer extends to his reader by encouraging him/her to listen to what is not said, to what occurs in the encounter between "(my)self" and "(an)Other" prior to anything that might be communicated.

Just Being Difficult?

Discussing the ethical responsibility of innovative poetry, especially that which "makes its difficulty a basic means to accomplishing its ends," might initially seem problematic since "privileging artistic complexity" is often seen to subordinate "political obligation" and the resultant ambiguity and indeterminacy are considered to preclude conviction.[63] As George Steiner asks, what does it mean when the "language-act most charged with the intent of communication, of reaching out to touch the listener or reader" and begin a dialogue is "resistant to immediacy and comprehension?"[64] Numerous questions are raised in this discussion of responsibility ("being capable of fulfilling an obligation" and "being accountable to another for something") and irresponsibility ("not answerable for actions" and "not liable to be called to account"). For example, is the poet responsible to the reader's expectations of what

---

[63] Charles Altieri, "On Difficulty in Contemporary American Poetry," *Daedalus* 133 (2004): 113.
[64] George Steiner, "On Difficulty," *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 18.

a poem should be and do, is s/he responsible to the experience being re-presented and/or performed, or is s/he responsible to the language and the medium being used? These multiple responsibilities are incompatible since ensuring one is satisfied inevitably forces the others into secondary importance. However, in Ashbery and Palmer, the emphasis is not on a practical responsibility to someone or for something but on an antecedent, precedential "response-ability" that is realised during the ethical encounter between self and other, the permission and the obligation experienced by the poet and the reader of which all subsequent questions of practical responsibility are derivatives. By revealing how tentatively we comprehend the many permutations of self-reference and continuously confronting us with what lies just beyond the limits of what we do and can know, difficulty prolongs this encounter between self and other, highlighting the importance of identification, albeit never in the ways that might reinforce us as self-sufficient subjects. Difficulty is neither just a property of a text nor merely a classifiable set of techniques but an experience that must be understood as a fundamental part of the writing and reading process. Because the "issue of poetic difficulty is meaningless" without considering the "reader and...reading publics," it is at once individual and collective, and can only be experienced rather than explained away.[65]

To understand the necessity of Ashbery's and Palmer's difficulty, it must be differentiated from the two dominant examples of difficulty in twentieth century American poetry, High Modernism and Language poetry, which have primarily determined our understanding of the function difficulty performs. Firstly, while the difficulty of high modernism "came with an 'ought,'" meaning it was not just the result of an individual's expression but a "matter of cultural and aesthetic *necessity*,"[66] it equally served "an important [but more problematic] social function as a cultural gatekeeper" because "knowing how to respond properly to difficult art [and literature] became a way of indicating one's membership in high culture."[67] For this reason, Eliot's claim that "poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*"[68] is not as innocuous as it might appear because difficulty was not just an argument about comprehension but "was the early twentieth century's tool for arguing about what literature is and who should control it."[69] Difficulty also articulates a social situation, where the "common reader" does not have the necessary "knowledge required to

---

[65] William Christie, "A Recent History of Poetic Difficulty," *ELH* 67 (2000): 542.
[66] Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 16, author's emphasis.
[67] Ibid, xv.
[68] T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Essays* (London, Faber and Faber, 1951), 289.
[69] Diepeveen, 2.

understand difficult modern texts" while a "specialised elite audience" does.[70] This knowledge-based difficulty "demanded an interpreting class" but it also "narrowed aesthetic meaning,"[71] since if the reader responded appropriately to the difficulty, i.e. interpreted the symbols correctly, identified the literary allusions, determined the bibliographic references, etc., it could be explained away, thus indicating his/her initiation into a coterie of like-minded individuals who share a similar sensibility. Secondly, the difficulty of the Language poets is more instrumental, since what motivates their innovations is a "demand for a social, political dimension in writing – embracing concern for a public, for community goods, for overall comprehensions and transformation" that "intersects an overall concern for language as medium: for the conditions of its makings of meaning, significance or value, & sense."[72] While this poetry is itself not "instrumentalised or instrumentalising" it is more "actively explanatory," a kind of "writing *as* politics" not just about politics in which difficulty serves a particular purpose.[73] Difficulty is intended to disrupt the ideological structures of the capitalist socio-economic system informing the production and consumption of meaning in poetry by precluding confessional, expressivist aesthetics and preventing close-reading. Language poetry radically reconfigures the relationship between the poet, the reader and the text to subvert the normalised hierarchies and invert the active-passive dichotomy structuring society and conditioning poetic composition and interpretation. As a result, the difficulty of such writing is only necessary in terms of its function in explaining and enacting this political objective.

Both the pro/prescriptive and the instrumental approach to difficulty oversimplifies it. For Ashbery and Palmer it is an inherent, if not *the* constitutive, feature of their "poethics," thus pointing equally to poetry and to life, to a life given over to the poem and to writing and reading poetry as a way of living in the social world of others. Their poetry displays a difficulty that cannot be explained away or limited to a utilitarian purpose, it is a "necessary difficulty" that "encompasses both critique" of how things are but also "celebration" of how things could and should be.[74] Necessarily difficult poetry allows for not only the exploration but the enactment of what the social might be, it performs the crucial function of developing different paradigms of subjectivity and testing the possibility of utopian social relations in ways that are impossible in other creative-critical discourses. Neither Ashbery nor Palmer are unnecessarily

---

[70] Ibid, 132.
[71] Ibid, 134.
[72] Bruce Andrews, "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis," *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Berkeley, CA: Roof Books, 1990), 24.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Michael Palmer, "Active Boundaries," 207.

difficult, they are not simply abstract, obtuse, solipsistic, surreal, indeterminate, exclusive, esoteric or whatever other word commonly used to disparagingly denote poetic innovations. As Woods', Jenkins', and Wrighton's studies demonstrate, they are part of the more general ethical turn in innovative American poetry but unlike their immediate predecessors and contemporaries they are not so much concerned with turning their attention to particular ethical issues but with exploring how poetry can enact this turning from self toward other that permits and obligates all further ethical activities. In this sense, Ashbery and Palmer are not poets of the everyday but poets of *the* everyday. Unlike William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara, who utilise relatively inconsequential experiences to reconfigure poetry's social function as a way of valuing the personal occasions that are often at best ignored or at worst intentionally suppressed by official discourses, Ashbery and Palmer call our attention to the most everyday experience that informs all subsequent social interactions, the ethical encounter between self and other. However, as Ashbery argues:

> It is as well to call attention
> To it by exaggeration, perhaps. But calling attention
> Isn't the same as explaining, and as I said I am not ready
> To line phrases with the costly stuff of explanation, and shall not,
> Will not do so for the moment.[75]

Their concern for the subjectivity of the reader means they are difficult because of the necessity of their task, not just explaining how to live ethically but providing readers with the opportunity to realise for themselves the considerations and commitments involved in acting in and interacting with the social world of others as a responsive and responsible ethical subject. As Ashbery explains, this poetry is about "getting from one place to another...from one [or my] *moment* to another [or an other's]."[76] Because "life is very difficult" the poetry must be difficult, because "it seems very often that we're in a situation that is impossible to deal with, but somehow it goes on, so it's very difficult and easy at the same time. It happens by itself and we're part of its happening."[77] Palmer appreciates this aspect of Ashbery, how he "deprives you of the simple reading, the either/or that certain lesser readers are always yearning for"[78] but which is, more importantly, the result of certain writing practices. Like Ashbery, he refuses

---

[75] Ashbery, "The Skaters," *CP*, 152.
[76] John Ashbery, "An Interview in Warsaw with Piotr Sommer," *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, ed. Michael Palmer (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1983), 313.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 279.

the "erasure of the function of poetry in relation to the world, a trivialising for which one is duly rewarded for making the thing manageable" by ensuring the poem remains "unmanageable," that its difficulty makes it a part of living in the social world of others. [79]

---

[79] Ibid.

<u>Chapter 1: The Poethics of Proximity: A Necessary Difficulty</u>

Poetry is capable of doing things ethical in a way that philosophy simply cannot. This is not to deny the latter's important heuristic capacity regarding ethical matters but to suggest rather that poetry offers a different way of conceptualising ethics by drawing our attention to the performative actions that constitute us as subjects within the social world of others. Informed by the "poethics of proximity," poetry is not concerned with imperatives or prescriptions but with enacting what it is like to be an ethical subject. By testing the possibility of living according to a principle you are trying to articulate, writing and reading become activities associated with a particular way of living in the real world, the social world of others outside, but always exerting influence upon, the self. Accordingly, the social function of poetry is pronounced and this acquires important political connotations when contextualised in the Cold War period and understood as a response to the dominant discourses of containment and consensus that defined this period. This turn to ethics signals a turn toward the other, a powerful gesture of resistance against the homogenising forces operating in society intent on neutralising difference by appropriating it into categories of the same.

Poems informed by such "poethics" are no longer limited to their communicative capacity in the same way that ethics is not limited to providing a prescriptive morality. They come to embody an ethics, a particular way of negotiating one's social environment and interacting with those others who inhabit it. The difficulty of such poems is, therefore, necessary because it ensures that otherness is protected from appropriation or reduction by insisting on difference and distance between the participants involved in the aesthetic experience. Because the poem is no longer limited to its meaning, its significance lies with the application of what one learns from it to one's own experience of life in that moment. It is important to remember that despite the centrality of ethics to poetics in such poetry, there is no coerciveness, imperatives or prescriptions since how you should live your life *cannot* be specified because no one else is in a position to fully understand another's life. In this sense, "poethics" is not concerned with the content of poetry but rather with the occasion it provides, a potential to be realised by the poet and reader that leads them somewhere they did not pre-empt, toward an encounter with an other that constitutes the self and is integral to it becoming a responsive and responsible ethical subject. The condition of such poems recommends a way of living in the social world of others, while their affect, rather than content, represents their ethical value. If difficulty demarcates the limits of understanding then it also marks the limits

the self. However, a "poethics of proximity" is not concerned with highlighting such limitations but rather with foregrounding the potential actions possible at such limits, the point at which self ends and the social world of others begins.

(1.1) The New Criticism: Containment and Consensus

New Criticism is arguably the most influential critical movement of the twentieth century, or is at least remembered first and foremost as the preeminent version of formalist criticism, because of its ability to translate theoretical and ideological arguments into practical and easily applicable pedagogical practices in the form of close reading. However, the well-documented failures of New Criticism are used to legitimise the charge levelled at its practitioners that they represented a retreat from the world of political, and as I will argue ethical, engagement, during a period when such explicit, committed engagements were becoming increasingly necessary. The failures of New Criticism derive from its overly formalist method, which manifested in its ignoring the constitutive role performed by the reader during the interpretation of a text, its denying the importance of the author's intentions, its privileging certain groups of texts (and by extension certain types of authors) over others, and its severing literature from its immediate historical-material and socio-cultural contexts. While New Critics may have favoured depoliticised readings, their pedagogical practices and interpretive strategies must not themselves be depoliticised. There is an irony that the "typical critique of the New Criticism as formalistic…is itself formalistic" since it "recognises that [it] was indeed a kind of formalism" while ignoring the "historical affiliations, purposes and functions of that formalism."[1] Like any other critical theory, its terminology "must be understood to have carried extra-critical meanings and performed extra-critical functions" because "the meaning and the function of language are never determined solely by the particular discourse" in which it appears, language being always "overdetermined…by its interdiscursive context."[2]

The view that the "New Criticism represents a coterie or even a school is mistaken"[3] given the evidence of disagreements among its practitioners, but nevertheless their reactions against preceding and contemporary critical schools, namely aesthetic-impressionistic

---

[1] Mark Walhout, "The New Criticism and the Crisis of American Literature: The Poetics of the Cold War," *College English* 49 (1987): 862.
[2] Ibid, 863.
[3] René Wellek, "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1978): 613.

criticism, the Humanist movement, the anti-genteel Naturalists and the Marxists, warrants considering them as at least articulating a "structure of feeling" in postwar American criticism. Any attempt at establishing a critical core is consequently prevented by the multiple divergences between each member's theories but for the purpose of this argument, my analysis of new critical poetics will concentrate on the pronouncements of John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren because they each viewed poetry as the most appropriate subject for a "critical method built on a holistic approach to interpretation."[4] Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941) can hardly be overestimated in its shaping of the New Critical approach to poetry. He argues for an "ontological critic"[5] who is committed to "the most fundamental pattern of criticism: criticism of the structural properties of poetry."[6] By focusing on the ontology of poetry, Ransom concentrates on the essential qualities that ultimately differentiate it from other discourses, primarily the formal and structural properties. His essentialist supposition that poetry offers "a kind of knowledge which is radically and ontologically distinct"[7] suggests its function exists separate from the intentions of the author, the response of any reader and the influence of, or its influence on, its historical-material and socio-cultural contexts. His pronouncements result in a "closing-off" of poetry and makes criticism simply an evaluative task of differentiating between 'good' and 'bad' poetry according to a range of normative standards. Consequently, poets who did not fit within the new critical paradigm were literally unreadable and thus excluded from the canon being formulated according to its ontological evaluation of poetry.[8] Whether intentional or not, selection is an implicit form of argument and it outlines a particular political position, and the New Critic's selections advanced an argument for the exclusion of those "outsiders" who might potentially challenge the status quo then favouring a white, male, heterosexual, conservative, Christian centre. An "ontological critic" deduces essentialist characteristics that determine who is included and who is excluded from their understanding of what poetry is. Dealing in such essentialist deductions lends a certain neutrality to texts, providing an enclave of certainty and coherence during a period of acute uncertainty and emerging heterogeneity. However, while removing the difficult political issues raised by authorial intention, reader participation and extratextual correspondence might result in depoliticised readings, the act itself is highly politicised.

---

[4] Daniel Green, "Literature Itself: The New Criticism and Aesthetic Experience," *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (2003): 66.
[5] John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941), 279.
[6] Ibid, xi.
[7] Ibid, 3.
[8] Stephen Matterson, "The New Criticism," *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide,* Ed. Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 173.

In a similar vein to Ransom, Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938) advances the organic metaphor for literature, in which "a poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships,"[9] and suggests that "if we must compare a poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought not to be a wall but to something organic like a plant."[10] Both "decried the treatment of poems as anything other than organic entities whose constituent parts could not be separated except at the cost of violating the whole."[11] Such a metaphor represents a further "closing-off" of poetry, as the text is revered as an autonomous object, self-contained and governed by its own internal logic of relations between its constituent parts. This formalist dictum of New Criticism is most succinctly conveyed in René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949), in which an aesthetic, intrinsic criticism is advanced that proposes the "prime and chief function [of literature to be] fidelity to its own nature."[12] They also "reject as poetry"[13] statements of "practical intent (…incitation to direct, immediate action) and scientific intent (…additions to knowledge),"[14] thus severely limiting the reach of poetry into the extratextual world. Ransom's, Brooks' and Warren's understanding of poetry is best illustrated using the spatial metaphor of a container. This enclosed space exists within impermeable boundaries separating the text from the extratextual world and contains a system of relationships that constitutes meaning as specific to the context engendered by the text. Ultimately, the text is informed by a strategy of containment as it is conceived to be an organic unit containing everything necessary to identifying its essential meaning independent of any extratextual significance that might be imported into it.

It is not too difficult to appreciate why such a "closing-off" of poetry was so readily accepted during the postwar period. The Cold War saw an overt concern with preserving imaginary boundaries that figured prominently as impassable limits designed to prevent the invasion of invisible threats from outside. Therefore, international, geopolitical boundaries were not the only locations where strategies of containment were most immediately apparent as these external fronts were replicated by internal ones. By categorising poetry according to its apparently essential properties and preventing any extension of its aesthetics into the extratextual world through a formalist methodology, New Criticism can be seen as

---

[9] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), xv.
[10] Ibid, i.
[11] Edward D. Pickering, "The Roots of New Criticism," *Southern Literary Journal* 41 (2008): 97.
[12] René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 26.
[13] Ibid, 13.
[14] Ibid, 229.

aestheticizing the discourses required to maintain the geopolitical and domestic policies of containment while using poetry (both the writing and reading of it) as an instrument to reaffirm the attendant ideological and cultural values.

William K. Wimsatt's and Monroe Beardsley's 1946 essays "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" concisely demonstrate how New Criticism becomes highly politicised when contextualised in the Cold War period. The former argues against the relevance of the author's intention, thus completely devaluing any external information when interpreting a text, while the latter discounts the reader's reaction to a text, thereby precluding any value the text might have in the extratextual world. Wimsatt's and Beardsley's arguments confirm how the New Criticism erected impermeable boundaries between the text and its context to exclude anything that might complicate the status of the text as an autonomous, self-contained object. The fact these theories developed during a period when America was ill-prepared for the inclusion of differences that might unsettle the fictive and actual boundaries erected by containment strategies suggests that an inherent reluctance to engage with the outside makes New Critical theories and Cold War politics inseparable, if not mutually constitutive. Alternatively but no less troubling, the New Critics provided a way of withdrawing "from a dangerous context into the safety of the organically whole work as an embodiment of absolute value"[15] in an attempt to avoid assuming a contentious political position as defined by Cold War ideological tensions. More worryingly perhaps, the removal of the author as an intentional agent and the disappearance of the reading subject convey a pronounced anxiety regarding one's ability to act in such a difficult political environment.

If the New Criticism just remained a series of theoretical pronouncements based on the "holistic life envisioned by the Southern Agrarians"[16] its influence would be limited to the immediate postwar period. As illustrated above, however, its complicity in advancing the containment strategies of the Cold War makes such confinement impossible. In addition, Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) meant that new critical theories immediately turned into practices, expanding its reach from the abstract and poetic into the practical and pedagogic, thereby further reinforcing its cultural values and making it difficult to ignore its highly politicised status. Brooks' text consists primarily of close readings of poems, providing "the concrete examples on which generalisations are to be based,"[17] most notably his insistence that

---

[15] Jeffrey S. Librett, "The Finitude of Method: Mourning Theory from the New Criticism to the New Vitalism," *Comparative Literature* 64 (2012): 129.

[16] Pickering, 102.

[17] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York, NY: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), 26.

paradox is the "language appropriate and inevitable to poetry"[18] and that it is heresy to paraphrase a poem when attempting to access its meaning. In addition, terms such as irony, ambiguity, tension and, most importantly, unity are popularised by Brooks as he codifies new critical theories in the practice of close reading and in doing so reinforces the principle of consensus. Paradox, like contradiction, allows for the organisation of a complex multiplicity into simple binary opposites of truths and untruths. While these oppositions cannot themselves be reconciled, they are arranged in a balance and thus achieve a sense of unity. Similarly, irony derives from the denotation of a term and its connotation as constructed from its contextual meaning in the poem, again reducing any complexity to a simple binary opposite. Brooks' discourse of coherence and cohesion allows him to speak accurately about difficult texts as organic wholes, where each part is related to the other to form a vital structure, but reducing poems into expressions of a single theme or literary device makes poems all the same.

Resolving poems according to such binary logic perpetuates the larger, and more problematic, 'us v. them' oppositional logic that characterised the geopolitics and socio-politics of the Cold War period. According to Brooks, the meaning of the poem is the poem itself because paradox, irony, ambiguity and tension can only be understood in the context of the poem, that is, they are unique to the poem in question and cannot be either paraphrased or resolved by recourse to anything outside the text. By insisting that a poem is essentially based on unity, Brooks' theory utilises poetry for its proficiency in "reconciling opposites, fusing contraries, amalgamating diversity, and ordering complexity."[19] Like the tendency toward containment discussed earlier, the new critical insistence on consensus suggests a desire to exclude anything that might disrupt the internal integrity of the text, a stance that becomes highly politicised when contextualised in the postwar period of national unity and entrenched boundaries between the hegemonic inside and the othered outside. The methodological application of new critical theories in the form of close, or, perhaps more appropriately here, "close(d)," readings, are so pervasive in literary criticism that we often fail to realise that this practice is only the strategy of a particular critical movement and not the inevitable work of criticism itself. During the fifties and sixties specifically, it was not "simply that the New Criticism [had] become institutionalised, but [it had actually] gained acceptance as the

---

[18] Ibid, 3.
[19] Art Berman, *From The New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 52.

institution itself,"[20] an issue that becomes even more important when reading poets committed to resisting containment and challenging consensus in all its forms.

So accustomed have we become to equating interpretation with the practical application of new critical theories, that all critics, conscious or otherwise and regardless of their opinions of New Criticism, proceed using some version of, or variation on, close reading. Such a phenomenon is typified by the poststructuralist theorists of the seventies, who might initially appear to provide readings antithetical to the depoliticised and decontextualized interpretations associated with New Criticism, but actually just take the "close(d) reading" strategy to its logical, albeit extreme, conclusion. Questions surrounding the removal of the author from the site of interpretation and the concurrent concentration on textuality; the amount of subjectivity to be permitted and acknowledged in interpretations; and the possibility of readerly agency all proceed from, if not the theoretical principles of New Criticism, then at least its antecedent example. M. H. Abrams wryly observes that the new critics and poststructuralists share an "ahistorical formalism," the only difference being that the "predisposition to discover coherence and a paradoxical unity of meaning" in the former is replaced by the "predisposition to discover incoherencies, ruptures and…aporias" in the latter."[21] It is necessary to acknowledge, therefore, that any discussion of the decline of New Criticism is easily invalidated by the fact that its values, attitudes and emphases are so embedded in our understanding of poetry that they have become its seemingly natural and definitive conditions.

One pertinent example of New Criticism's position of hegemonic authority being at the expense of other more progressive, expansive and inclusive approaches to literature would be F. R. Leavis' marginal status in transatlantic literary criticism. While he similarly advances the importance of paying attention to the words on the page and acquiring practical skills through the analysis of literature, he always contends that we must be "critics of both literature and more than literature,"[22] and that close reading should only ever be a prologue to more important work reaching beyond the text, not an end in itself. For Leavis, close reading should never be closed, but rather should always venture outside itself to consider what is informing these words, "practical criticism of literature must be associated with training in awareness of the environment."[23] Other things are invariably excluded when a "close(d) reading" strategy is

---

[20] William E. Cain, "The Institutionalisation of the New Criticism," *MLN* 97 (1982): 1101.
[21] M. H. Abrams, "The Transformation of English Studies: 1930-1995," *American Academic Culture in Transformation*, ed. Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 127.
[22] Cain, 1113.
[23] F. R. Leavis, "How to Teach Reading," *Education and the University: A Sketch for an English School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 138.

normalised, "other" being the important word here as Leavis gestures toward the possibility of an alternative heteronomic turn, an orientation toward what is outside, what is other and different, when considering the value and function of poetry. Certain poets who began writing during the period of New Criticism's ascension also provided a counter by calling attention through their innovative work to the fact that privileging new critical poetics was done at the expense of other possible compositional and interpretive strategies that were consequently excluded. Their radical response to New Criticism qualifies the 'new' in their moniker, the New American Poets. Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Frank O'Hara, for example, not only challenged the denial of authorial intention, the text's status as an autotelic object and the removal of the reader's response through their respective theories of proprioception, derivation and personism, they also revealed that close reading is only a single possible strategy amongst many others rather than the essential task of all readers.

While the limitations of New Criticism's ideologies and practices are readily identifiable, perhaps its greatest failure is not: its unwillingness to recognise the important role aesthetic experience can perform by extending into the real world and supplementing one's experience of the social environment. If poems could be "used to achieve ends that are in context specifically pedagogical, to provide those who read them with anything that might accurately be called an "education," it can only be first of all an education in how to read poems."[24] By *only* teaching how to read poems, close reading conventionally understood remains a practical strategy without any pragmatic application because it does not extend beyond reading texts into how we might read our social, and textually saturated, environment. Or as Leavis proposes, "a serious concern for education in reading cannot stop at reading."[25] The "close(d) reading" strategy formulated by Ransom, Brooks and Warren reinforced the socio-political values of containment and consensus, making the New Criticism a vital tool during the Cold War period in closing-off culture in an attempt to protect it from the incursions of those with *other* political, and ethical, objectives. Containing the text as an aesthetic object and insisting upon its consensual meaning are products of an era dominated by paranoia of the invisible threat of invasion by some unknown and uncontrollable source of otherness and difference. I am not advocating the complete abandonment of close reading but rather that its impetus toward closure should be replaced with an emphasis on "closer," by suggesting that the text be seen not as an aesthetic object separating the author from the reader but as an

---

[24] Green, 75.
[25] Leavis, 138.

aesthetic event that allows for a closer relationship between these two active, responsive and participative subjects. With this comes increased proximity to otherness and difference, which precludes either self-containment or self-sufficiency on both the hermeneutic and existential levels, and necessitates an ethics of writing and reading poetry. It is important to remember, therefore, that New Critics do not have sole purchase on the practice of close reading, which was actually first conceived and practised on the other side of the Atlantic by I. A. Richards as an instrumental and pragmatist aesthetics before being co-opted by Ransom, Warren and Brooks into a dehistoricising and depoliticising aesthetics. Richards "specifically...oppose[d] any attempt to set up the aesthetic as a self-sufficient category insulated from the rest of life,"[26] insisting its value derived from its "ability to act as a means by which readers can develop many of their most practical faculties."[27] Close reading was initially a means of "aesthethic" education for the "improvement of people's lives,"[28] focusing attention on the reader of the text before the New Critics focused attention on the text itself, severing it from its various contexts. Most importantly, before Richards' practical innovations "arrived at the sterile concern with hieracrchy and canonicity"[29] that occupied the New Critics throughout the Cold War period, close reading was intended to encourage "more ethical psychological responses"[30] in readers.

The protective stance assumed by the nation logically anticipated the violation of its geopolitical boundaries by an enemy, a stance replicated by the New Critics, who feared the invitation of otherness and difference into the text and avoided any consideration of how the poem might be modelled on heteronomy rather than self-sufficiency because it would require a reading strategy removed from subject-centred consciousness and open toward the social world of others. While the New American Poets helped prevent a single theoretical and ideological pronouncement closing-off poetry completely, insisting instead on its opening outward, its becoming heteronomous, and denying a single method of reading becoming the normalised standard, Ashbery and Palmer engage with the difficulty of otherness inevitably raised by such a reorientation. Their work, informed by a "poethics of proximity," allows poetry to realise its social function as a way of acting in the real world, becoming a viable means of assuming a properly responsive and responsible orientation in one's life. However,

---

[26] Joseph North, "What's 'New Critical' about 'Close Reading?" I. A. Richards and His New Critical Reception," *New Literary History* 44 (2013): 144.
[27] Ibid, 143.
[28] Ibid, 146.
[29] Ibid, 154.
[30] Ibid, 151.

the difficulty of this task is not something to be reduced by applying a particular reading strategy to determine the correct interpretation of the text. The difficulty cannot and should not be reduced since it is a necessary component of what this poetry is doing: precluding complete comprehension in order to make the poem an event of proximity in which poetics assumes an undeniable ethical significance.

(1.2) "Poethics:" "Ethics and Aesthetics are One and the Same"

The above quote from Ludgwig Wittgenstein's *Tracatus Logico-Philosophicus* (6.421) [31] highlights the vital "aesthethic" fact that we can no more ignore the ethical implications of what we view, read and write than we can the ethical implications of our other activities in life. Retallack's neologism "poethics" denotes the practice in which aesthetics and ethics come together in order to address and participate in, rather than simplify and avoid, the difficulties of everyday existence. This difficulty derives from the always already social world that requires engaging with others who limit our capacity for self-control and are unpredictable, thus complicating attempts at containment and consensus. Such a practice requires innovative poets who are "acutely aware of the changing circumstances and forms of [their] own times and [devise] a distinctive writing procedure that accommodates them," [32] one that is instructive to the writer, and by extension the reader, not as a product but in its manner of operation:

> If you're to embrace complex life on earth, if you can no longer pretend that all things are fundamentally simple..., a poetics thickened by an *h* launches an exploration of art's significance *as*, not just *about*, a form of living in the real world. [33]

A "poethics" provides a way of reacquainting poetry with the difficult conditions of living in the real world rather than simplifying and neutralising such complexity as mere linguistic device or unifying theme through containment and consensus respectively. "Poethics" also means that writing and reading poetry changes the individual rather than expressing him/her; it has an important performative capacity. However, consciously redirecting our attention

---

[31] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tracatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. Mc Guinness (Oxon: Routledge, 2001), 86.
[32] Retallack, "The Poethical Wager," 40.
[33] Ibid, 26.

entails cultivating practices of writing and reading that are difficult because difficulty facilitates acknowledgement of the limitations of relying uncritically on habitual practices and familiar perspectives. Retallack blames the reluctance to do so on a pervasive "attention deficit disorder,"[34] the systematic discouragement of engaging in sustained projects that are tolerant toward uncertainty, open toward difference and attentive to the possibilities in what we do not understand. "Poethics," on the other hand, encourages this radical shift in attention to change one's sense of the relation of language to the world beyond the page as it "vitally engages with the forms of life that create its contemporary context,"[35] positing the writing and reading of poetry as a pragmatic method for "how to operate in that impossible situation, how to take oneself beyond one self's single-point perspective."[36]

If "self-awareness of oneself and one's relationship [with others]...is part of ethical life, then [writing and] reading contribute to greater self-understanding" by supplementing our lived experiences.[37] Retallacks's "aesthethic" theory requires poetry not to be closed-off from the extratextual world through an emphasis on certainty, but to be closer to, even constituted by, the very conditions of this irreducibly social world of others. With their emphasis on paradox, irony, ambiguity and tension, the New Critics advocated a teleological approach to interpretation, where the reader's sole responsibility is to figure out what the text is doing. Their poetics was motivated by the principle of verisimilitude, or "unnatural realism,"[38] in which the text is seen to confirm the reader's presupposition that a correct reading exists. If the state of paradox, irony, ambiguity or tension is determined to be the theme of the poem, the text will then be shown to replicate this but this is the limit of its realism. Put another way, verisimilitude is limited to what the reader decides is the poem's theme rather than it having any connection with the complexities of everyday existence. This results in a particular type of textual production and reception in which the poem is a self-contained, self-sufficient object, situated apart from its surroundings and aesthetically admired rather than utilised. As a counter, Retallack suggests a "poethics of complex realism"[39] with poiesis and hermeneutics having the character of occurring in the author's and reader's experience of the world as it is, not manipulated to affirm the omniscience of the author's intentions, to coercively persuade identification with a particular experience or to legitimise the reader's singular perspective. It

---

[34] Ibid, 30.
[35] Ibid, 40.
[36] Ibid, 37.
[37] Daniel R. Schwarz, "Performative Saying and the Ethics of Reading: Adam Zachary Newton's 'Narrative Ethics,'" *Narrative* 5 (1997): 195.
[38] Retallack, "The Poethical Wager," 42.
[39] Joan Retallack, "Poethics of a Complex Realism," *The Poethical Wager*, 219.

is perhaps testament to the legacy of New Criticism's theories and practices that it is so difficult to appreciate how such a major conceptual shift in poetry might be possible, if not compulsory. But moving away from the production and reception of poems as objects toward an understanding of the process more accurately resembling an event highlights the performative capacity of "poethics," its ability to act in and change the extratextual environment, perhaps accentuating the *h* even further and prioritising the ethical over the poetic.

When conceived according to Retallack's idea, the text only provides the occasion for making meaning, it neither aspires toward expressive clarity nor contains the meaning as something pre-existent awaiting discovery by the properly trained reader. The presence of the text occasions a specific intersection of material, place and time in which the poet and the reader are engaged in the properly "poethical" task of making meaning through imaginative collaboration. "Poethical" poems, therefore, offer the opportunity to consider the complex ethical issues of how subjectivity is constituted, the complicated negotiation with otherness that occurs while not appropriating it into categories of the same and why not understanding is fundamental to any understanding of the self as it relates to others. Conceived as an event of collaboration between poet and reader rather than an object separating them, such poems foreground the potential for an encounter and the attendant issues of distance, difference and alterity necessary for it to remain ethically informed. In this sense, the circumstances of everyday life become the immediate context of the poem.

It is important to note, however, that "poethics" is not simply the application of ethics to poetics. Foregrounding the ethical potential waiting to be realised in the acts of writing and reading poetry does not advocate a prescriptive form of either activity. There can be no doubt that interest in ethics and literature has enjoyed a revival during the last thirty years, for example, feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory and (multi)cultural studies. What Michael Eskin identifies as the double turn to ethics and literature, that is, "the 'turn to ethics' in literary studies and, conversely, the 'turn to literature' in (moral) philosophy"[40] is, he argues, actually a *re*turn since "neither ethics nor literature could possibly be back in literary studies and philosophy respectively...because they never left."[41] Certain neologisms, and this project certainly employs a number of them, purporting to signify a radical reconsideration of the relation between ethics and literature simply reiterate and reinscribe the ethical significance of literature as a means of explicating complex philosophical concepts, a potential already

---

[40] Michael Eskin, "Introduction: The Double 'Turn' to Ethics and Literature," *Poetics Today* 25 (2004): 557.
[41] Ibid, 562.

identified by philosophers ranging from Plato and Aristotle, through Kant and Hegel, to Nietschze and Sartre, and finally Derrida and Blanchot. Words such as alterity, answerability, ethical responsibility and dialogism all betray the continued influence of traditional questions surrounding the relation between ethics and literature, for example, one's moral responsibility toward others, how to be an active participant within a community of others, the ethical significance of the aesthetic, etc. "Poethics" might be seen as just another manifestation of this return to ethics in literature if it were not for Eskin's appeal for:

> an "aesthetics" according to which ethics (and philosophy in general) and literature only exist and make sense in conjunction, as ethics-and-literature; an "aesthetics" that conceives of art and our engagement with it not in standard aesthetic but in what has been called "poethic" terms, whereby the ethical and the literary are transformed and sublated into a qualitatively altogether novel union.[42]

"Poethics" is this novel union, an "aesthethics," rather than just another reinscription of the ethical significance of literature. It demonstrates how poetry is capable of doing certain things that ethical philosophy cannot and is therefore capable of translating and expanding ethics into a more pragmatic text enacting a way of living in the real world. Poetry "is capable of *doing* things ethical in an exemplary way,"[43] of doing "something ethically in excess of [ethical] philosophy," hence the ascription of "an ethically exemplary performative function"[44] to this type of poetry. Because poetry does not have to adhere to the strictures of philosophy it can attempt what the latter cannot: representing the unrepresentable as a "non-meaning based...form of signification that signifies not for but to a subjectivity, to the constitution *of* subjectivity."[45]

While this radical reconfiguration of what aesthetic experience can affect and the consequent reorientation of the relationship between the producer and the receiver is more readily apparent, and accepted, in the visual arts and dance, "poethics" ensures it remains possible in poetry, even if the poet and reader refuse to acknowledge this potential. However, Retallack suggests that innovative poetry consistently utilises this potential because of the "invitation [it provides] to the reader to realise the work for him/herself," [46] thereby

---

[42] Ibid, 563.
[43] Ibid, 574.
[44] Ibid, 577.
[45] Henry Mc Donald, "Aesthetics as First Ethics: Levinas and the Alterity of Literary Discourse," *diacritics* 38 (2010): 36.
[46] Retallack, "The Poethical Wager," 41.

emphasising performative engagement in the requirement of reader-interactive processes such as attention and response to complete its meaning. If the poet provides the first gesture toward the reader in his/her composition, it is the latter's responsibility to respond through interpretation. Within the "poethical" poem, then, neither the poet nor the reader has to provide the meaning alone as the work is completed by their imaginative collaboration, their encounter, as both make a contribution to the meaning. Therefore, "there's always at least a dual perspective, that of the poet and reader, two very *different* starting points of equal importance, mediated by worlds of experience *in between*."[47] Such poems are not concerned with complete identification with the poet by the reader but rather with the encounter between two perspectives, each different to and distanced from the other because of the experiences informing each and the unique spatial-temporal position it is oriented from. By retaining difference and distance, otherness is protected from appropriation into the self and from being categorised in relation to the same, ultimately its alterity remains. The best, in fact the only, situation to be aspired to is a relation of proximity, a closer relation between two attentive and responsive individuals rather than complete identification between them. "Poethics" ensures that the extratextual significance of aesthetic experience denounced by the New Critics is realised, as poetry, in particular the reading and writing of it, is shown to perform a vital social function: providing a model for how people can interact with each other according to fundamental though non-prescriptive ethical principles and informed by the acknowledgement, but never the appropriation, of otherness that questions the self and challenges the categories it uses to make sense of the social world of others and compose itself as a subject within it.

(1.3) Proximity

Normally, "persons are known to each other by acts of interpretation. One approaches another with a thematising gaze, conforming one's sense of the other's otherness to categories of comprehension communicable in language."[48] Levinas, on the other hand, challenges this tendency of reducing the Other to the category of the Same by prioritising the approach toward another, the encounter, rather than the act of interpretation itself. Levinas terms this sense of encounter with another person proximity, whose very nature connotes a certain sociability. For

---

[47] Ibid, my emphasis.
[48] Wes Avram, "On the Priority of 'Ethics' in the Work of Levinas," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996): 266.

him, the ethical subject exists first and foremost as an "embodied agency open…to the material reality of other situated subjects" and the world in which they are situated, where embodiment is dependent on *not* being "a self-contained and autonomous ego, but rather [existing] as a world-directed openness ready to allow the world into the relational structure of my body."[49]

In *OTB*, Levinas discusses such openness as "sensibility," which is "the subject's subjectivity…its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability."[50] Such openness to the world does not simply refer to one's capacity to receive and process information from the world around and outside him/her, which implies conscious intentionality, because "sensibility" is the source of subjectivity, it is constitutive of the subjectivity of the subject, prior to consciousness and intention. "Sensibility" connects the subject to its world as an encounter between the self and what lies outside the self when interiority and exteriority interpenetrate, "an inviting of exteriority to dwell within and inhabit us" as the world both enters and becomes us.[51] The self cannot be separated from the world in the same way that it cannot be closed-off from it. This embeddedness, the interpenetration of interiority and exteriority, means the outside world acts upon and changes the self to the same extent that the self acts in and changes the outside world. Therefore, one's embeddedness results in one's embodiment, as the subject is situated as a body being acted upon by and acting in the world. However, this world is always already a social world consisting of other bodily subjects. As a result of this embeddedness and embodiment, our actions assume ethical significance as they signal the moment when the self engages with the world of others outside it, when subjectivity "emerges from an irreducible and originary contact with human otherness, which saturates every form of our encounter with the world."[52]

"Sensibility" toward this social world necessitates an ethical stance because the subjectivity of the subject is constituted by the self's interactions with those other bodily subjects situated in proximate relationships to it. However, while such proximity explains why the self is best understood as being closer to rather than closed-off from otherness, it does not simply refer to a physical or measurable distance, it is not "reducible to the spatial sense" of the term.[53] If "sensibility" is the origin of subjectivity, then proximity is what allows for ethical subjectivity. Being open toward the social world of others constitutes subjectivity, but

---

[49] Joel W. Krueger, "Levinasian Reflections on Somaticity and the Ethical Self," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 51 (2008): 609.
[50] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 14.
[51] Krueger, 608.
[52] Ibid, 607.
[53] Levinas, *OTB*, 82.

proximity is the event of *inter*subjectivity, the occasion when sensibility "begins to take on an ethical signification – and importantly, is recognised as taking on this ethical signification."[54] Proximity is not a geometrical space but *is* an encounter with another person, "an approach and a contact."[55] Therefore, it is best understood as a lived, social space in which openness toward the world of others assumes ethical signification as the self acts in and is acted upon by this external world and the others who inhabit it. In this sense, "poethics" allows both the poet and the reader to explore proximity not just as a way of representing, of talking about, the real world and how one interacts with/in it but as a way of actually living in it, of being embedded and embodied within it as an ethical subject. For Levinas, "proximity is communication."[56] Communication in this instance refers to the event of reaching outside oneself and toward another person to realise actual intersubjectivity. Given Levinas' equating proximity with communication, it is important to note too that he does not conflate subjectivity with interiority. As Joel W. Krueger highlights, Levinas challenges the accepted correlation of subjectivity with interiority because "subjectivity…is always co-given with reference to exteriority." [57] Communication, according to Levinas' definition, is not the expression of subjectivity as a pre-existent, inner realm of experiences, values and judgements directed toward another person but the event during which subjectivity itself becomes intersubjectivity, a sharing of consciousness as the self interacts with another person.

Discussing "proximity and/as communication" might give the impression of difference and distance between individuals being reduced through encounter, contact and understanding but Levinas is insistent that the other should never be reduced to the category of the same by such strategies. "Proximity and/as communication" are configured as events in themselves in which the self experiences involvement with an irreconcilable and irreducible otherness as the primary, constitutive experience of intersubjectivity, the occasion when subjectivity assumes ethical signification. Because another person is constituted by its fundamental difference to and distance from the self, proximity is not concerned with any resolution of difference that might occur through consensus and does not necessarily mean physical nearness or the removal of separation to the point of symbiosis. By extension of this logic, communication cannot be associated solely with the exchange of knowledge and experience since the complete "relaying

---

[54] Krueger, 613.
[55] Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 221.
[56] Levinas, *OTB*, 166.
[57] Krueger, 613-614.

of one mind to another is effectively the elimination of a fundamental relation to the other,"[58] its accomplishment results in denying the otherness required as the constitutive experience of subjectivity. If "sensibility" prevents containment, then proximity makes consensus equally impossible as both are informed by heteronomy, an openness toward and subjection to a force outside the self. To be closer to rather than closed-off from otherness, "proximity and/as communication" refers to the event of intersubjectivity, the ethical encounter between two embodied agencies within the lived space where the self can be affected by the other through their interactions. The "poethic" text as defined earlier *is* proximity rather than being an object according to the new critical paradigm. When you open and read such a text, you encounter another person. It is a lived space of interaction where the poet and the reader encounter each other as embodied agencies and realise their intersubjectivity because the poet is affected by the reader's interpretation and the reader is affected by the poet's composition. Rather than reducing the difference and distance between them, the "poethic" text provides the occasion for their encounter.

Because exteriority is the constitutive feature of my interiority, subjectivity always has the potential to be ethical, to be configured as intersubjectivity, the encounter between self and other as they interact together. "Inter" and "act" are both vital here to understanding Levinas' argument for ethical subjectivity more generally but also, more specifically, for appreciating the "poethic" text as proximity. Firstly, "inter" has a variety of meanings including between, among, together and reciprocally that suggest a plurality rather than a singularity. It suggests a relation between two bodies, or two embodied agencies, but the "poethic" text is not an object that exists between and distinguishes the poet and the reader as two separate selves. Instead, "inter" refers to "betweeness," defined as the state of being between two others. As explained earlier, the "poethic" text occasions an intersection of material, time and space that exists between the poet and reader and through which they encounter each other to realise ethical subjectivity, or *inter*subjectivity. Accordingly, it requires a "close(r)" rather than a "close(d)" approach to the reading and writing of the text because the encounter with, rather than the denial of, otherness is integral to the poem. Differences can come into contact as the self encounters another but the distance between them is never completely reduced.

Secondly, "act" refers to praxis in this case, the process by which ethics is enacted and embodied through the activities of self and other exerting influence upon and affecting change

---

[58] Amit Pinchevski, "The Ethics of Interruption: Toward a Levinasian Philosophy of Communication," *Social Semiotics* 15 (2005): 214.

in their opposite. For Levinas, ethics does not exist in the abstract. There are only ethical actions, those moments when an act is performed that affects change and makes containment impossible because the self is made to interact with its external environment. The "poethic" text involves a mutual responsibility for the meaning since the acts of composition *and* interpretation are considered components of the same event. Again, proximity is aligned with the "poethic" due to responsibility. Because proximity denotes the occasion when the self interacts with another person, it also signals the point at which the self is responsible to the other for its "inter-actions." However, responsibility does not just refer to personal liability for one's actions but to the "living relation between self and other."[59] No longer just objects that engender aesthetic experience, these texts are lived spaces; events or occasions in which the poet and the reader "inter-act" as selves and others. Poetry is consequently reconfigured as, not just about, a way of living in the world where containment and consensus are precluded in favour of difference and distance. In addition, proximity ensures that subjectivity realises its ethical signification in the form of embodied agencies who assume responsibility for their actions in the text and/as the social world of others.

(1.4) "Response-Ability"

Despite the important differences between Bakhtin and Levinas discussed in the introduction, there is significant correspondence in their ethical philosophies, in particular how they relate to a "poethics of proximity." Firstly, both Bakhtin's and Levinas' thinking from the very beginning consists of shifting attention from identity (self) to alterity (other), acknowledging what lies beyond the boundaries of, and actually constitutes, the self. Their ethical philosophies can easily be renamed as an ethics of difference, in which the self is a heteronomous entity, subjected to and made a subject by an outside influence acting upon it. Secondly, neither posit ethics as a question of creating a reified system of prescriptive imperatives or as an abstract system of rules governing how we should behave. Ethics is a defining feature of self-other relations that is prior to the codification of actions into theoretical rules of ethical conduct, what both term a "first philosophy," Bakhtin in *TPA*[60] and Levinas in "Ethics as First Philosophy."[61]

---

[59] Ibid, 216-217.
[60] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), 27.
[61] Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1989), 75.

Thirdly, the act of communication features prominently in their respective philosophies, inhering within Bakhtin's concept of dialogism itself but also in his earlier "aesthethic" writings on the self's authoring of subjectivity, and featuring in the face-to-face encounter in Levinas' *TI* and the relation between the saying and the said in *OTB*, the two centrepieces of his philosophical investigations. There is always something additional, a surplus or excess, to communication. It is through this surplus or excess that the act of communication is always already ethically engaged. Prior to information transference or hermeneutic disclosure, this act is proximity as explained earlier, an openness toward and "inter-action" with the social world of others. If the act of communication is central to their ethics, the defining feature of self-other relations that does not seek to reduce the alterity of the other by appropriating it into the categories of the self, then it must no longer be considered just a "mechanism for uncertainty reduction," our limited understanding of communication as an attempt to comprehend the other, but also as the difficult task of "moving from the certainty of the self toward the unknowing possibilities that the other presents."[62]

The act of communication also informs the fourth and perhaps the most important correspondence between these two thinkers because it allows them to avoid complete abstraction *and* prescription by providing a specific, concrete occasion when self and other encounter and "inter-act" but which is not circumscribed by predetermined rules. Bakhtin and Levinas share a "mutual insistence on the subject's irreducible engagement with otherness" and insist that when "confronted by an excessive alterity, the subject must perform a response," what the former terms answerability and the latter responsibility.[63] These performed responses represent Bakhtin's and Levinas' ethical praxis, signalling the moment when ethics is enacted and embodied through the actions of self and other within the lived space of proximity. Alphonso Lingis, the translator of Levinas' primary works, is probably best suited to explaining the ethical nature of communication as it features in his, and also Bakhtin's, philosophy, "What is said is inessential; what is essential is that I be there and speak."[64] For both, the content of what is said is secondary to the occasion of an embodied subject performing the act of speaking in response to the presence of, and the initiating question proposed by, another person.

---

[62] Spoma Jovanic and Roy V. Wood, "Speaking from the Bedrock of Ethics," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 37 (2004): 329.

[63] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 35.

[64] Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), xi.

The act of communication exemplifies how their ethics readily translates into material actions, which can only ever occur among embodied subjects in specific contexts. As Michael Gardiner observes, "each of them argues that ethics is constitutively linked to corporeality, the direct experience of 'lived' time and place, and our affective and meaningful relations with concrete others."[65] Bakhtin and Levinas allow us to have an ethical subject that is de-essentialised, that is, heteronomous and always changing and being changed by performative actions that reinterpret and recompose its subjectivity. Jeffrey T. Nealon sees their ethics as founded on "dialogic intersubjectivity,"[66] which "keeps the otherwise monadic subject open to the outside… [and] necessitates that the self…is always open – performatively responding and answering – to the other."[67] The idea of a dialogue between multiple voices provides a useful metaphor for a social world with a distinctly ethical character, wherein the relations between people listening to and answering each other constitutes ethical subjectivity, or as Bakhtin and Levinas would term it, my answerability and responsibility as an ethical subject.

"Response-Ability" refers to the ethical signification of "proximity and/as communication," how it engenders the capacity for a gesture of response, a performative action, in a dialogic encounter between the self and another person rather than simply an abstract or prescriptive approach. It is also central to understanding a "poethics of proximity," where the text enacts rather than represents a way of living in the social world of others based on a non-appropriative, heteronomic subject position. Living in this world inherently involves "inter-acting" with others, acknowledging alterity by *listening* to those concrete others outside the self and *answering* them, which together constitute the response made possible during proximity. These actions, however, are not the result of subjective agency, they are integral to Bakhtin's and Levinas' first philosophy, the primary experience of sociality and attendant otherness that precedes any ontological disclosure of subjectivity or epistemological understanding. In terms of ontology, it challenges the self as a contained, autotelic entity, while in terms of epistemology, it challenges the consensus of the self's singular perspective. Because of this primary experience of sociality, the self is always already responding to others in particular socio-material circumstances. As Nealon again highlights, because "one responds or answers first and foremost to the social other, rather than responding to or through an abstract system of ethical rules to be followed,"[68] the ability to respond in concrete contexts

---

[65] Michael Gardiner, "Alterity and Ethics: A Dialogical Perspective," *Theory, Culture and Society* 13 (1996): 122.
[66] Nealon, 33.
[67] Ibid, 36.
[68] Ibid, 37.

"presupposes a necessary subjection before the…alterity of the other."[69] In other words, "response-ability" presupposes a heteronomic subject in the lived space of proximity. The term "response-ability," therefore, is being used in this instance to convey both the capacity (Bakhtin's answerability) *and* the obligation (Levinas' responsibility) one has to respond to those encountered and interacted with in the social world of others.

As mentioned earlier, answerability and responsibility are not issues of subjective agency. Responding to another person is a performative *not* a performance, since it enacts change through "inter-action" rather than implying an act of personal volition as the latter does. The heteronomic subject has both the capacity *and* the obligation to respond to the other that questions it. For Bakhtin, on the one hand, the constitutive role of "response-ability" is explained using answerability and what he terms one's "non-alibi in being."[70] This notion "allocates to each consciousness a measure of responsibility in a world of other consciousnesses for which there is no alibi for being elsewhere,"[71] I cannot be relieved of answerability for the act I have committed by another person because it was performed from the unique spatial-temporal position that only I inhabit. As Bakhtin explains, my:

> non-alibi in being derives from the fact that I occupy a place...that is unique and never repeatable, a place that cannot be taken by anyone else and is impenetrable for anyone else...That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else...[and this uniqueness] is compellently obligatory.[72]

"Response-ability" is "compellently obligatory" because the presence of another person during the experience of proximity requires the self to respond and to be answerable for this action. For Levinas, on the other hand, "response-ability" is explained through responsibility and what he calls the "not-being-able-to-slip-away-from an assignation."[73] As Levinas explains, being in question is this "assignation to answer without evasions, which assigns the self to be a self."[74] Responsibility is not transferable, it is "incumbent on me exclusively, and what, *humanly*, I

---

[69] Ibid, 39.
[70] Bakhtin, *TPA*, 40.
[71] J. C. Bittenbender, "Silence, Censorship, and the Voices of *Skaz* in the Fiction of James Kelman," *Bakhtin and the Nation*, ed. Barry A. Brown and Christopher Conway (Cranbury, NJ: Associated Universities Press, 2000), 156.
[72] Bakhtin, *TPA*, 40.
[73] Levinas, *OTB*, 127.
[74] Ibid, 106.

cannot refuse...I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I."[75] "Response-ability" is "incumbent on [the self] exclusively" since saying I is to respond to the question already posed by another person by his/her presence during proximity and to be responsible for that utterance. The "subjectivity of a subject is responsibility of being-in-question,"[76] it is being subjected to, and consequently made a subject by, the presence of another person during proximity, where my irrefutable "response-ability" ensures that "I am not "another," but me."[77]

Finally, given both thinkers' insistence that the ethical subject is constituted through "response-ability" in a concrete context of social others, a material intersection of place, time and persons, terms such as "Self" and "Other" are too abstract. The "Other" is never a generic other because it denotes the presence of another person through voice for Bakhtin and the face for Levinas. It corresponds to *an* other, a particular person who inhabits a different and distant spatial-temporal position to me. For this reason, "(an)Other" will be used to denote the source of alterity so integral to Bakhtin and Levinas as it conveys both the particularity of another person *and* the irreducible otherness s/he represents. Similarly, "Self" lacks the specificity of individuation required for answerability and responsibility as described above. It must become *my* self, made to correspond to a particular spatial-temporal position from where one is answerable and responsible. Therefore, "(my)Self" will be used to indicate when self stops being a theoretical, unrealised entity and becomes a subject position. It denotes the moment when one realises his/her "response-ability" during proximity, answering by saying "I," by making self mine, in response to the question of another person and being responsible for the actions performed from the spatial-temporal position that that pronoun demarcates. "(My)Self" and "(an)Other" further indicate the importance both Bakhtin and Levinas place in ethical praxis, the enactment and embodiment of ethics through performative actions committed by a particular person in the presence of actual others made possible by "response-ability" within the lived space of proximity.

---

[75] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 101.
[76] Levinas, *OTB*, 111.
[77] Ibid, 127.

(1.5) A Necessary Difficulty

Texts informed by a "poethics of proximity" radically change how the activities of writing and reading poetry are understood since they reveal these acts as being performed by embodied subjects realising their "response-ability" during proximity. The etymology of "comprehend" exposes its severe limitations in relation to a "poethics of proximity," from the latin "com," meaning with and/or together, and "prehensus," meaning to grasp or seize. Comprehension, therefore, suggests appropriation, the denial of difference and the removal of distance through possession and togetherness. Consequently, difficulty is seen as something preventing successful communication, an obstacle to be overcome in order to ensure increased understanding and identification. As Wes Avram argues, understanding something as difficult or not understood "reinforces the priority of understanding in human experience and situates the confusing or incomprehensible thing in dialectical relation to comprehensibility,"[78] thereby demonstrating the capacity of thought to appropriate the incomprehensible into the comprehensible and to reduce its otherness as it is contained in a consensual category of the same. A "necessary difficulty," however, is intended to demarcate the limits of understanding and to expose the limitations of comprehension by signalling the presence of an otherness that cannot be appropriated or reduced but is instead to be encountered. This otherness is not to be eluded since it is an invitation to realise one's "response-ability," to answer the question posed by this otherness that exceeds the "categories of comprehension communicable in language"[79] through an act of composition, whether that is the poet's initial composition or the reader's subsequent composition as interpretation.

A final "close(d)" reading based on containment and consensus precludes any source of otherness exerting influence on or affecting change in either the poet or reader. Closing-off the text, and by extension the poet and the reader, from the presence of "(an)Other" that questions "(my)Self" from its different perspective and distant spatial-temporal subject position is to deny poetry its ethical signification, its "poethics" because "poetics thickened by a h" is an aesthetic as well as an ethical act founded on intersubjectivity, the "inter-actions" of "(my)Self" and "(an)Other that occur during proximity. Texts marked by a "necessary difficulty," that is, texts that make identification (the denial of difference) and appropriation (the removal of distance) impossible, are most conducive to enacting a "poethics of proximity."

---

[78] Avram, 266.

[79] Ibid.

"Poethic" texts allow us to appreciate how the way in which we write and read texts corresponds with how we interpret this world and author ourselves as subjects within it. The poets "response-ability" is immediately apparent in this situation as s/he responds to an unknowable other in the form of the prospective reader through his/her act of writing. However, the reader realises similar "response-ability" because interpretation inevitably creates its own text by distorting the original, thereby making every act of reading an act of (re)writing. In this sense, both the poet and the reader are answerable and responsible for the text, for the meaning generated through the imaginative collaboration that occurs when the poet and the reader encounter each other. The "poethic" text is an intersection of time, place and persons within which "response-ability" can be realised during the experience of proximity, as "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" "inter-act" through the performative actions of writing and reading.

Texts marked by a "necessary difficulty" have the ability to engage the poet and the reader ethically as both are operating at the limits of understanding, the point at which something other is encountered that challenges habitual norms and questions the categories used to comprehend the world and our position within it. The otherness encountered in these texts refers to whatever it is about them that prevents consensus and resists containment, how they challenge all preconceptions within the paradigms of our interpretive techniques to ensure that difficulty remains a constitutive feature of their overall effect. These texts are characterised by what Derek Attridge describes as "textual otherness, or textualterity: a verbal artefact...that stages the ethical as an event."[80] Their ethical significance is not reliant on the deductions or conclusions they permit, or on their representations of otherness, because our "involvement...in the ethical" is less a question of something we can learn than something that happens to us as we write and read, "it occurs as an event in the process of [writing and] reading, not a theme to be registered, a thesis to be grasped, or an imperative to be followed."[81]

As a result, the important distinction must be made between "ethics *in* poetry" and "ethics *of* poetry," where the former refers to how a poet might comment on events, real or imaginary, that have already happened in order to impose a particular moral imperative or prescribe a specific ethical conclusion to be deduced, while the latter refers to the text's ethical value as it allows for the enactment of an encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" during the experience of proximity engendered by its "poethics." "Poethical" texts neither deal with situations that might be considered ethical nor provide exemplary examples of a

---

[80] Derek Attridge, "Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J. M. Coetzee's Early Fiction," *Poetics Today* 25 (2004): 669.
[81] Ibid, 654.

relationship between self and other for the reader's observation. "Textualterity" is a result of the "necessary difficulty" of certain poets, who make an encounter with otherness possible through the inventive, innovative alterity of their "poethics." As Attridge again observes, it is "not an otherness that exists outside language...[but] an otherness brought into being by language,"[82] not language's other but something excessive, inassimilable and ultimately unknowable. Innovative poetry, or what Attridge terms the text's singularity or inventiveness, refers to "what we respond to when we feel that the work we are [writing or] reading is unlike any other in ways that go beyond mere differentiation and that....opens up new possibilities in the literary domain and beyond."[83] When the text stops being an object and becomes an event, not the representation of otherness or of a relationship between a self and an other but the occasion for enacting an encounter between "(my)Self" and"(an)Other," the necessity of difficulty becomes apparent, as that which prolongs the experience by increasing uncertainty, reducing referential clarity, undermining singular authority, foregrounding the materiality of the medium and articulating a heteronomic subject. "(My)Self" and "(an)Other" become two ethical participants in the event of encounter engendered by the experience of proximity within the "poethic" text.

Most importantly, for the "poethic" to become pragmatic, for it to extend beyond the text and inform how we interpret the social world of others outside us and compose ourselves as subjects within it, its "necessary difficulty" requires a different approach to the practices of writing and reading. To realise its intention to test the limits of knowing in poetry, to complicate the assumptions of language's transparency, referentiality and instrumentality that are so central to the poem being a vehicle of teleological communication, the "poethic" text must encourage us to reconfigure not just *how* poetry is written and read but also to re-evaluate the reasons *why* these activities are undertaken in the first place. As Richard Deming suggests, "reading and writing are the means of discovering one's own constitution, that which makes a self, however provisionally and contingently, a self."[84] If the initial act of creativity by the poet as s/he responds to otherness constitutes his/her subjectivity, then the hermeneutic activities of the reader as s/he responds to the otherness of the text is constitutive of his/her subjectivity. Put another way, both are subjected ethically, or made ethical subjects, by realising their respective "response-ability." Poesis and hermeneutics, the poet's and the reader's respective acts of "response-ability," indicate how the world becomes a lived space, how it is inhabited

---

[82] Ibid, 669.
[83] Ibid, 654.
[84] Deming, 2.

and made intersubjective as selves and others come into existence as embodied agencies through articulated acts. These texts provide pedagogical moments that deepen our understanding of ethics in a pragmatic sense because reading is seen "as both a social and socialising activity" and "writing…is the means by which one enters that particular field by participating and manipulating social dynamics in a public context."[85] At this intersection of reading and writing, a certain communication occurs but it is communication as proximity, the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" during the experience of proximity in the "poethic" text.

It may be easier to discern how the poet's initial act of composition constitutes his/her subjectivity, how s/he authors a self through the act of writing a poem, but the reader's constitutive act of subjectivity is equally important if not as easily apparent, especially when discussing a "poethics of proximity." Despite the general reluctance against considering the poem as being personally addressed to a reader due to the connotations of moral imperativeness and prescriptive actions, the poem is always written toward a potential, prospective reader, "(an)Other" who is different to and distant from the poet and is the source of otherness that cannot be appropriated into categories of the same by the poet, cannot be named by or identified in relation to "(my)Self." The potential reader is "(an)Other" who the poet responds to during the act of composition, or put another way, the text stages the encounter between the poet as "(my)Self" and the reader during the experience of proximity. Difficulty is necessary because this is an experience of uncertainty and miscomprehension since "(an)Other" cannot be completely known and, therefore, cannot be represented in language. A poem that insists on difficulty as its constitutive feature signals the poets encounter with "(an)Other," when s/he reaches beyond the demarcated limits of understanding that define "(my)Self" and interacts with the social world of others outside him/herself.

How difficult texts arise then can be appreciated but if difficulty is not to be explained away then how it affects the reader assumes utmost importance as it reveals the intention behind a "poethics of proximity." When faced with a difficult text, the reader is made aware of the limits of understanding that define "(my)Self" but is also encouraged to undertake a more active, attentive engagement with the text. By refusing to consign the reader to the predestination of the poet's singular intention, these texts foreground the importance of interpretation, when the "reader (re)acts…[his/her] reacting (acting again) of the author's

---

[85] Ibid, 44.

initiating activity, albeit in a transfigured and transfiguring way."[86] The reader's (re)action to the author's initiating activity cannot change the actual text but the performative action of reading introduces an additional perspective and changes meaning through the different choices constantly being made. These texts require the reader to respond to the poet as "(an)Other," s/he who exists beyond the parameters of "(my)Self" and cannot be completely known or identified with but toward whom the reader is oriented during his/her attempts to engage with the otherness encountered at the limits of understanding.

Texts characterised by their "necessary difficulty" consequently require a reconfiguration of what it means to write and read a poem because composition and interpretation are shown to be processes within the "dialogic intersubjectivity" of the poet's and reader's encounter with one another through a text that stages the event of proximity. Writing and reading are not the expression, description or representation of subjectivity but performatives that enact subjectivity itself, revealing how it is constituted not as a result of containment and consensus that delimit the boundaries of "(my)Self" and separate it from "(an)Other" but as the consequence of the "inter-actions" possible at such boundaries. Certain poets respond to the social world of others outside them in innovative ways, realising their "response-ability" in a manner appropriate to their "non-alibi in being" (Bakhtin) or their "not-being-able-to-slip-away-from an assignation" (Levinas) because no one else has or could have responded in that particular way. By extension, truly innovative poetry requires the reader to respond in an equally innovative manner, to realise his "response-ability" in a way that no other reader possibly could and to be answerable/responsible for that response. A poetics thickened by a h, therefore, provides an ethics of writing *and* reading, but it is a pragmatic pedagogy aimed at educating about ethical subjectivity experientially rather than didactically. "Poethics" is concerned with the ethics *of* not the ethics *in* poetry, how the ethical significance of poetry is only realised with the application of *how* one writes and reads to one's own experience of life in this moment, as something immediately pragmatic rather than something objectively understood, rather than the deduction of ethical imperatives from, or the prescription of appropriate behaviour through, *what* one writes and reads. This "aesthethic" approach affects change outside the text because it makes the poet and the reader more attentive to otherness in the social world than s/he might otherwise have been, highlighting the ethical importance of "response-ability," of responding to others in a way that does not attempt to completely comprehend them and always assuming responsibility for the performative actions that affect

---

[86] Ibid, 68.

change in them. Therefore, the turn to ethics in poetics is not a return to the conventional ethical significance of literature but a turning of our attention to what has always existed as a possibly unrealised or denied potential in poetry due to habitual, pedagogical practices based on containment and consensus: that writing and reading poetry is to author an ethical, heteronomic subject that is open toward the social world of others in which it is located and which responds to "(an)Other" who questions it by realising "response-ability."

Part I: "The Facts Have Hinged on my Reply:" The Face-to-Face Encounter in John Ashbery

Not only did *SPCM* win Ashbery the triptych of major American book awards in 1975 – the Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award and the National Book Critics' Circle Award – it also marks the moment when his "wanderings have come full circle,"[1] returning to what he calls in "Soonest Mended" "the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago"[2] located in his first collection *ST*. From the beginning, he has never been majorly preoccupied either by the "madness to explain"[3] or with developing a poetics of expression, preferring instead to use poetry as a medium of communication, albeit not in the conventional understanding of the word. Up to and including *SPCM*, Ashbery's multiple innovations are always informed by two concerns with attendant "poethical" consequences. Firstly, the question of self-representation in poetry: how one author's a self as an ethical subject, that is, a subject who is heteronomic rather than autotelic. For Ashbery, accordingly, self-representation is never a solipsistic task because it is always "Leading first to you, and through you to/Myself that is beyond you,"[4] something he successfully achieves in the eponymous poem of *SPCM* by making the acts of writing and reading coterminous, precluding "the enchantment of self with self."[5] This poem's indelible mark can be seen in the immediately subsequent collection *Houseboat Days*, in which the nature of the creative act of self-representation is given extended treatment as Ashbery focuses his phenomenological gaze on the conditions of composition. However, in "SPCM," the act of self-representation cannot be separated from the face-to-face encounter that occurs when Ashbery writes in response to another's self-portrait, thus revealing an ethical imperative that is never again so explicitly apparent in his work. Furthermore, this sense of encounter and interaction between two different people is positively precluded in the next collection. "Litany," from *As We Know*, is Ashbery's most innovative poem but the two columns of text, which he tells us "are meant to be read as simultaneous but independent monologues,"[6] prevent dialogue or exchange, suggesting the impossibility of encounter and interaction between two different people through poetry as a medium of communication. This particular analysis of Ashbery is not concerned with why encounter becomes impossible following *SPCM* but instead

---

[1] John Ashbery, "The System," *CP*, 314.
[2] Ashbery, *CP*, 186.
[3] John Ashbery, "The Skaters," *CP*, 153.
[4] John Ashbery, "Clepsydra," *CP* 145.
[5] John Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 477.
[6] Ashbery, *CP*, 553.

with how he creates the conditions required for it to happen in the first place in the previous collections.

Secondly, the possibility of configuring the acts of writing and reading poetry so they than can be approached just like the other actions we perform that constitute us as ethical subjects acting in and interacting with the social world of others. In "SPCM" he manages to position himself in the present tense of writing and reading, making the occasion of composition and interpretation an event shared by the poet and the reader, where the "past/Is now here."[7] This has important "poethical" implications because writing and reading poetry become a way of living in the social world of others:

> This age-old truth I to thee impart
> Act according to the dictates of your art
>
> Because if you don't know one else is going to
> And that person isn't likely to be you.[8]

Imparting this "age-old truth" gives the impression that what Ashbery is attempting is applicable to all poetry but his commitment to it sets him apart from his contemporaries. Like Bakhtin's and Levinas' "first philosophy," Ashbery's poetry from *ST* to *SPCM* builds upon the very foundations of, in his case poetic, discourse, or verse, from the Latin "versus," a line of writing," and "vertō," to turn around. As a medium of communication, poetry for Ashbery is about being turned around, of being turned toward another person as in conversation. He articulates an ethics of writing and reading poetry but with practical application, that is, with "poethical" implications, because writing and reading this type of poetry is a way of living in the social world of others, of acting according to the dictates of his "poethics of proximity." If Ashbery is concerned with self-representation as a poet, his work equally facilitates the self-representation of the reader because both write a particular self into existence through the actions performed in the event of the poem, how they encounter and interact with each other *as* other. Therefore, Ashbery is not being unnecessarily difficult since difficulty is a necessary condition of the "poethical," it corresponds with the challenges faced when trying to author an ethical subject who acknowledges the alterity of others but without trying to appropriate and thus reduce it.

---

[7] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 486.
[8] John Ashbery, "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," *CP*, 191.

In the two book-length, chronological analyses of Ashbery's work to date – John Shoptaw's *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (1994) and David Herd's *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (2000) – the poet's difficulty, the fact that "nobody understands"[9] him, is seen to correspond with the more general difficulty of living in the present and trying to say something different about the situation we find ourselves in. For Shoptaw, Ashbery's difficulty derives from his "misrepresentative" poems, poems that "represent and "behave" differently because the poet "leaves himself and his homosexuality out of his poetry."[10] Ashbery "misrepresent[s] in a particular way which [Shoptaw]…call[s] "homotextual"" by using "distortions, evasions, omissions, obscurities, and discontinuities" and other evasive manoeuvres that are not just aesthetic principles but the survival tactics of a homosexual male whose poetics evolved during the particularly repressive and paranoid period of American history when homosexuals were publicly investigated and harassed.[11] Ashbery's sexuality is not unimportant to his writing but Shoptaw's critical language of cryptography as the "missing centre of his method of composition" suggests that his difficulty can be explained away by finding references to gay experiences that are "encoded…hidden, forgotten, or simply covered over"[12] in the text. This too closely resembles an epistemology of the closet and the expression of denial which fails to account for Ashbery's insistence that his "are not autobiographical poems, they're not confessional poems."[13] Whether concentrating on the convention of explicit disclosure or the innovation of intentional misrepresentation, reading Ashbery as an autobiographical or confessional poet ignores his intention to make poems "as representative as possible,"[14] poems characterised by their openness toward the social world of others around him.

Unlike Shoptaw, Herd never tries to explain away the difficulty, seeing it as validation for Ashbery's status as a "great contemporary" because his poetry "exceed[s] the language by which we attempt to describe it."[15] For Herd, Ashbery's difficulty is the result of his continuous attempt to make communication possible during a time when "there is no short cut to expounding simply the full complexity of the situation which does not exactly fit any common

---

[9] John Ashbery, "The Art of Poetry No. 33," Interviewed by Peter A. Stitt, *The Paris Review* 90 (1989): 399.
[10] John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.
[11] Ibid, 2.
[12] Ibid, 6.
[13] John Ashbery, "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery," Interviewed by A. Poulin Jr., *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20 (1981): 251.
[14] John Ashbery, "Interview: Conducted by John Koethe," *Substance* 9-10 (1983): 183.
[15] David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 6.

classification,"[16] when we find ourselves in situations with unconventional circumstances and without precedence. His poetry is, therefore, marked by a sense of its occasion, where a poem ""belongs" to, or "fits" the occasion"[17] because it gives form to "the apothegm appropriate to his moment."[18] Ashbery's intention "is to achieve a poem appropriate to the occasion of its own writing," such that his "concern is with the time, place, situation and circumstances of the poem itself."[19] This might appear somewhat solipsistic, but Herd insists that Ashbery's underlying motif is always communication in the service of understanding, bringing the reader "into such a satisfactory relation to the occasion that the utterance appropriate to that occasion" is "apparent to all involved."[20] With this idea, however, Herd himself falls victim to the same criticism he levels at the more dismissive critics of Ashbery, of "misunderstand[ing] the paradigm of understanding according to which his poetry makes sense."[21] In response to the criticism that his poetry represents "a failure to communicate," Ashbery insists his intention is always "to communicate" but not "something that's already known by the reader" which "is not really communicating anything."[22] Communication is not about uncertainty reduction through confirmation or affirmation but bringing the reader to the limits of understanding, to the limits of the known and knowable where an otherness outside "(my)Self" is encountered in the presence of "(an)Other."

This study seeks to refute Shoptaw's suggestion that Ashbery's difficulty can be explained away by the right reading strategy and correct Herd's misunderstanding of understanding in how and why Ashbery communicates. However, it does develop upon the latter's argument about Ashbery's sense of occasion by showing that the poet not only creates poems fit for or belonging to their occasion but creates poems that *are* occasions in themselves. What he calls in "Litany" "occasions for all occasions."[23] Difficulty, consequently, is a necessity because it reveals that understanding, or uncertainty reduction, is not the teleological goal of communication for Ashbery. Instead, by demarcating the very limits of the known and knowable, difficulty signals potential encounter with that which lies outside "(my)Self."

---

[16] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Second Edition, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 38.
[17] Herd, 10.
[18] Ibid, 2.
[19] Ibid, 10
[20] Ibid, 14.
[21] Ibid.
[22] John Ashbery, "Craft Interview with John Ashbery," Interviewed by Janet Bloom and Robert Losada, *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly*, ed. William Packard (New York, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1974), 112.
[23] Ashbery, *CP*, 633.

Communication, therefore, refers to the event of reaching outside oneself and toward another person to realise actual intersubjectivity, it is the experience or lived space of proximity between "(my)Self and "(an)Other." In this sense, my analysis also engages with Geoff Ward's observation of the "fated nature of encounter" in Ashbery, of "meeting only to miss."[24] In one of his most widely anthologised poems, "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," Ashbery makes this sense of encounter explicit:

> This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.
> Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
> Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.
> You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.[25]

Ashbery later explains that "a plain level...is that and other things,"[26] suggesting a literal, practical aspect but also an additional function in which "other" is crucial. Extending this logic, the poet is concerned with communication on such "a very plain level" in the sense of conveying meaning but more importantly in how it involves an encounter with another person. Ward's observation is correct, that those meeting ultimately "miss each other," but it is more important than being "universally applicable to the displacements inhering in any act of perception"[27] because it informs the notion of ethical encounter central to Ashbery's "poethics of proximity." As will be seen, encounter does not mean complete identification between the contrapositions of "I" and "you." Ethical encounter requires a difference and a distance to remain between those meeting. Instead of uncertainty reduction, "miss[ing] each other" comprises misunderstanding, further highlighting the necessity of difficulty as that which prevents understanding but also marking the very limits of the comprehensible, the known and knowable.

"Paradoxes and Oxymorons" is "concerned with language" but "the poem is you,"[28] a presence and an absence that is beyond the grasp of the poet, signalling "(an)Other" who is unknown to and unknowable for Ashbery. However, equating the poem with another person implies "a kind of generosity that allows the reader a genuinely creative role,"[29] the poem is "you[rs]" or "y̶ou[rs]." In *Other Traditions*, he contests that "poetry is somehow incomplete

---

[24] Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 160.
[25] Ashbery, *CP*, 698.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 160.
[28] Ashbery, *CP*, 698.
[29] Ward, *Statutes of Liberty*, 100.

without the external completion of it by a reader/critic"[30] or reader as critic, someone whose interpretation is a further composition because it changes the meaning of the poem by making it correspond to his/her individual circumstances. In "Litany" again, Ashbery discusses how "Great poets of the past, and a few/Great critics as well"[31] not only describe "Exactly what is taking place all about us"[32] but:

> Make you wish you were in it, or better yet
> …make you realise that you actually are in it
> For better or for worse, with no
> Conceivable way of getting out"[33]

According to this logic, great poetry is "poethic," not just about but a way of actually living in the real world as the actions performed while writing and reading such poetry are equivalent to the other actions performed when authoring a self amongst others. If Ashbery is to be a great poet then he needs great critics, readers whose interpretations are further compositions because they extend his work by making it correspond with the conditions informing their reading, making the poem "something to be acted out"[34] after it has been read. Charles Altieri identifies this "dialectic of call and response"[35] throughout Ashbery's oeuvre but I would go further, proposing that his work is a call *to* respond, an obligation to realise one's "response-ability" because we are tasked with completing the act of communication and in doing so making the poem ours. In becoming responsive readers, however, we must be responsible for our interpretations because they are further compositions in the same way an ethical subject is answerable for how s/he acts in and interacts with the social world of others.

---

[30] John Ashbery, *Other Traditions: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 105.
[31] Ashbery, *CP*, 601.
[32] Ibid, 599.
[33] Ibid, 601.
[34] John Ashbery, "The Recital," *CP*, 326.
[35] Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 210.

Chapter 2: The "Aesthetics of Indifference" in *Some Trees* and *The Tennis Court Oath*

At the end of the seventies, Ashbery announces in "Litany" from *As We Know* (1979) that "a new school of criticism must be developed"[1] for which "all/Is by definition subject matter for the new/Criticism, which is us."[2] The requirement for such a pronouncement is interesting because it helps us identify a major feature of his work during this and the two preceding decades: the need for a more expansive and inclusive approach to the writing and reading of poetry. However, like the New Criticism he implicitly critiques, Ashbery's "new/Criticism" should not be seen as a solely aesthetic, depoliticised occurrence, it must also be pragmatic. While challenging containment and consensus is a prerequisite for a "poethics of proximity," it is also integral to appreciating how such a "poethics" *is* a form of living in the real world. The new critical practice of close reading advocates an aesthetics founded on containment and consensus but, as we have seen, it has quite a pronounced political function given the period during which it became entrenched as the normative procedure of literary criticism and a determinant in the type of poetry being written and read during the Cold War period. In this socio-political context, containment refers to the impermeable boundaries established to distinguish between Self and Other, an attitude informed by essentialist categories of identity. Consensus, by extension, refers to the moral and political system that operated according to the principle that American society could accommodate and absorb every oppositional tendency without collapsing.

The political purpose behind containment and consensus is easily discerned: to protect the nation from the Other to its democratic, capitalist socio-economic system by excluding it and emphasising political unity as a deterrent against the threat of foreign and domestic subversives, whether imagined or actual. However, despite the importance of maintaining binary oppositions, the Cold War period marked the moment when the attendant distinctions between the private and the public, and the personal and the political, were paradoxically and irreversibly collapsed. Mc Carthy's dogged pursuit of the menacing political Other (communism) is well-documented but with his admission that "homosexuality…was the psychological maladjustment that led people toward communism,"[3] the Red Scare takes on a

---

[1] Ashbery, *CP*, 603.
[2] Ibid, 605.
[3] David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 16.

more lavender hue. Equating political with sexual deviance meant homosexuality was designated a threat to national security and became the focus of the same strategies of containment and discourses of consensus as its political equivalent. Non-normative sexual behaviour became a national obsession during the Cold War period, "a wave of officially sponsored homophobia" emerged against those who did not adhere to ""normal" sexual behaviour culminating in marriage," whose sexual perversions, like communism, could infect and disintegrate the national consensus.[4] Not only the external threats of communism and nuclear energy had to be contained, but also the potential for internal subversion posed by the increased visibility of homosexuality and the emergence of same-sex communities. It is in this climate that Ashbery's pronouncement against the new critical aesthetics of containment and consensus must be situated because it is the extratextual reality his "poethics" is intended to participate in. His sexuality invariably means that the personal *is* always already the political. Similarly, what might initially appear solely poetic concerns actually have profound ethical significance because they constitute a way of living in the real world according to an aesthetic principle he is trying to articulate, the heteronomic turn toward outside influences.

Fortunately, Ashbery was not alone in developing imaginative and conceptually engaging ways of strategically working against strategies of containment and discourses of consensus, finding creative resources in the examples provided by the collage-assemblage artist Joseph Cornell and the composer John Cage. In addition, Ashbery can be identified according to what Moira Roth termed the "aesthetics of indifference," referring to a "number of [predominantly homosexual] artists [who] made a virtue of indifference and whose ideology coalesced during the Mc Carthy period"[5] to provide a deliberately apolitical, neutral alternative to the bigoted convictions and highly politicised causes associated with the era. As the American public was being presented with the histrionics of Mc Carthy's Red and Lavender Scares, Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and, to a lesser extent, Jasper Johns used silence, emptiness and passivity to expose how spying, concealment, secrecy, coded messages and misleading information were engendering the hysterical obsession with public exposure and self-disclosure. To the silence, emptiness, absence and erasure they use to negotiate the oppressive, oppositional politics and aesthetic paradigms that both informed and enforced the strategies of containment and discourses of consensus can be added Ashbery's poetics of reticence, first

---

[4] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008), 91.

[5] Moira Roth, "The Aesthetics of Indifference," *Difference – Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1998), 34.

articulated in *ST* and continuing in *TCO*. The "aesthetics of indifference" can be best described as what he terms "a kind of fence-sitting/Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal"[6] in "Soonest Mended" from *DDS* (1970). Ashbery's "[a]esthetic [and ethical] ideal" involves occupying a neutralised interstice between two conventionally oppositional categories that completely deconstructs the binary opposition itself. For Ashbery, the "Aesthetics of Indifference" prove "poethical" since it enacts a way of living in the real world while also conceiving "(an)Other" beyond categories of the same that reduce its alterity and appropriate it by placing it in relative opposition to "(my)Self."

(2.1) The (Mis)Instruction Manual

In his first attempt at self-portraiture, Ashbery directly refutes the formalist methodology of New Criticism that isolates the poem from the contextual conditions of its composition in order to read it as an autonomous aesthetic object. "The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers" uses intertextuality to highlight the limitations of this methodology: how it devalues context and authorial intention by closing off the text to maintain its status as a self-contained, autotelic object. "The Picture…" immediately denies any attendant "close(d) reading" by insisting on the context that engendered it through a variety of direct intertextual references and extratextual allusions. The title simply changes the subject of Andrew Marvell's "The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers," a poem warning against the loss of innocence, while its epigraph consists of the concluding sentence from Boris Pasternak's selective memoir *Safe Conduct*. In a poem centred on the act of self-definition, it is striking how reliant it is on other literary voices, "referring in half a dozen lines to figures as divergent as...[those mentioned above, in addition to] James Joyce, Thomas Nashe, Daniel Defore, [William] Shakespeare and [William] Wordsworth." [7] Like Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Ashbery's poem consists of three sections and discusses the principle of *lacrimae rerum*, which means that life is growth, "My head among the blazing phlox/Seemed a pale and gigantic fungus," but a certain loss is inevitable, "Still, as the loveliest feelings//Must soon find words, and these, yes,/Displace them."[8] More importantly, Wordsworth's poem relies on the

---

[6] Ashbery, *CP*, 185.
[7] Ben Hickman, *Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 18.
[8] John Ashbery, "The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers," *CP*, 14.

"notion of pre-existence,"[9] making Ashbery's text an engagement with what pre-exists his own, the intertextual context outside, yet constitutive of, his poem. "The Picture..." enacts how reading happens, it is "a poem which discloses itself as it tells the story of its reading" and "describes its genesis through the work of other writers."[10] "J. A.," the subject of the poem, is, like the poem itself "a wet sponge/ …/…accepting//Everything, taking nothing."[11] The significance given to other people and the outside may gesture toward an immediate heteronomic turn in Ashbery's poetics, but given the sexual and moral politics of the Cold War period, their association with the act of self-definition suggests the more problematic activities of surveillance, interrogation and coerced confessions:

> So far is goodness a mere memory
> Or naming of recent scenes of badness
> That even these lives, children,
> You may pass through to be blessed,
> So fair does each invent his virtue.[12]

The dichotomy of moral absolutes is evoked in the act of "naming," which can refer to both disclosure from within or exposure from without, and is juxtaposed with the possibility of a more relativist, less essentialised, approach to "good" and "bad" behaviour. Ashbery also questions one's ability to escape categorisations or representations of oneself:

> Yet I cannot escape the picture
> Of my small self…
> //
> As though the rolled-up future might stink
> As loud as stood the sick moment
> The shutter clicked.[13]

Ultimately, however, "The Picture…" is concerned with the displacements that occur in writing and reading, how signifying displaces even "the loveliest feelings" and how what we read now will inevitably be displaced by what we read subsequently, to become "lost words/[in which

[9] William Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality," *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. V: 1806-1815* (New York, NY: Cosimo, Inc, 2008), 53.
[10] Hickman, 13-14.
[11] Ashbery, "The Picture…," *CP*, 13-14.
[12] Ibid, 13.
[13] Ibid, 14.

we can] imagine our rewards."[14] Paying close attention to these "lost words" is impossible since they do not comprise a textual object to be read but refer instead to the residual effect a poem might have on the reader. If the poem cannot be self-contained, then the self it purports to represent similarly cannot be understood in terms of containment. Both are informed by what is outside of them respectively, they are heteronomic. Ashbery's "poethics" is the counterexample to the methodology provided by New Criticism because by emphasising how the text might affect a particular response in the reader, he undermines the strategy of containment motivating this Cold War pedagogy of writing and reading.

Ashbery's exposition of how not to read in his writing continues in "The Instruction Manual," a critique of the tendency to provide a prescriptive set of normative practices. By writing according to its prescriptions, Ashbery exposes the limits of this poetics and the consequent circumscriptions that arise from adhering to it. As with "The Picture…," "The Instruction Manual" describes its own coming into being but its closedness is more pronounced, the subject being closed-off from the social world of others outside him, "I look down into the street and see people, each walking with an inner peace,/And envy them – they are so far away from me!"[15] and the poem itself being enclosed, its circular structure beginning "As I sit looking out of a window of the building/I wish I did not have to write the instruction manual on the uses of a new metal"[16] and concluding "Back to the instruction manual which has made me dream of Guadalajara."[17] Ashbery challenges the "close(d)" writing and reading method of New Criticism by advocating inattention to the text, to the instruction manual he is writing and "The Instruction Manual" before the reader. This formalist method might appear to be an objective, non-discriminatory reading strategy but "to call for close reading, in fact, is to do more than insist on due attentiveness to the text. It inescapably suggests an attention to *this* rather than to something else: to the 'words on the page' rather than to the contexts which produced and surround them."[18]

To highlight this, the closed poem documents how "We have seen young love [between "the young fellow with the toothpick"[19] and "a young girl/Of fourteen or fifteen,"[20] married love [between "a dapper fellow/Clothed in deep blue" and "His dear one, his wife, [who] is

---

[14] Ibid.
[15] John Ashbery, "The Instruction Manual," *CP*, 5.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid, 8.
[18] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Second Edition (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 38, author's emphasis.
[19] Ashbery, "The Instruction Manual," *CP*, 6.
[20] Ibid, 7.

young and pretty,"[21] and the love of an aged mother for her son,"[22] "a dark-skinned lad with pearly teeth [who] grins out at us from the worn leather frame."[23] Ashbery's intention here is to reveal "How limited, but how complete withal, has been our experience of Gudalajara!"[24] This closed poem contains the threat of "deviant" sexuality by paying attention to the heteronormative relations between the inhabitants of Guadalajara. Including these in an instruction manual, whose practical, utilitarian purpose, to define the function of an object, evokes the prescriptive pronouncements of new critical pedagogy, reveals the exclusions made in the service of containment, both textual and sexual. Inattention prevents a "close(d)" approach to writing and reading but it insists on the closer alternative, paying attention to what is excluded, to what is outside of both the text and the self. The speaker in "The Instruction Manual" claims to imaginatively escape the mundane task at hand but his imaginings are shown by Ashbery to simply reinforce the (sexual) politics of the period as his text is conditioned by a strategy of containment.

Adhering to the "close(d)" methodology endorsed by the New Critics has important ethical implications also. There is a profound absence of otherness in "The Instruction Manual," even though Guadalajara is the "City I wanted most to see, and most did not see, in Mexico!"[25] The sense of otherness associated with a foreign place is normalised through the tour guide, a contentious figure given the U.S. policy of non-colonial imperialism in Latin America during the Cold War and a representative of the "imperialism of the same"[26] that a "poethics" is designed to contravene:

> And we must catch a view of the city, before we leave, from a
>   good high place.
> That church tower will do…
> /…/
> Soon we have reached the top, and the whole network of the
>   city extends before us.[27]

---

[21] Ibid, 6.
[22] Ibid, 8.
[23] Ibid, 7.
[24] Ibid, 8.
[25] Ibid, 6.
[26] Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 50.
[27] Ibid, 7-8.

Any sense of otherness in this vastly complex city that the speaker has never actually seen before is appropriated by his/her imperialist imagination, reduced to a stereotypical cacophony of colours and sounds, and heteronormative relationships. The foreign, what is different or other, is reduced to the categories of the same by the speaker's "close(d)" poem, depriving it of exactly that which constitutes its alterity. Ashbery exploits the inherent utility of "The Instruction Manual" to warn by example against New Criticism and the type of self-contained subject represented in the autonomous, textual objects its practitioners endorse. Otherness requires "poethics," a way of conceptualising the event of aesthetic experience, of writing and reading a poem, and its coincidence with how one lives in the extratextual world.

(2.2) Thinking Outside the Box

"SPCM" is undoubtedly Ashbery's most recognised ekphrastic poem but his unique engagement with the visual arts began in *ST*. Cornell's influence has been a constant in his work, admitting in his 1995 "Robert Frost Medal Address" that after having read "a book about Joseph Cornell [in the early '40s, he] immediately became my favourite artist and has remained one to this day."[28] Cornell contested the very aesthetic categories used to confine artists, "avoiding the traditional nomenclature of art media, which enforces settled definitions"[29] and who "in a society organised around acquisition, consumption [and] elimination...cared [only] for...the detritus."[30] Accordingly, his "bounded microcosms [provided] metaphors for real-world ideals"[31] that ask viewers to look with renewed and more responsible vision at the world than they had before. Ashbery and Cornell share an affinity for the *metaphysique d'ephemera*, the aesthetics of making the everyday transcendent through the transformative power of paying attention to what is outside of normative axiological standards or is surplus to requirement. "Nothing is one thing only [in Cornell]"[32] as objects reappear in different contexts without their prior meaning being completely erased, thereby encouraging the viewer to pay attention to what is outside the box. Cornell's "method of working offers explanation for the necessity of variations on a theme:" it invites the viewer to elicit further associations because what matter

---

[28] John Ashbery, "Robert Frost Medal Address," *Selected Prose*, 246.
[29] Wayne Andersen, "Joseph Cornell's 'Healthier Possibilities,'" *Common Knowledge* 12 (2006): 428.
[30] Ibid, 421.
[31] Jennie-Rebecca Falsetta, "Acts of Containment: Marianne Moore, Joseph Cornell, and the Poetics of Enclosure," *Journal of Modern Literature* 29 (2006): 126.
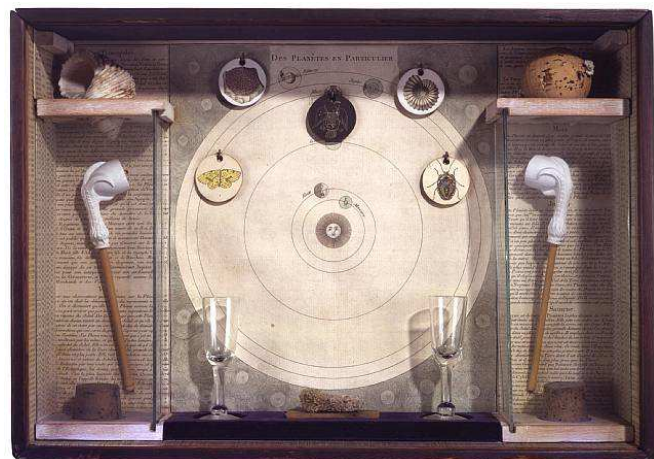[32] Peter Schwenger, "The Dream Narratives of Debris," *SubStance* 32 (2003): 79.

are the lasting familial relations he establishes amongst the otherwise ephemeral "through [the] reiteration of certain objects."[33] There is probably no poetic form better suited than the pantoum for enacting Cornell's aesthetics. However, Ashbery's deviation from its formal constraints only further emphasises his appreciation for Cornell as an artist who refutes the viability of any strategy of containment.

Firstly, "Pantoum," or as it appears in *A Joseph Cornell Album* with the subtitle "Homage to Saint-Simon, Ravel, and Joseph Cornell," contains a number of references to the objects and images that repeatedly appear in the artist's boxes.

(Fig. 1) Joseph Cornell, *Penny Arcade for Lauren Bacall*

(Fig. 2) Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*

"Eyes shining without mystery" suggests the numerous female actresses that gaze out at the viewer through the glass panes of portraits such as *Garbo: The Crystal Mask* (1939-40) and (Fig. 1) *Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall* (1945-46), while "the vague snow of many clay pipes" refers to the abstract objects emanating from the pipes in Cornell's (Fig. 2) *Soap*

---

[33] Diane Waldman, *Joseph Cornell* (New York, NY: Joseph Braziller Inc., 1977), 24.

Bubble Set(s) from the '30s and '40s. [34] The Medici Prince and Princess in his (Fig 3.) *Slot Machine*(s) from the '40s also appear in the poem as "those dearest to the king."[35]

(Fig. 3) Joseph Cornell, *Medici Slot Machine Object* (1942)

(Fig. 4) Joseph Cornell, *Pharmacy* (1943)

However, "Pantoum" is not merely an ekphrastic poem since Ashbery alludes to the achievement and the effect of Cornell's aesthetics as opposed to just re-presenting the material objects of his boxes. For example, "connoisseurs of oblivion" refers to his ability to give value to the completely forgotten or unknown, that which exists outside our standards of judgement and taste (Fig. 4). In the dime stores he frequented, Cornell discovered the literally abject, the objects of detritus that he transforms into museum-like homilies to bygone eras through the creative act of selecting and paying attention to them. Similarly, how he manages to arrest the impermanent, lending a degree of permanence to the ephemeral, is attested to, "These days [that] are short, brittle; there is only one night/And that soon gotten over,"[36] as seen in his boxes capturing the performance of the ballets he so cherished. Cornell ultimately protects what

---

[34] John Ashbery, "Pantoum," *CP*, 14.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid, 15.

matters to him from being excluded or discarded, due to "Some blunt pretense to safety we have."[37]

To understand an artist like Cornell, so reliant on complex visual metaphors, surreal juxtapositions and abstract arrangements of objects, his boxes must also be viewed in terms of their tangibility, their "thingness," which requires engaging with their literalisms. With the glass panels functioning as demarcated yet transparent boundaries, his boxes are never literally impermeable containers, their significance projects beyond the bounded space through repetitions in and associations with other boxes. Ashbery is attuned to this, asking "what is in store?"[38] like Cornell's boxes are some kind of surreal department store display. They introduce a visual "poethics" to Ashbery, articulating a way of living within the real world of external, material objects rather than just representing one. "Pantoum" deftly conveys this integral aspect of Cornell's collage-assemblages in that it similarly enacts, or per-*forms*, its meaning. Normally, a pantoum is comprised of a series of quatrains, with the second and fourth lines of each stanza repeated as the first and third lines of the next one. This pattern can continue to any length but the final stanza must conclude the series with its second line being the third line of the opening stanza and the last line of the poem repeating the first line of the opening stanza. However, Ashbery deviates from the formal conventions in the concluding stanza:

> Some blunt pretense to safety we have:
> Eyes shining without mystery   [1st Line Opening Stanza]
> For they must have motion
> Through the vague snow of many clay pipes.[39]   [3rd Line Opening Stanza]

As can be seen here, Ashbery reverses the order of the repeated lines in the final stanza so that it no longer concludes the series but provides the stanza that would have preceded the opening one:

> Eyes shining without mystery   [2nd Line Previous Stanza]
> Footprints eager for the past
> Through the vague snow of many clay pipes,   [4th Line Previous Stanza]
> And what is in store?

---

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid, 14.
[39] Ibid, 15.

Ashbery refuses to close his poem, thereby negotiating, and ultimately resisting, the strategy of containment inherent within the pantoum form. Instead of (en)closure, Ashbery insists on repetition, an important feature that will be seen in *TCO* as it allows for difference and precludes consensus. Rather than artistic originality, in Cornell "discarded objects are reconditioned and revived as meaningful artefacts" as their value is "transferred into a new system of evaluation through metaphor."[40] His boxes encourage repeated viewing, or closer reading, that transforms spectatorship into a creative endeavour because they "make it difficult…to resist a verbal translation of the images,"[41] that is, the spectator is compelled to focus on the selections of the artist, what he has decided to pay attention to. Like the individual objects in Cornell's boxes, the sentences in "Pantoum" are irreducibly abstruse in isolation. Their significance derives from them being repeated throughout the poem, thereby turning the reader's attention to the words Ashbery has selected, which reveal the accordance he is trying to highlight between his poetics and Cornell's aesthetics. While a formalist analysis of "Pantoum" is required to identify the poem's performative capacity, it only makes sense when read in terms of the context that engendered it, the aesthetic paradigm provided by the collage-assemblage artist as a means of negotiating and resisting strategies of containment.

Cornell's boxes serve as a metaphor to help explain Ashbery's view of open and closed poetry as not referring to specific poetic forms but rather to one's attitude to poetry itself, to its purpose and potential. They invite us not only to look at chosen objects but also to reflect on our own acts of seeing because "rather than denying interactions between the objects displayed and the spectator," which would heighten the "sense of isolation and enclosure,"[42] they stress "interaction with the world as a condition for creative production."[43] Being open toward rather than closed-off from the world outside us makes containment and consensus in poetry impossible, allowing instead for "perpetual inter-relation and interaction between inside and outside."[44] From Cornell, Ashbery learns to value what is normally confined to the outside, be that context, the excluded, the repressed or the ignored, therefore, "Pantoum" needs to be read within the highly policed Mc Carthy era. As a homosexual male during this period, Ashbery knew what it meant to be on display to someone or to have to perform in a certain way.

---

[40] Daniel Morris, "Responsible Viewing: Charles Simic's Dime Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell," *Papers on Language and Literature 34* (1998): 347-348.
[41] Ibid, 354.
[42] Ariane Mildenberg, "Through the Wrong End of the Telescope: Thresholds of Perception in Joselh Cornell, John Ashbery, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty," *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box*, ed. Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor (Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd, 2007), 140.
[43] Ibid, 143.
[44] Ibid, 154.

"Pantoum" indicates the possible emergence of a "poethics" in Ashbery motivated by the example of Cornell, a way of negotiating strategies of containment in the real world that is enacted in the poem. It also reveals, in conjunction with "The Picture…," that the heteronomic poem and the subject it purports to represent develop as a response to the Cold War culture of institutional homophobia, making the "poethic" already cogently political.

(2.3) The "Aesthetics of Indifference"

The eponymous poem in *ST* explains the political efficacy of an "aesthetics of indifference" for Ashbery, utilising what Jonathan Katz identifies as "opposition without oppositionality,"[45] a strategy of homosexual resistance perfectly calibrated to negotiating strategies of containment and discourses of consensus. Reticence and accentuation are used by Ashbery to challenge the other binary oppositions he is confronted with given his circumstances, including but not limited to: concealment and confession, private and public, disclosure from within and exposure from without, secrecy and surveillance, and containment and excess. Each opposition features in both *ST* and *TCO* in numerous ways but in "Some Trees" Ashbery can be seen resisting differentiation and separation in favour of assimilation and contact. Its per*form*ative capacity is also immediately apparent:

> These are amazing: each
> Joining a neighbour, as though speech
> Were a still performance[46]

Each line literally joins its neighbour due to the enjambment required to adhere to the "AABB" rhyming scheme. The poem captures something that is happening, the "still performance" of speech, an act of communication which, as Levinas highlights, is the experience of proximity:

> ...you and I
> Are suddenly what the trees try
>
> To tell us we are:
> That their merely being there

---

[45] Jonathan D. Katz, "Identification," *Difference – Indifference*, 62.
[46] John Ashbery, "Some Trees," *CP*, 26.

> Means something, that soon
> We may touch, love, explain.[47]

"I" and "you" are heteronomic in this sense, since the act of communication ultimately refers to the event of reaching outside oneself and toward another. Potential to possibly "touch, love, explain" also further suggests proximity because they are unrealised, "we *may*." A distance and a difference between "I" and "you" are implied by the inability to actually touch and the need for explanation respectively. Including love among the indicators of proximity serves to reaffirm that Ashbery's "poethics" must, initially at least, be read in terms of his sexuality. In the context of the '50s, therefore, the heteronomic turn toward the other, or more generally toward what is outside the contained, consensually endorsed self, enacts a way of living in the real world as a homosexual.

Touch is particularly significant because it corresponds with the tactility central to Cornell's aesthetics and provides an alternative modality for how "Some Trees" might be read. In tactile art following the readymade, although actual tactile contact is eluded due to these objects being held in exhibition display cases or reproduced as photographs for catalogues, "imagined or intellectualised contact becomes central to a consideration" of how they are received and how they instigate "bodily reactions through disturbance and incompletion, attraction and repulsion."[48] Tactile art allows for "bodily reactions" or, as Bakhtin and Levinas would argue, embodied responses in the viewer. In the case of Cornell, paying close attention to his boxes gives the impression of being in proximity to an irreducible and irreconcilable otherness that cannot be appropriated into or expressed through language. He redefines aesthetic experience through a tactile approach that:

> asks viewers to reject their conventionalised and unquestioned modes of perception – to approach works within an interchange that is open ended and exploratory, intimate yet inconclusive...Tactility acknowledges that there are many unexplored avenues of comprehension that, if chosen, would necessarily suggest alternative meanings and challenges to the status quo.[49]

Reconfiguring aesthetic experience from the optic to the haptic is to replace distance and separation with proximity and contact, and in doing so radically alter the relationship between

---

[47] Ibid.

[48] Janine Mileaf, *Please Touch: Dada and Surrealist Objects After the Readymade* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 17.

[49] Ibid, 20.

the object and the spectator. This is another example of Cornell encouraging us to pay attention to what is normally excluded or ignored. Perhaps this is what "Some Trees," and the collection as a whole, is "try[ing]//To tell us we are:" subjects joined to a neighbour about to "touch, love, explain" during the experience of proximity. As a "still performance" whose "merely being there/Means something," the poem stages a heteronomic turn, an imagined or intellectualised encounter between "you and I," between "(an)Other" and "(my)Self." Like Cornell's boxes, "Some Trees" is trying to perform something, to make it happen by extending beyond itself as text and affecting a particular response in the reader, ultimately changing how s/he interacts with his/her environment and what s/he pays attention to within it. By reorienting the reader's attention toward what is other, different, beyond containment and against consensus, Ashbery's "aesthetics of indifference" become apparent.

Although written in 1948, "Some Trees" references the same aesthetic principle behind Cage's silent composition *4'33"* (1952) and Rauschenberg's empty composition *White Painting* (1951):

We are surrounded:
A silence already filled with noises,
A canvas on which emerges

A chorus of smiles, a winter morning.
Placed in a puzzling light and moving,[50]

Cage and Rauschenberg elide self-expression in and preclude the possibility of self-identification through their respective mediums. Instead, a heteronomic turn manifests in *4'33"* and *White Painting* as they are open toward and dependent on what is outside, an otherness that is ultimately inexpressible and impossible to represent without reducing it to categories of the same. To their silence and emptiness can be added Ashbery's reticence, "Our days put on such reticence/These accents seem their own defence."[51] Silence, emptiness and reticence are not due to sexual oppression. Informed by an "aesthetics of indifference," they are acts of strategic resistance against the strategies of containment and discourses of consensus. "Reticence" and accentuation comment on the paradoxical status of homosexuality during the Cold War period as an "open secret" and "Some Trees" "exhibits the caution attendant upon

---

[50] Ashbery, *CP*, 26.
[51] Ibid.

[such] unsanctioned behaviour"[52] in its closing couplet, implying that both accentuation (exhibition) and reticence (caution) are required for the homosexual male to successfully live in the real world of social and institutional homophobia. Because "our days *put on* such reticence," silence, emptiness and reticence are the result of individual choice. Indifference, therefore, complicates the "binaries that circumscribe the status quo"[53] and condition how we identify and express ourselves as political, and sexual, subjects by providing a way out of oppositional categorisations. Living within the paradox of an "open secret" further reveals the limits of defining oneself according to such categories, making an "aesthetics of indifference" all the more relevant to these homosexual men and gesturing toward the "poethic" as it provides a way of living in, not just representing, the real world of c/overt homophobia.

The paradox of calling attention to oneself *and* being reticent is an example of Ashbery's indifference but, as he concludes "Some Trees," "these accents [of reticence] seem their own defence." Like Cage's silence and Rauschenberg's emptiness, reticence is resistance, an aesthetic choice with real world application because it ensures the individual "can escape both complicity in the dominant culture and detection as a homosexual," thereby providing a viable political stance for other "closeted homosexuals [who could] ill afford to call attention to themselves with an articulated, entrenched oppositional stance."[54] Conventional opposition must be avoided because it "simply reproduce[s] the binary logic through which domination writes itself"[55] and continually runs the risk of being co-opted as a tool of hegemony. Once marked as oppositional, "any disturbance [or deviation] can be incorporated into a discourse of oppositionality that only catalyses [further] oppressive constructions"[56] and appropriates what might be considered other or different into categories of the same. An "aesthetics of indifference" provides a way out of the binary logic of oppositional categories. The fact that Cage's silent composition focuses the listener's attention on noise and Rauschenberg's empty painting is full of white paint collapses oppositional categories. Their aesthetics encourage a reading of Ashbery's reticence and accentuation as *in*difference. Despite its closed form of five quatrains and standardised rhyming scheme, "Some Trees" is resolutely open toward its immediate socio-political environment, just as *4'33"* and *White Painting* are heteronomic rather than self-contained, open toward and responding to the environments outside them. To understand what the poem is "try[ing]/To tell us we are" it must be read as responding to the

---

[52] Shoptaw, *On the outside Looking Out*, 22.
[53] Jonathan D. Katz, "John Cage's Queer Silence; Or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse," *GLQ* 5 (1999): 244.
[54] Ibid, 242-243.
[55] Ibid, 245.
[56] Ibid.

climate of social and institutional homophobia and encouraging a response to this environment based on "opposition without oppositionality." Reticence and accentuation pre-empt the "shield of a greeting" in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," the poem in which a "poethics of proximity" is realised in the experience of an aesthetic encounter with "(an)Other." Therefore, how Ashbery lives in the real world as a homosexual male fundamentally informs his poetics, thickening it with a "h" until it becomes a model for how a non-appropriative, heteronomic subject can engage with otherness but without appropriating it into categories of the same or reducing its alterity through containment and consensus.

(2.4) "Opposition Without Oppositionality" in *Some Trees*

Ashbery is by no means the only poet who found a solution to the oppressive sexual politics of the Cold War period by turning his attention toward the outside. At the same time, those associated with the San Francisco Renaissance, primarily Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser, were beginning to experiment with what was termed the "practice of outside."[57] Duncan's derivative poetics, which will be discussed later in more detail as a primary influence on Palmer's early collections, and Spicer's poetics of dictation are further examples of how a certain homosexual sensibility was manifesting in heteronomic poetry, that is, poems that cannot be contained because their content is constantly referring to the indeterminable. Although Duncan's and Blaser's poetics more closely resemble an "aesthetics of indifference" in their refusal to be categorised as oppositional, the discrepancy between the poetic and the personal/political in Spicer helps us understand Ashbery's own relation to oppositionality and how it features in his transition from *ST* to *TCO*. Spicer's poetics can be best described as a textual version of assemblage, as copies of original documents are arranged into incongruous combinations to form a new poetic composition. *After Lorca* (1957), for example, is ostensibly composed of translations of the Spanish poet but the accuracy of Spicer's versions is highly contestable and some of his own original poems are even posed as translations themselves. In a similar manner to Cornell, paying attention to something constitutes a creative act, as discarded, ignored and overly familiar material is reclaimed and reworked until the distinction between found object and original composition is no longer tenable.

---

[57] Robin Blaser, "The Practice of Outside," *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*, ed. Miriam Nichols, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 113.

In the first poem of *ST*, "Two Scenes," the theme of surveillance, the private being made public, is introduced, "We see us as we truly behave."[58] As the piece with which Ashbery chose to introduce himself to the reading public, "Two Scenes" is "significant in retrospect because it remains broadly representative," introducing "strategies which will figure in his mature style,"[59] such as the simultaneity of multiple perspectives to challenge "singular authority"[60] and the use of circularity to negate oppositionality. The externalisation of identity suggests a dependency on others, while Ashbery's insistence that "Everything has a schedule"[61] implies, like "The Instruction Manual" earlier, a way of reading his poems. The first scene establishes certainty through predestination, "Destiny guides the water-pilot, and it is destiny," and declarative statement, "For long we hadn't heard so much new, such noise./The day was warm and pleasant."[62] While the second scene evokes uncertainty due to contingency and the lack of precedence, "This perhaps a day of general honesty/Without example in the world's history," and the absence "of a singular authority."[63] However, the opposition between certainty and uncertainty is complicated by the poem's conspicuous dialogism, the inclusion of other voices in the quotes concluding each scene that undermine its respective theme. For example, "'We see you in your hair,/Air resting around the tips of mountains'"[64] attenuates the certainty of the first scene with its polysemous pronouns and the lack of referential particulars to determine who is speaking. Whereas "As laughing cadets say, 'In the evening/Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is'"[65] refutes the uncertainty of the second scene by indicating the source of the utterance and identifying a plan of procedure. Therefore, the two scenes are not complete opposites because each contains an aspect of its other, which is provided by the quotations from voices other than the poet's. Furthermore, the schedule mentioned at the end of the poem returns the reader to the beginning because it explains how "The train comes bearing joy" and demystifies the "Destiny [that] guides the water-pilot,"[66] emphasising the circularity of, rather than opposition between, the two scenes. Ashbery also seems to be suggesting that no singular authority can predetermine a train of thought because it will unavoidably be affected by outside influences, other voices that introduce a different schedule and necessitate beginning again. If surveillance suggests the more negative

---

[58] John Ashbery, "Two Scenes," *CP*, 3.
[59] Herd, 26-27.
[60] Ashbery, "Two Scenes," *CP*, 3.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

connotations of one's identity being dependent on another person's perspective, "Two Scenes" makes this dependency reciprocal and mutually constitutive, an opportunity to "see *us* as *we* truly behave," to encounter and interact with, rather than being closed-off from, "(an)Other." The presence of other voices in the opening poem of *ST* indicates that heteronomy must be considered to appreciate how Ashbery's work might be read, "Two Scenes" providing the schedule for understanding his trains of thought and how they are affected by outside influences.

In his Vancouver Lectures (1965), Spicer uses the analogy of the radio to explain his practice of dictation because "it literalises the actual transmission of words from elsewhere…[and] as a model for poetic dictation, it suggests that composition begins with listening and not self-expression, with emptiness and not an overflow of autobiographical content."[67] As Spicer explains, "instead of the poet being a beautiful machine which manufactured the current for itself, did everything for itself...instead there was something from the Outside coming in."[68] Spicer's awareness of the importance of what is outside for expressing and understanding the inside makes his work resolutely heteronomic. In addition, Spicer's poetics of dictation make explicit what remains implicit in his work: the denial of singular authorial intention as the poet discovers "that these poems say just exactly the opposite of what [s/]he wants [her/]himself, *per se* poet, to say"[69] and is required "to bring the poems, read the poems, to an audience, simply because often [s/]he can find things from the audience's reaction that [s/]he didn't understand the poem said, which tell him[/her] something about it."[70] However, "dictation [was] also a release from the responsibility of authorial intention and all it denotes."[71] While Spicer confirms the importance of what lies outside the self, a "poethics" is impossible due to the denial of individual responsibility, the prerequisite for an encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" as embodied, answerable agents during the experience of proximity when "response-ability" is realised.

Although Spicer consistently marks his sexuality throughout his work it is difficult to categorise him because he remains "largely free of predictable tropes of queer abjection and self-loathing" and refuses to affirm his homosexuality through "prominent gay aesthetic

---

[67] Peter Gizzi, "Jack Spicer and the Practice of Reading," *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 187.
[68] Jack Spicer, *The House That Jack Built*, 5.
[69] Ibid, 6.
[70] Ibid, 16.
[71] Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 183.

traditions, especially camp."[72] With the coterie poetics he formulated in San Francisco during the '50s "he mounted a group offensive among faithful followers" that "railed against feminised or assimilated versions of gay identity" and opposed itself to the heterosexual outside world, resulting in a "group offensive [that] involved creating a frontal, unadorned image of gay reality that excluded not only a heterosexual viewer but a certain kind of homosexual as well."[73] There is a profound discrepancy between the poetic and the personal in Spicer who identifies himself with the outside but uses oppositionality rather than indifference as a defence against being appropriated by the inside, thereby reinforcing the "us v. them" binary. While never formulated in any extended critical writings, Spicer "experienced poetry as needing some kind of program or set of guidelines for practitioners"[74] to protect it and the coterie relationships articulated through it, resulting in an almost militant insistence on strict boundaries demarcating the inside from the outside. His example testifies to how a heteronomic orientation in one's poetry does not always correspond with the personal stance assumed by the poet, in addition to how the establishment is able to cohere further when the structural model of the "dominant culture as inside" and "oppositional culture as outside" is reinforced, however inadvertently or not.

Ashbery's long-term interest in the status of avant-garde art and outsider artists makes him particularly perceptive regarding the dangers of assuming an oppositional stance due to the recolonizing force of oppositionality, observing in "The Invisible Avant-Garde" that:

> in both art and life we are in danger of substituting one conformity for another…[as] protests against the mediocre values of our society…seem to imply that one's only way out is to join a parallel society whose stereotyped manners, language, speech and dress are only reverse images of the one it is trying to reject.[75]

The only way *out*, it appears, is to enter *in*to another group however marginal or alternative it purports to be, which merely serves to reverse the terms of the "us v. them" binary while leaving the logic informing it intact. If Spicer's poetics of dictation provides an example of how a heteronomic orientation toward the outside is possible in poetry as a means of resisting

---

[72] Daniel Katz, *The Poetry of Jack Spicer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 4.

[73] Michael Davidson, *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2004), 43.

[74] Christopher S. Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 108.

[75] John Ashbery, "The Invisible Avant-Garde," *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1956-1987*, ed. David Bergman (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989), 393.

strategies of containment and challenging discourses of consensus, Ashbery discovers in his close friend O'Hara how this can be extended into the personal life of the poet to achieve a more "poethical" purpose. Writing on the occasion of his death in 1966, Ashbery summarises the atmosphere confronted by poets who sought to be different during the previous decade as:

> a supremely tribal civilisation, where even artists feel compelled to band together in marauding packs, where loyalty-oath mentality has pervaded outer Bohemia…Whatever it is, join it; you can examine it later and neutralise it, if necessary, from within.[76]

O'Hara offers a corrective in his poetry because it "has no program and therefore cannot be joined…in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe."[77] O'Hara's attitude, the stance he *puts* on, toward the establishment perfectly embodies *in*difference, being different to but not the opposite of and, therefore, outside the binary logic that contains individuals within oppositional categories and reduces their differences. As "a source of annoyance" for both the "us" and the "them," O'Hara's poetic and personal stance is political but calibrated in a way to critique both without aligning with either. Like Cage and Rauschenberg, his response to the oppositional politics of the period helps explain Ashbery's refusal to be entirely appropriated into any reductive category, into any camp, and adds a further level of disapproval to Spicer's famous critique of Ashbery as a "faggot poet."[78] Spicer's condescending opinion of Ashbery and O'Hara in particular, and the New York School more generally, as "urbane…campy…and effete"[79] further confirms him substituting one conformity for the other by perpetuating the derogatory sterotypes associated with discussions of homosexuality during this period. Ashbery is not a camp poet in the sense that homosexuality is not inscribed in his poetry because he favours a mode of homosexual resistance whose continued viability, unlike Spicer's, is due to the identity it articulates being outside strategies of containment and discourses of consensus, of it not being reducible to any camp because it is reliant on being different to, but never the opposite of, what he seeks to oppose.

---

[76] John Ashbery, "Writers and Issues: Frank O'Hara's Question," *Selected Prose*, 81.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Lewis Ellingham, "'the King's Two Bodies' from *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer's Circle in San Francisco, 1956-1965*," *Line* 7/8 (1986): 62.
[79] Ibid, 60-61.

(2.5) The "Practice of Outside"

Ashbery's relocation to Paris in 1955 provides one of those rare instances when the poetic and the personal almost perfectly coincide. By the time John Bernard Meyers coined the term "Poets of the New York School" in 1961, his expatriate status meant it was immediately obsolete yet still thoroughly representative of how his physical relocation from New York corresponded with the emerging heteronomic orientation in his poetry. His dislike for the New York School of Poets is exacerbated by the fact "it seems to designate a place, whereas New York is really an anti-place, an abstract climate."[80] The regionalist connotations of the term became further entrenched following the publication of Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, which used momentary coincidences of geographical proximity to organise an otherwise heterogeneous selection of innovative poets into consolidated movements centred around New York, Black Mountain College and San Francisco.

In his assessment of fellow expatriate artists in Paris, Ashbery identifies the desire to escape the "acceptance world" of American culture, "which so often ends up by stifling an artist's originality through the efficacious means of over-encouragement."[81] Quoting the artist Caroline Lee, Paris is appealing because it gives "the opportunity for…anonymity," not "in the sense of being myself unknown; but anonymous in the sense that my habits, reactions, impulses would neither expect nor find comprehending or knowing reactions."[82] As literal outsiders, these artists resolve the difficulty of being oppositional without espousing oppositionality: "there is not much "protest" in the work, simply because…[whatever protest there is has already been] sufficiently expressed by [expatriation itself]."[83] In a similar way to how O'Hara's political critique is the personal stance he assumes toward both the establishment and the marginalised, his ability to annoy both components of the us-them binary by "being too hip for the squares and too square for the hips,"[84] the personal position of these artists constitute their political critique. Ashbery's political critique of the "acceptance world" of American culture is constituted by his decision to personally locate himself beyond its reaches. Therefore, his poetry does not need to be explicitly oppositional in terms of its content because he himself embodies the principle of being oppositional, with the result that any poetry written from his outsider position inherently involves an implicit form of oppositional critique. Through his own

---

[80] John Ashbery, "The New York School of Poets," *Selected Prose*, 114.
[81] John Ashbery, "American Sanctuary in Paris," *Reported Sightings*, 91.
[82] Ibid, 89-91.
[83] Ibid, 91.
[84] Ashbery, "Writers and Issues," 81.

combination of silence, exile and cunning, Ashbery's life and poetry during this period position him firmly on the outside, literally and figuratively beyond the jurisdiction of the strategies of containment and discourses of consensus he opposed in *ST* while still in America.

However, there is an even more negative aspect to this "acceptance world," especially when read in terms of a "poethics of proximity," which also allows for Meyers' categoristaion of Ashbery to be read as a pre-emptive warning. The unprecedented international success of Abstract Expressionism as an indigenous, avant-garde movement was because the aesthetic philosophy and the compositional practices supporting it closely coincided with the ideology of "new liberalism" set forth in Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center*, which not only accommodated dissidence and opposition but accorded it a position of paramount importance in society. This was no accident, since "avant-garde culture in general and Pollock's painting[s] in particular…[articulated the] values that were subsequently assimilated, utilised, and coopted by politicians, with the result that artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology."[85] During the '50s, modernism becomes completely depoliticsed, identified only by:

> virtue of formal and stylistic characteristics, (including difficulty), presented as the work of heroic individualists working in a free society, and used as evidence that American society was so ideologically free that no form was too experimental or abstruse for toleration and even support.[86]

The explicitly oppositional stance of painters like Pollock made it remarkably easy to categorise and appropriate them, to neutralise their difference as outsiders and restrict their capacity for political critique by containing them within the national consensus of liberty, free-expression and individualism. However, appropriating outsiders and removing their constitutive differences has more negative connotations according to a "poethics of proximity," making it an ethical as well as an aesthetic issue and further merging the personal and the political.

By introducing a "necessary difficulty" for the first time as a constitutive feature of some of the poems he has written and indicative of their effect on the reader, Ashbery makes difference an indicator of otherness rather than something to be overcome in order to arrive at a better understanding of what the poem means. The pervasive sense of difference/otherness is

---

[85] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 200.

[86] Greg Barnhisel, "Perspective USA and the Cultural Cold War: Modernism in Service of the State," *Modernism/Modernity* 14 (2007): 735.

TCO's innovative quality: how it provides an invitation to realise one's "response-ability" as a heteronomic, non-appropriative subject. In what is probably the most difficult poem in the collection, the influence of Cornell is once again apparent as Ashbery investigates the capacity of repetition to preserve difference and elicit "response-ability" in the reader. "Europe" is a collage of found materials, in this case "a circa World War I British novel for girls called *Beryl of the Biplane* that [he] found at a bookstall along the Seine."[87] This collage experiment is representative of what Ashbery was attempting in *TCO* as a whole, "trying to move beyond what were to me the successful poems in *Some Trees* toward something else…troubling the waters so as to be able to fish in them later" with the intention of putting "everything back together again later so it would be 'the same only different.'"[88] Moving "toward something else," gesturing to something different or other, is achieved in "Europe." Each separate stanza, paragraph, sentence, fragment or word is numbered but there are no grammatical signifiers to differentiate between the poet's original utterance and the repeated material of the collage. Because returning to the source text to determine what parts of the text belong to either Ashbery or Le Queux is practically unfeasible, "Europe" potentially belongs to both authors, thus precluding the possibility of a singular authorial intention being responsible for the text. Put another way, the presence of "(an)Other" is made discernible in Ashbery's poem through his repetitions from an external textual source. "Europe" is less concerned with delimiting parameters of containment and privileging the singularity of consensus than it is with encouraging the reader to consider how containment and consensus are, if not impossible, then at least highly problematic as the reader is required to continuously look outside the poem toward the source text. In doing so, the reader involves him/herself in differentiating between the poet and the novelist, which has significant ethical connotations since it implicates the reader in determining where the "(my)Self" of Ashbery ends and the "(an)Other" of Le Queux begins. Ultimately, any easy distinction between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" is denied because they are shown not to be self-contained, mutually exclusive categories but fundamentally interrelated, mutually dependent ones. "Europe" is probably the best example of the heteronomic turn in Ashbery's poetry because its content literally belongs to an external source.

A number of references to "waste" reveal the function of his collage aesthetics, with the practice of recycling further emphasising the importance of Cornell to Ashbery as the artist

---

[87] John Ashbery, "Interview: Conducted by Rich Kelley," *The Library of America Interviews*, (2008): 3, <https://www.loa.org/images/pdf/LOA_Ashbery_interview_on_Collected_Poems.pdf> Accessed 22nd September 2014.
[88] Ibid.

who affirmed the transformative, creative potential in simply paying attention to what is excluded, ignored or discarded. Recycling other materials through collage provides a concise example of how repetition always involves differences, the composition of "new junk."[89] Recycling and repetition invalidate claims to singular authority due to the inability of any one author to control his/her materials, that is, they will always be vulnerable to the intentions of others who utilise them in different ways. Accordingly, extracts from Le Queux appear in Ashbery's poem but, as with Cornell's use of found objects, without their previous meanings being entirely erased. "Europe" performs its meaning by enacting a denial of singular authorial control in the face of an otherness that resists containment and consensus. The collage aesthetics demonstrate Ashbery's reconfiguration of the activities of writing and reading since what he reads literally provides the content of what he writes, resulting in the control of the original author being subordinated to the increased authority of the reader since Le Queux cannot control what Ashbery does to his text. In this sense, "Europe"'s compositional practices encourage particular interpretational practices, to the extent that these activities become coterminous. It warns against habitual reading practices focused on content, "The newspaper is ruining your eyes,"[90] in favour of "mistak[ing] his book for garbage"[91] which can be recycled, remade into something new through the transformative, creative potential of the reader paying proper attention to it. O'Hara was probably the first to notice this increased demand on the reader in such poems, identifying "Europe" as being "attention demanding" with the "kind of obscure appeal which one is absolutely certain...is going to prove fruitful in a completely original way."[92] The possibility of a text having multiple authors is a recurrent theme in Ashbery and "Europe" exposes the important ethical connotations as it involves both "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" in the composition of the text.

(2.6) Repetition and Difference in *The Tennis Court Oath*

As an example of a heteronomic poem, one that is dependent for its meaning on influences outside the singular authority of the poet, "Europe" provides an occasion for the reader to realise his/her "response-ability" and is purposely characterised by a "necessary difficulty," a

---

[89] John Ashbery, "Europe," *CP*, 94.
[90] Ibid, 103.
[91] Ibid, 93.
[92] Frank O' Hara, "Letter to John Ashbery, 7 January 1960," qtd in Herd, 88.

constitutive quality of the text rather than something to be explained away. While repetition is integral to this poem, it also serves to make the oppositional categories that containment and consensus rely on impossible to preserve, such as text (inside) and context (outside), self (authorial intention) and other (readerly agency), composition (writing) and interpretation (reading), and authentic utterance and reiteration. Rather than a "close(d) reading," repetition necessitates a "close(r) reading," in which the reader pays closer attention to the words as they appear on the page to identify patterns, assonances, parallels and differences between the repeated words and phrases, ultimately realising how containment within a single poem and consensus regarding semantic meaning are both impossible. *TCO* demonstrates how Ashbery's "new/Criticism" will operate because repetition highlights the self-generative capacity of language. While a collection structured using repetition denies both containment and consensus, it also illustrates how meaning ultimately escapes the poet's singular intention, how the collection requires someone who "care[s] only about signs,"[93] an outside influence who determines the meaning by what s/he pays attention to, the patterns, assonances, parallels and differences s/he identifies and charts throughout the collection. "They Dream Only of America" is further proof of the heteronomic in Ashbery and a succinct example of his "new/Criticism" promoting a poetry dependent on outside influences. It continually refers outside itself through numerous quotes from an unknown speaker and prevents a single, authoritative interpretation because each line and/or sentence suggests a competing narrative and is entirely decontextualized from what precedes and succeeds it. The only reference to a subject, in terms of both matter and position, is in the concluding line, where "I am lost without you.'"[94] The poem's subject is dependent on an outside influence in the sense that "I" requires "you" and that the meaning of the poem requires the reader to select a particular narrative and develop it further, i.e. Ashbery's literary forbears who dreamed of America in Whitman's "thirteen million pillars of grass" and Twain's Bildungsroman characters "hiding from darkness in barns/[Where] They can be grownups now," or the threats of surveillance and exposure in the images suggesting noir detective films such as "the murderer's ash tray" and the "key in his right hand."[95] Neither of these readings are entirely sufficient because what matters is the poem's heteronomic orientation.

Repetition further emphasises difference as individual words acquire multiple meanings by recurring in a single poem. "America" conveys this accretive function with the

---

[93] John Ashbery, "They Dream Only of America," *CP*, 45.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid, 44.

identical words "stars," "stone[s]," "fire" and "sea" never having identical semantic meanings. The meaning of "stars," for example, cannot be essentially deduced by referral to a dictionary because it is context-dependent. Ashbery indicates how meaning will gradually accrete in the opening lines, "Piling upward/the fact the stars."[96] In a single poem, "stars" simultaneously means that other five-pointed symbol of the national bureaucracy, "In America the office [Pentagon] hid/archives in his/stall…/Enormous stars on them,"[97] the object in the night sky, "with moon and the stars,"[98] a feature in astrology regarding predestination, "The gift of a the stars./The person/Horror[scope] – the morsels of his choice,"[99] celebrity status, "the stars with privilege jerks,"[100] the physical, luminous entity, "what with stars/rocks and that fascinating illumination,"[101] the symbol from the national flag, "these stars in our flag we don't want"[102] and something absolutely necessary because it is neither a need nor a desire, "the undesired stars/…/…[that] persist, knowing we don't want it."[103] The other elemental words "stone," "fire" and "sea" recur to a similar extent so that "America" can be read as a radically disjunctive sestina that prevents a singular interpretation of the particular semantic content of the repeated words. In addition, the poem indicates how repetition facilitates a heteronomic orientation and the consequences this has for strategies of containment and discourses of consensus. Interspersed throughout "America" are references to the Cold War environment already seen in *ST*, such as the annihilation of one's reputation through public exposure, "I was almost killed/now by reading/on trial,"[104] anxiety regarding the violation of borders, "…the janitor reaches for the wrench with/which he'll kill the intruder/Terrain,"[105] the fear of foreign bodies, "…I had never come here" [106] and the surveillance of private spaces, "can't keep inside/perhaps feeling the sentry."[107] An overarching binary is established between private spaces, "…the apartment/…the bed,"[108] "a house"[109] and "the room,"[110] and public spaces,

---

[96] John Ashbery, "America," *CP*, 46.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid, 46.
[100] Ibid, 47.
[101] Ibid, 48.
[102] Ibid, 50.
[103] Ibid, 49-50.
[104] Ibid, 47.
[105] Ibid, 49.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid, 46.
[109] Ibid, 48.
[110] Ibid, 50.

"the out of doors"[111] and the "country."[112] The fact that a poem structured on repetition addresses the Cold War atmosphere of heightened fear regarding the violation of boundaries, the difficulty of keeping public and private spaces separate and the unsustainability of the us v. them (self v. other) dichotomy is not accidental. "America" is testament to the significance of repetition not just as a means of invalidating New Criticism by making containment and consensus impossible in terms of how a poem is written and read but also as a mode of resistance against the strategies and discourses of the period that seek to either exclude or appropriate difference.

"America" is a further example of the heteronomic in Ashbery, a poem beyond containment because it exceeds the author's intentions and relies on the reader's response. It is an "act   imitation,"[113] performed for someone else who must determine its validity as an imitation by paying attention to it and comparing it to something else in the same way repetition operates. Ashbery's reconfiguration of how the text relates to both the poet's intentions and the reader's response constitutes his "new/Criticism" but it also foregrounds how repetition facilitates a relationship between the poet and the reader based on difference rather than identification between both individuals. Heteronomic poems such as "Europe" and "America" also inform *TCO* as a whole since patterns of repetition can be traced between multiple poems, further removing their meaning from the intentions of the poet and emphasising their reliance on the reader's response to confirm the importance of outside influence. For example, a pattern of repetition can be charted through "To Redouté," "How Much Longer Will I Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher…," "Rain" and "White Roses" based on bodies of water, the spectrum of light and darkness, times of day and botanical entities. Ashbery illustrates this aspect of repetition in "How Much Longer…" and the effect it has on the reader using an incomplete quote from Ben Jonson's "Song to Celia," "Drink to me only with [thine eyes]/And the reader is carried away."[114] What is repeated is never the same as its original occurrence. In this sense, it carries the reader away from the contained poem whose meaning is based on consensus by encouraging him/her to consider the differences between, and to respond to, them.

"To Redouté" (an address to the Belgian painter and botanist Pierre-Joseph Redouté who became famous following the French Revolution for his paintings of roses that mentions "new thing[s]"[115]) and "White Roses" (which concludes with an image of spring renewal, "The

---

[111] Ibid, 49.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid, 50.
[114] John Ashbery, "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher...," *CP*, 56.
[115] John Ashbery, "To Redouté," *CP*, 52.

new white flowers that are beginning to shoot up about now"[116]) show how repetition allows different contexts to inhabit a single poem as they interpenetrate one another. Yet two poems that repeat one another in such a profound way also foreground revolution and renewal, the act of making something new by returning to the beginning. This gets to the very centre of why repetition is so significant to Ashbery in *TCO* and the consequent necessity of response. While it "authenticates difference as that which cannot be subsumed under the category of the Same,"[117] the attendant alterity permits further creativity beyond the poet's intention or control, it allows the reader to realise his/her "response-ability." The reader creates something new by introducing "different contexts created by each new reading that can never be experienced by the poet."[118] "To Redouté" and "White Roses," therefore, demonstrate how each reading is ultimately a return to a new beginning because after having read one there is the compulsion to read the other to identify further repetitions before returning to the first again and repeating the process using a different word, phrase or theme. Just like Ashbery's recycling of other material, each reading remakes the collection into "new junk," something different to what the poet originally intended. It demonstrates how "the book [is] a trap,"[119] that the poem is a tool of containment when considered a static, self-sufficient object, and how "the facts have hinged on my reply,"[120] that in order for "the facts" to be "piling upward," for meanings unintended by the poet to be accumulated and for the poem to preclude consensus, a response from another person is necessary. Therefore, a collection based on heteronomy rather than containment and consensus emphasises the importance of outside influence, which in turn places the meaning of the text beyond the intentions of the poet and provides an occasion for the reader to realise his/her capacity to respond.

While *TCO* first introduces the notion of a "necessary difficulty" in Ashbery, what makes it so important is its "opposition without oppositionality," how it manages to oppose what he achieved in *ST* but without ever becoming a codified set of prescriptive practices for how this can be maintained in subsequent collections. This is possible because the collection, just like the painting by Jacques-Louis David from which its title is derived, ultimately remains incomplete. Like O'Hara, Ashbery's poetry here offers no set of guidelines for practitioners to ascribe to; there is no programme to be joined and therefore no attempt to initiate individuals

---

[116] John Ashbery, "White Roses," *CP*, 66.
[117] Krystyna Mazur, *Poetry and Repetition: Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 10.
[118] Ibid, 121.
[119] John Ashbery, "Rain," *CP*, 61.
[120] Ibid.

into a coterie poetics according to strict conditions determining who is included and who is excluded. This highlights the implicit humour in Ashbery's "aesthetics of indifference." Playing with the other connotations of the title, *TCO* denies the possibility of pledging allegiance to what he is doing because every reader's response is going to be different. Ashbery suggests a "close(r) reading," paying heightened attention to things to acknowledge the differences between them but without appropriating them into categories of the same. Difficulty is necessary because difference prevents any one reading being exhaustive but it is precisely this difference that changes the poem from a self-sufficient object to something existing between the intentions of the poet and the response of the reader. *TCO* reflects Ashbery living in the real world as an outsider, as an expatriate in France, just like *ST* documents him negotiating the challenges facing homosexual men in Cold War America. As will be seen, its heteronomy is developed upon in subsequent collections when his attitude toward writing and reading poetry reconfigures the relationship between the poet and the reader to provide a model for living in the real world of others, one where differences rather than similarities between individuals allow for ethical relationships of proximity.

Conclusion: The Two Ashberys?

ST and *TCO* encapsulate the indifference of Ashbery's earliest poetry, with both collections being different from but not the opposite of each other, a fact often overlooked since these collections are used to distinguish between the "two John Ashberys…figures who correspond to the two traditions of contemporary American poetry."[121] His "ubiquity in recent anthologies is unequalled," anthologies that make "overt claims at defining the shape of contemporary writing."[122] On the one hand, he appears in Helen Vendler's *Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, Harold Bloom's *The Best of the Best American Poetry 1988-1997* and J. D. McClatchy's *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, three anthologies concerned with consolidating the inheritors of the more sanitised, conservative form of modernism favoured by academic institutions into the dominant force in American poetry. Alan Golding also discovered that Ashbery was "the last poet cut from [Donald Hall's] *New Poets*

---

[121] Nick Lolordo, "Charting the Flow: Positioning John Ashbery," *Contemporary Literature* 42 (2001): 750.
[122] Ibid, 751.

of England and America,"[123] which assembled "academic" poets criticised for their tameness and uniformity according to their experimentations with form. On the other hand, he appears in Eliot Weinberger's *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*, Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry* and Douglas Messerli's *From the Other Side of the Century, New American Poetry: 1960-1990*, anthologies that continue Allen's original intention in *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* to gather those who represent the "total rejection…of academic verse"[124] and a commitment to what Marjorie Perloff terms, borrowing from Ashbery himself, the "Other Tradition" in modernism. In this sense, Ashbery is enlisted by both sides of the "anthology wars."

Ashbery criticism itself also falls into two camps, but the stakes are raised considerably because "the business of explaining Ashbery becomes a significant kind of cultural self-definition" that raises questions concerning "the meaning and status of what it is to be 'American.'"[125] Those like Bloom and Vendler, and others like James Logenbach and Vernon Shetley, view Ashbery as the revisionist of a larger genealogy that resulted in a hegemonic modernism that continues into the second-half of the twentieth century, with Bloom positioning him as the latest link in a chain that includes Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, Crane and Stevens, and Vendler situating him in a lineage stretching from "Wordsworth, Keats [and] Tennyson [to] Stevens [and] Eliot."[126] For critics like Perloff, Charles Altieri and Andrew Ross, in addition to poet-critics such as Charles Bernstein, however, Ashbery is part of the ""breakthrough" narrative of postmodernism" that extends the experiments of modernists such as Rimbaud, Stein, Williams, Pound and Cage, who cannot be understood according to the Romantic-Symbolist tradition. Either way, significant omissions are required to contain Ashbery in any tradition or to arrive at a consensual appreciation of what his poetry is doing, with the former erasing more difficult collections like *TCO*, *As We Know* (1979), *Shadow Train* (1981) and *Flow Chart* (1991) in favour of the more acceptable *DDS*, *SPCM* and *Houseboat Days*, while the latter praise these difficult collections for showing us "how mediated and material language is" and "self-consciously examin[ing] the categories by which we define writing"[127] to deconstruct the syntax that confines us in a particular worldview and dismiss the

---

[123] Alan Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 207.

[124] Donald Allen, "Preface," *New American Poetry 1945-1960*, Ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), xi.

[125] S. P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe, "John Ashbery and the Articulation of the Social," *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 37.

[126] Susan M. Schultz, "Introduction," *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Susan M. Schultz (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1995), 2-3.

[127] Ibid, 9.

others as being "too easily recuperable by what writers associated with Language poetry see as the post-Romantic vocabulary of mainstream poetry criticism."[128]

What all this demonstrates is that Ashbery's "esthetic ideal" of "fence-sitting" makes any attempt to contain him within a specific category or engender consensus about the purpose of his work an exercise in futility. Most importantly, however, his refusal to invent a critical apparatus with which to compel agreement on the nature of his achievement and the impossibility of charting influence understood in terms of a "temporal line of succession descending from his predecessors"[129] means there is no programme to be joined, he is resolutely not a camp poet. Furthermore, he demonstrates in *ST* and *TCO* how the opposition between "open" and "closed" forms used to differentiate between New American and new critical poetics, respectively, is itself problematic. The "open" form of poems from *TCO* such as "Rain," "Europe" and "Idaho" don't make them any more innovative than the "closed" form of poems from *ST* like "Sonnet", "The Painter" (a sestina) and "Pantoum." What makes *ST and TCO* innovative is their inherent openness, their insistence on heteronomy and concomitant refusal to be closed-off from outside influences. *ST* is open toward the social world of others because it shows Ashbery strategically resisting the strategies of containment and discourses of consensus he experienced as a homosexual male in postwar America, whereas *TCO* is open in that "the facts have hinged on my reply," the poems are "not intend[ed]..to be finished poems...in the way...[he] had done so before"[130] because they require the response of another person to complete them, they obligate the reader to realise his/her "response-ability." As *ST* and *TCO* illustrate, there are not two Ashberys opposed to one another but rather what he terms in "The Skaters" from *RM* "that other 'I,'"[131] the co-existence of differences during occasions when the contrapositions of I and other are no longer separated as opposites but encounter each other within the lived space of proximity.

---

[128] Lolordo, 753.
[129] Ibid, 752.
[130] Ashbery, "In Conversation with John Tranter."
[131] Ashbery, *CP*, 149.

Chapter 3: "Fundamental Absences" in *Rivers and Mountains* and *The Double Dream of Spring*

The difficulty of *TCO* was necessitated by Ashbery's desire to achieve heteronomy in his poetry, to negate strategies of containment and complicate discourses of consensus as they existed in both new critical practices and in Cold War society. Certain poems in that collection make difference prominent to acknowledge the importance of outside influence as a means of relinquishing complete authorial control of the poem and increasing the reader's capacity to respond. Such difficulty is similarly necessary in his subsequent collections because it "isn't there for its own sake" but rather an inherent condition of the task he has set himself and his reader; raising awareness of the "difficulty of living in passing time," within the "ever-changing, minute adjustments that go on around us and which we respond to."[1] Difficulty does not just refer to the hermeneutic variety here because it also "marks the furthest reach of poetic meaning,"[2] marking the moment when one moves from knowing into unknowing, what he identifies in "Fragment" from *DDS* as "the threshold of so much unmeaning, so much/Being."[3] *RM* and *DDS* achieve what Levinas terms sensibility, not simply one's capacity to receive and process information from the outside world but one's complete openness toward it. Sensibility is constitutive of the subjectivity of the subject prior to consciousness and intention, referring to the moment when exteriority is invited to inhabit interiority as the subject interacts with the social world of others. Developing on his experiments in heteronomy, Ashbery's "poethics" begin to emerge in these collections, where his concern is exploring poetry's "significance *as*, not just *about*, a form of living in the real world."[4] If containment and consensus in the poem are no longer possible following *ST* and *TCO*, then the type of closed-off subject such strategies and discourses endorse is equally impossible to articulate. Ashbery's "poethic" sensibility in *RM* and *DDS* posits a poetic subject that manifests from an originary encounter with otherness, the difference of another person.

Rather tellingly, Ashbery observes in an article on Gertrude Stein that "poets, when they write about other artists always tend to write about themselves."[5] His comments on other

---

[1] John Ashbery qtd in Richard Kostelenatz, "How To Be a Difficult Poet," *The Old Poetries and the New* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 108.
[2] John Emil Vincent, *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1.
[3] John Ashbery, "Fragment," *CP*, 232.
[4] Retallack, "The Poethical Wager," 26.
[5] John Ashbery, "Gertrude Stein," *Reported Sightings*, 106.

poets also prove similarly informative. Reviewing Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* as "The Impossible" in 1957, he describes it as "a hymn to possibility" whose story "is a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his[/her] own set of particulars."[6] The combination of generality and potential specificity explains the impossibility of Stein's text for Ashbery, but this impossibility "denotes a [more] complex version of difficulty – at once intellectual and affective, aesthetic and experiential."[7] A more complex version of difficulty derives from the attempt "to transmit a completely new picture of reality," the "complicatedness of life, [which is Stein's] subject…its way of happening," and which often result in "works [that] are highly complex and, for some, unreadable."[8] Ashbery's subject is the same, a way of living in the "*real* reality,"[9] the external social world of others. In *RM* and *DDS*, difficulty, as the moment when the certainty associated with "(my)Self" ends and the uncertainty inherent in "(an)Other" begins, signals "the end of friendship/With self alone"[10] because the "demarcation between the textual and experiential worlds, the world of the poem and the world of the reader,"[11] is intentionally blurred. What Ashbery is attempting in these collections is characterised by its "necessary difficulty" since "we feel that it is still impossible to accomplish the impossible," hence the experiential effect of Stein's *Meditations*, where it "seems not so much as if we were reading as living a rather long period of our lives with a houseful of people."[12] The impossible for Ashbery is collapsing the distinction between the textual and the social world so that poetics is thickened by a h and the resultant poems become examples of living in the social world of others, of acknowledging and responding to otherness but never appropriating or reducing it. Like Palmer, however, this is only difficult but never impossible. Ashbery's solution is what he terms a "one-size-fits-all" type of poetry, a "general, all-purpose experience – like those stretch socks that fit all sizes."[13] However, to achieve the combination of generality and potential specificity and compose his own "everybody's autobiography" following the example of Stein, a radical process of self-displacement is required.

During the period 1955-65, Ashbery is notably absent from developments in American poetry, more specifically the two seminal events in which the New American Poetry was consolidated and disseminated: the Vancouver Poetry Conference (1963) and the Berkeley

---

[6] John Ashbery, "The Impossible: Gertrude Stein," *Selected Prose*, 12.
[7] Emily Setina, "From 'Impossible' Writing to a Poetics of Intimacy: John Ashbery's Reading of Gertrude Stein," *Genre* 45, (2012): 145.
[8] Ashbery, "The Impossible," 13.
[9] Ibid.
[10] John Ashbery, "Fragment," *CP*, 229.
[11] Setina, 151.
[12] Ashbery, "The Impossible," 11-12.
[13] Ashbery, "The Experience of Experience," 250.

Poetry Conference (1965). Like his fellow New York poets, however, Ashbery's absence is a further indication of his commitment to remaining outside, of remaining beyond the confines of all poetic programmes be they mainstream or oppositional. *RM* and *DDS* are both noticeably marked by, even thematically and conceptually dependent upon, absence in the sense of self-displacement, with Ashbery removing himself as the subject by vacating the centre. He displaces himself to the outside of his own poetry by denying explicit autobiographical correspondences with the pronouns in his work, achieving what he calls in "Clepsydra" from *RM* "As graceful a kind of non-absence as either/Has a right to expect."[14] Similar to the reticence seen in *ST*, a strategic gesture calibrated to his lived experiences of the time rather than an imposed silencing, absence or self-displacement is an intended feature of the poetry and not a symptom of his exclusion. Put another way, self-displacement allows for the presence of "(an)Other," thereby extending upon Ashbery's decision in *TCO* to reduce singular authorial control and increase the reader's capacity to respond while adding an ethical dimension to his poetics. By refusing to incorporate autobiographical material into his poetry, the particulars of his life do not reduce the generality of these collections and the reader can consequently adapt them to fit his/her own set of particulars. As Ashbery explains, "my biography doesn't come into my poetry very much…which many readers find disturbing…whenever I try to think about it, I seem to draw a complete blank."[15] Drawing "a complete blank" constitutes his absence or self-displacement and provides the prerequisite generality for a different kind of presence, that of the reader who "is able to experience the poem without having to refer to outside sources to get the complete experience."[16] "Disturbing" can be replaced with difficult here because the reader is being asked to experientially inhabit these poems rather than to intellectually deduce their meaning or what they correspond to because they are what Palmer defines as "compositions[s] with nothing at [their] centre,"[17] a "hollow [that] produce[s]/A kind of cave of winds; distribution centre/Of subordinate notions."[18]

---

[14] John Ashbery, "Clepsydra," *CP*, 140.
[15] John Ashbery, "Ashbery: Interviewed by Sue Gangel," *American Poetry Observed: Poets and Their Work*, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 10.
[16] John Ashbery, "Craft Interview," 122.
[17] Michael Palmer, "From the Notebooks," *19 New American Poets of the Golden Gate*, ed. Philip Dow, (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984), 343.
[18] Ashbery, "Fragment," *CP*, 231.

(3.1) Displacement (or This Space Meant) in *Rivers and Mountains*

In "The Bungalows" from *DDS*, Ashbery notes how "standing still means death, and life is moving on,/Moving on towards death. But sometimes standing still is also life."[19] Written following his permanent return to America, this concluding couplet evaluates a life defined up to this point by a series of departures and displacements: from his maternal grandparents' Victorian house in Rochester to his father's farm outside Sodus in 1934, to Deerfield Academy in 1943 and to Harvard in 1945, to New York in 1949 and Paris in 1955 before returning to New York in 1965. Defining Ashbery as a poet of displacement is not a negative appraisal because it reveals the complex negotiation of space and place occurring in his poetry at this time and confirms his status as a poet of the "anti-place," the "abstract climate" epitomised by New York. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's definition of space as general compared to the more specific place is useful here, ""space" is more abstract than "place" because what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value."[20] Place is "enclosed and humanised space"[21] but rather than conceiving of them as mutually exclusive opposites, Tuan argues that they require each other for definition because "if we think of space as that which allows movement, then pause is place; each pause in movement makes it possible for [one's] location [in space] to be transformed into place."[22] Place as "enclosed space" has certain connotations of containment that are anathema to Ashbery, but as his conclusion to "The Bungalows" makes clear, life is both "moving on" and "standing still," a complex negotiation of space and place, of movement and pause. The multiple displacements in Ashbery's life suggest intentional departures from the overly familiar, exemplified by the "anti-place" of New York and Paris "where the language spoken was not [his] own."[23] This further explains the preference for the generality of space over the specificity of place in his work.

While Ashbery is not an ecological poet according to the conventional definition of the term, *RM* and *DDS* negotiate the two interdependent objectives that J. Scott Bryson identifies as the motivations behind ecopoetry: "(1) to create place, making a conscious and concerted effort to know the non-human world around us; and (2) to value space, recognising the extent

---

[19] John Ashbery, "The Bungalows," *CP*, 226.
[20] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.
[21] Ibid, 54.
[22] Ibid, 6.
[23] Ashbery, "In Conversation with John Tranter."

to which that very world is ultimately unknowable."[24] Ashbery may not be an ecological poet, one who is interested in the "non-human world," but he is an environmental poet, one concerned with the external environment surrounding him, in this case the social world of others, which is valued for being a source of irreducible otherness that is "ultimately unknowable." In terms of a "poethics," however, where poetry is a way of living in this social world of others, space is more important than place since the latter involves a degree of appropriation, of reducing differences into categories of the same by making the unknown knowable, in an effort to create a stable sense of subjectivity. For Ashbery, such stability is problematic since it suggests containment and consensus. Subjectivity is constituted by sensibility; it is open toward the outside and willing to allow the differences and attendant sense of otherness found there to prevent it becoming autotelic. *RM* and *DDS*, therefore, are not so much concerned with creating places than with valuing space, providing momentary pauses in movement that encourage us to attend to the social environment outside us and understand our places within it but without possessing it as an object of comprehension, as something grasped in terms of complete understanding.

Most importantly, perhaps, is the "placelessness" of *RM* and *DDS*, how the poems convey Ashbery's displacement by never specifying a particular location that either he or the reader is familiar with. These poems provide such an elsewhere, a generalised, non-descript "nowhere" that can be adapted to suit his particular circumstances and, more importantly, the reader's. The intention behind such an "anti-place" or "nowhere" is the "fact that somebody is being born; in other words at the end a person is somehow given embodiment...who was not there when the poem began."[25] In this sense, the poems are intended to facilitate embodiment because they provide a "nowhere," which, as Palmer observes, "can [also] be read 'now here.'"[26] The generality of "nowhere" becomes the more specific "now here" when embodiment occurs, when the poem is adapted to the particular circumstances of the poet and reader. That is, the "now here" is realised when the poem is made to correspond with the temporal (now) and spatial (here) circumstances of the poet when he writes and of the reader when s/he reads the poem. In what is without doubt Ashbery's most complete repudiation of new critical pedagogy, the poem is posited not as an object to be analysed but an event to be experienced, not a representation of the given but a process of becoming in which "we are

[24] J. Scott Bryson, *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Ecopoetry* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 8.
[25] Ashbery, "Craft Interview," 131-132.
[26] Palmer, "Active Boundaries," 208.

somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem."[27] Ashbery displaces himself from the centre of his poems so that the reader can adapt them to his/her particular circumstances and in that way momentarily inhabit them as a place in space, a pause in movement that allows him/her to pay attention to the social environment outside him/her and those others within it. In addition, they provide an occasion for realising one's "response-ability" since they are the product of the poet's and the reader's interactions, the actions they perform as embodied subjects within the material reality of other embodied subjects as similarly happens in the external social world.

Understanding one's spatial and temporal position, the place in space and time one inhabits and from which one acts, is key to any sense of embodiment. The increased capacity to respond in Ashbery's poetry assumes a more ethical component when the poem is considered an occasion of "response-ability," especially when Bakhtin's theory of answerability is employed. *RM*'s title refers to the tradition of Chinese landscape scroll-painting named "shan shui hua," which translates as "mountains, bodies of water, painting." This tradition of landscape painting has two important features that distinguish it from the Western variant and make it particularly informative about what Ashbery is attempting in *RM* more generally. Firstly, "shan shui shua" is concerned with neither the mimetic representation of actual places nor the self-expression of the artist. Secondly, these paintings are "composed through a series of multiple vanishing points"[28] instead of the fixed, singular perspective associated with Western landscape painting. These combine to produce paintings that "can be seen from a distance, [but] a proper appreciation requires a close viewing [since they] provide a different mode of visual experience accomplished only by up and down eye movements."[29] "Shan shui hua" paintings are not to be viewed as objects accurately depicting a place but experienced as a meditative space for examining the tension and harmony between the vertical and the horizontal, the solid and the fluid, and presence and absence. The artist is noticeably absent due to the lack of a singular vanishing point and the denial of self-expression because they are intended to facilitate a state of mind the spectator can get into to explore his/her own "now here". To this end, the poems "Rivers and Mountains" and "Clepsydra" foreground the importance of "now here" in this collection through the extended metaphors of cartography and time-measurement respectively.

---

[27] Ashbery, "Craft Interview," 123.
[28] Christin Bolewski, "'Shan Shui Hua' – Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting Reinterpreted as Moving Digital Visualisation," *Electronic Visualisation and the Arts (EVA) Conference* (2008): 28.
[29] Ibid, 31.

The fact that "shan shui hua" paintings refuse the specificity of a particular place to achieve a generality of space means Ashbery's use of the cartography metaphor in the eponymous poem is less to do with the empirical measurement of physical space than it is with valuing space and the attendant otherness of the environment surrounding us. In his own take on Olson's "composition by field," cartography and writing/reading become coterminous activities:

> Of the trail among dry, papery leaves,
> Gray-brown quills like thoughts
> In the melodious but vast mass of today's
> Writing through fields and swamps
> Marked, on the map, with little bunches of weeds.[30]

The "papery leaves" in the terrain and the "bunches of weeds" on the map make the terrain and the text synonymous with one another. Additionally, "Rivers and Mountains" argues against causality, opening with "the assassins/Cloistered" on the "secret map" and ending with a "letter [placed]/On the unassassinated president's task." [31] By extension, the poem reverses the causality that would normally lead from a physical terrain to a textual reproduction of it:

> To get to the other places you found
> It all on paper but the land
> Was made of paper processed
> To look like ferns, mud or other[32] (126)

Not only are the physical terrain and the textual reproduction completely interrelated, the textual even precedes the physical. The terrain can be read as a physical reproduction of the textual, made of paper and acted on to look like ferns, mud, etc. Cartography is an act of reading and writing the external environment but it also involves imprinting oneself into that environment, "…its impact/makes a light print."[33] The singular perspective of the cartographer, or place-maker, imposes order on the space surrounding him/her, reduces its otherness by making it knowable, but this is countered by "quiet walking" which "only…ever instructs."[34]

---

[30] John Ashbery, "Rivers and Mountains," *CP*, 126.
[31] Ibid, 126-128.
[32] Ibid, 126.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

"Rivers and Mountains" collapses the distinction between the textual world of the poem and the physical world of the poet/reader to show how other oppositions are equally untenable:

> Your plan was to separate the enemy into two groups
> With the razor-edged mountains between.
> It worked well on paper
> But their camp had grown
> To be the mountain and the map[35]

While organising things into more easily manageable opposites is appealing, what is intended to separate the "two groups" in the real world actually confirms their inseparability. The reader is thus being asked to contemplate how other oppositions, such as presence and absence, space and place, movement and stasis, the physical and the textual, and, ultimately, the poet and the reader, are not only co-existent but coterminous. The "two groups" are not separated but rather conjoined by the "mountains between" and "the map" in the same way that "Rivers and Mountains" does not exist as an object separating the poet and the reader but as an event of meditation that brings them closer together. It is a "seminar[y] of instruction,"[36] demonstrating how the text is a part of the physical world it is trying to depict, and by writing and reading it, the poet and the reader are acting in and being acted upon by that world. "Rivers and Mountains" is not about the physical or measurable distance between things but instead suggests proximity, the event of intersubjectivity during an encounter with another person. As he explains in "Fragment," the "coming together of masses coincides/With that stable emptiness."[37] Ashbery's poem is emptied of any particulars that might correspond with him as the subject (matter) but this self-displacement or absence allows for a different type of presence: the two masses of the embodied poet and reader "coming together" in the empty poem. Although these embodied subjects are located in two different physical places, two specific "heres," the "Rivers and Mountains" between brings the "two groups" closer together in the generalised textual space.

"Clepsydra" is the first poem written in what is now recognisably the Ashberian style, a long, meandering sentence that extends over multiple lines as it introduces a theme, develops it further before abandoning it, digressing to something else before resuming and ultimately revising it. A clepsydra refers to any timepiece that measures time through the regulated flow

---

[35] Ibid, 127.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ashbery, *CP*, 230.

of water either into or out of a vessel, "the progression of minutes by accepting them as one accepts drops of water/As they form a shower,"[38] providing the rivers to the mountains identified above. It is a physical materialisation of a passage of time and indicates Ashbery's interest in time, that is, how his sentences in "Clepsydra" provide a textual materialisation of time, its movements backwards and forwards:

> We hear so much
> Of its further action that at last it seems that
> It is we, our taking it into account rather, that are
> The reply that prompted the question...
> /.../
> To have this to be constantly coming back from –
> Nothing more, really, than surprise at your absence
> And preparing to continue the dialogue into
> Those mysterious and near regions that are
> Precisely the time of its being furthered.[39]

He is not concerned with rhythm exactly, or any sense of linear progression, but the passage of time itself and how the poem can move both backward to "the reply that prompted the question" and project forward into unknown yet "near regions." The "backward-movement between past and present...is made possible by [the poem's] time-space conflation [and] serves as a useful guide to reading the poem."[40] Reading "Clepsydra" involves looking backward and forward to previous and subsequent qualifying statements to determine the variant meanings, with the effect that we are "returning to the conclusion, its premises/Undertaken before any formal agreement had been reached" and "the contract now/.../...drawn up and consented to as insurance/Against the very condition it was now so efficiently/Seeking to establish."[41] Conflating time and space means "Clepsydra" provides a passage of time in textual form that can be moved around in, depending on which theme or sentence group is concentrated on by the reader as s/he moves backward and forward within it. Like "Rivers and Mountains" in terms of space, this poem achieves a similar effect in terms of time, encouraging contemplation in the reader regarding the time s/he is located in. In addition, just as the terrain and the textual are synonymous in the eponymous poem, the temporal and the textual are coterminous in

---

[38] John Ashbery, "Clepsydra," *CP*, 145.
[39] Ibid, 141.
[40] Annette Gilson, "'Disseminating Circumference:' The Diachronic Presence of Dickinson in John Ashbery's 'Clepsydra,'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 44 (1998): 487.
[41] Ashbery, *CP*, 143.

"Clepsydra" because it is ultimately a passage of time whose "unstated circumference"[42] is its beginning and ending. Ashbery displaces himself from the poem by denying any particularities that might correspond with his autobiography or coincide with a particular time so that his absence allows for the presence of the reader who can adapt the poem to suit his/her own particulars, providing "As graceful a kind of non-absence as either/Has a right to expect."[43] In this sense, the poem is inhabitable because the reader makes its "now" coincide with his/her own:

> Though one must not forget that the nature of this
> Emptiness, these previsions,
> Was that it could only happen here, on this page held
> Too close to be legible, sprouting erasures, except that they
> Ended everything in the transparent sphere of what was
> Intended only a moment ago, spiralling further out, its
> Gesture finally dissolving in the weather.[44]

Ashbery is asking the reader to concentrate on the "now here" of the poem, not as an object for new critical analysis, where attention is only given to the words on the page, but as something happening, an event occurring in a particular time and space. A close reading is insufficient because displacement is absolute: of any sense of self from the poem and its meaning into the posterior, "spiralling further out." While "Rivers and Mountains" suggests that two different spatial locations can be brought closer together through the text, "Clepsydra" is "A moment that gave not only itself, but/Also the means of keeping it."[45] Being emptied of particulars that would make the poem coincide with only one particular moment means it can be adapted to fit the reader's current circumstances, thereby providing "the means of keeping it[s]" original "now" by making it coincide with the other "nows" of subsequent readings.

"Rivers and Mountains" and "Clepsydra" have the characteristics of both mountains and rivers since, as material texts, they exist as static objects whose content does not change and, as events, they allow for multiple "now heres" to occupy the poem and make change a constitutive feature of their meaning. Like the "shan shui hua" aesthetics discussed earlier, they encourage meditation on the tension between stasis and fluidity in the reader. In addition, like

---

42 Ibid, 141.
43 Ibid, 140.
44 Ibid, 142.
45 Ibid, 143.

a map and a clepsydra, they are also designed to help orient the reader in space and time respectively, to make him/her contemplate his/her spatial-temporal position and in doing so adapt the vacated, empty poem to suit his/her circumstances, thereby inhabiting it. Absence in "Rivers and Mountains" and "Clepsydra" means "that it could only happen [now] here, on this page," that is, the empty, vacated poem provides an opportunity for the poet and the reader to become embodied, to be subjects who inhabit a particular space and time and who are responsible for the actions performed there that give rise to the poem. The text will always have a certain stasis due to its material nature and the reader's inability to literally change its content but when read as a "one-size-fits-all" type of poetry, the absence of the poet allows for the presence of the reader who can adapt it to fit his/her own set of particulars and, therefore, radically change its meaning. The poet and the reader exist as embodied subjects who inhabit the "now-here" of the poem as event and in doing so bring two different and distant spatial-temporal locations closer together, into greater proximity. This signals the emergence of Ashbery's "poethics," how his poems allow for, rather than just discuss the possibility of, an encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" to ensure they are a way of, not just about, living in the "real reality," the social world of other embodied subjects.

(3.2) The Poem as Event

Toward the end of "Clepsydra," Ashbery poses a question that reveals his intention in *RM*: to collapse the distinction between the textual world of the poem and the experiential world of the poet and the reader, "Why shouldn't all climate and all music be equal/Without growing?.../…/…because everything is relative."[46] This question is central to *TP*, where Ashbery creates poems informed by the Cagean model for composing texts determined by changes in the environment conditioning them, but in *RM* it proposes the "law of placement:" how the unique position I occupy in time and space conditions my experiences. Ashbery's relativistic position means that everything is relative to a particular framework or perspective that is equally valid since no standpoint is privileged above all others. The only difference between "climate" and "music" according to this logic is a question not of absolute, essential qualities but one of axiological judgement. Differentiating between the noises that surround us in our immediate, everyday environment and the noises that are given aesthetic value is a

---

[46] Ibid, 145.

question of what we pay attention to and what we consequently include and exclude from the category "music" based on individual standards of taste and personalised cultural values. But if "everything is relative," as Ashbery suggests, then such habituated practices of categorising harmony, rhythm, tonality and structure as "music" and noise, dissonance, chance and atonality as belonging to the climate, the particular conditions of the environment surrounding us, are no longer credible. Making each perspective equally valid obviously builds on the self-displacement discussed earlier, yet while it is immensely empowering it also involves certain obligations. Bakhtin's first philosophy, particularly his argument concerning "Being-as-event"[47] and the "answerable act"[48] in *TPA*, is crucial here. Furthermore, his use of aesthetic experience to conceptualise his first philosophy makes him especially useful for understanding how the ethical commitments involved in creating and interpreting a poem according to one's axiological judgements are readily transferrable into how one interacts with the social world as an embodied, ethical subject amongst others.

For Bakhtin, being is an event, one that occurs according to specific spatial-temporal conditions. It is constituted by the "actually performed [answerable] act," the "actualisation of a decision" that exists in "its actual, unique factuality" as an act performed by an embodied subject rather than something "contemplated from outside or thought of theoretically."[49] As Ashbery insists it "could only happen [now] here, on this page," Bakhtin similarly asserts that "I, too *exist*…actually – in the whole and assume the obligation to say *this* word."[50] This is the point of origin of the answerable act, which he explains using the "fact of my non-alibi in Being,"[51] and reveals the reason behind Ashbery's emphasis on the spatial-temporal position one inhabits when writing and reading a poem in "Rivers and Mountains" and "Clepsydra." According to Bakhtin:

> I, too, participate in Being in a once-occurrent and never-repeatable manner: I occupy a place in once-occurrent Being that is unique and never-repeatable, a place that cannot be taken by anyone else…In the given once-occurrent point where I am now located, no one else has ever been located in the once occurrent *time* and once-occurent *space*…That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else. The uniqueness or singularity of present-on-hand Being is compellently obligatory.[52]

---

[47] Bakhtin, *TPA*, 16.
[48] Ibid, 28.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid, 10, author's emphasis.
[51] Ibid, 40.
[52] Ibid, 10, my emphasis.

The sense of answerability proposed here helps explain the emergence of "response-ability" in Ashbery's poetry, no longer just the increased capacity for the reader to respond as seen in the heteronomic poems of *TCO* but the obligation to do so from the unique spatial-temporal position s/he inhabits and the necessity to be answerable for those responses. Bakhtin's "non-alibi in being" is particularly useful to understanding how "response-ability" can be achieved in poetry because he conceptualises it using aesthetic experience. The fact that "*everyone* occupies a unique and never-repeatable place [means] *any* being is once-occurrent"[53] and his/her axiological judgements are, consequently, informed by the spatial-temporal position s/he inhabits. In aesthetic experience, the spatial, the temporal and the valuative moments are all "consolidated or "bodied" here…all are correlated with a concrete centre of values."[54] In terms of an aesthetic event, a way of, not just about, living in the "real reality," the "actual world of the performed act," there is a "contraposition of *I* and the *other*"[55] because:

> Life knows two value centres that are fundamentally and essentially different, yet are correlated with each other: myself and the other; and it is around these centres that all of the concrete moments of Being are distributed and arranged. One and the same object (identical in its content) is a moment of Being that presents itself differently from the valuative standpoint when correlated with me or when correlated with another.[56]

Ashbery's self-displacement allows for the placement of another in the "now-here" of the poem. Considering the poem as an object means the poet and the reader are situated outside of and separated by the text, whereas in the poem as event, the poet and the reader function as the contrapositions of I and other with the potential for these value centres to be brought closer together. As Ashbery explains in "Clepsydra:"

> In this way any direction taken was the right one,
> Leading first to you, and through you to
> Myself that is beyond you and which is the same thing as
>   space,
> That is the stammering vehicles that remain unknown,
> Eating the sky in all sincerity because the difference
> Can never be made up: therefore, why not examine the
>   distance?[57]

---

53 Ibid, author's emphasis.
54 Ibid, 72.
55 Ibid, 73, author's emphasis.
56 Ibid, 74.
57 Ashbery, *CP*, 145

He is emphasising a crucial feature also found in Bakhtin's notion of being as "an event that is shared...a simultaneity...always a co-being"[58] but most significant perhaps is the insistence on difference and distance. While the poet and the reader can be brought closer together by inhabiting the poem and making it coincide with their respective spatial-temporal positions, complete convergence in terms of identification should be avoided. In other words, only proximity should be sought after. If the poem is to articulate a sense of self it must first engage with you, that is, "(my)Self" must encounter "(an)Other."

"A Blessing in Disguise" elaborates this need "…to tell/Of this in a way, that knowing you may be drawn to me."[59] Ashbery's verse, therefore, is projective in an alternative way to Olson's theory in that he projects himself into the future of subsequent readings, "beyond [the] you" of the current reading, into "now-heres" yet to be realised, waiting for another reader to inhabit the poem and make it coincide with his/her spatial-temporal position, thereby completing the contraposition of I and other. First and second-person pronouns are integral because they provide the positions to be inhabited by the poet and the reader, "…the chance to know you, to sing of me/Which are you……/…/…you always tell me I am you,/…/I prefer "you" in the plural, I want "you,"/You must come to me." [60] Due to Ashbery's self-displacement as the subject of his poems, the "I" of the poem can be inhabited by the "you" of another person during subsequent readings. There is no singular other to whom the poem is addressed but ""you" in the plural, the innumerable, unknown others who will read the poem in the future. He blames drawing a blank in terms of the pronouns in his poems on not having "a very strong sense of my own self"[61] but there is profound ethical significance to what he is doing. Any sense of self can only be accessed and articulated by engaging with another, the "I" needs "you." But simply acknowledging the importance of outside influence, the uncertainty and ineffability of "you" that challenges the certainty of "I," is no longer sufficient. The outside, the otherness and difference of "(an)Other," must be allowed to inhabit the inside, thereby constituting "(my)Self." Ashbery is uncharacteristically explicit about this in "Clepsydra:"

>   I am
> Not speaking of a partially successful attempt to be
> Opposite; anybody at all can read that page, it has only

---

[58] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 25.
[59] John Ashbery, "A Blessing in Disguise," *CP*, 139.
[60] Ibid.
[61] John Ashbery, "Interview with a Writer," Interviewed by JP O'Malley, *The Spectator*, <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/books/2013/02/interview-with-a-writer-john-ashbery/> Accessed: 24th February 2015.

> To be thrust in front of him. I mean now something much
>   broader,
> The sum total of all the private aspects that can ever
> Become legible in what is outside[62]

"I" and "you" are not mere opposites and his poems are not intended to be read simply as addresses to an unnamed other. That would be too easy. Ashbery's "you" is a source of irreducible otherness because of the "private aspects" inherent in another person, the individual experiences unknown and ultimately unknowable to him that each reader brings to his text:

> I see myself in this totality…
> /…/
> And even this crumb of life I also owe to you
> For being so close as to seal out knowledge of that other
> Voluntary life[63]

In the first explicit indication of a "poethics of proximity" in his work, the first and second-person pronouns are central. The closeness of another person brings what is outside the self inside or put another way, the otherness and difference of "you" constitutes, or gives life to, the "I." Being indebted to another person affirms Levinas' idea of "sensibility" discussed earlier, how subjectivity is this openness toward and subjection to another person, but proximity indicates ethical subjectivity, or intersubjectivity. Proximity is crucial to the poem as event, the occasion for an encounter between the poet and the reader as embodied subjects in different and distant spatial-temporal positions that foregrounds intersubjectivity because the poet is affected by the reader's interpretation and the reader is affected by the poet's composition. In this sense, the poem as event is informed by a "poethics of proximity" because it is a way of and not just about living in the social world of other embodied subjects.

    "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" attests to the poem as an event to be shared. It is a procedural poem: the subject or the object of each sentence is a river and is enjambed so that each line contains one:

> Leaves fall into the Conneticut as it passes
> Underneath. The Liffey is full of sewage,
> Like the Seine, but unlike

---

[62] Ashbery, *CP*, 145.
[63] Ibid.

> The brownish-yellow Dordogne.
> Mountains hem in the Colorado
> And the Oder is very deep, almost
> As deep as the Congo is wide.[64]

However, it also engages with the complex negotiation of presence and absence that results from Ashbery's self-displacement to allow for the placement of another and is, therefore, more than just a taxonomy of rivers because it denies singular authority in favour of multi-centredness. First published in *Locus Solus* in 1962, a journal of experimental poetry edited by Ashbery, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler that contained numerous collaborations between them, it makes the implicit connotations of collaboration within the poem more explicit. The contrapositions of I and other are the value centres involved in the poem as a multi-centred event of collaboration, thus using aesthetic experience to conceptualise an encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" and making a "poethics of proximity" more apparent. Ashbery's poem confirms David Huntsperger's definition of the procedural poem as being characterised by "the tension between volition and constraint."[65] Throughout the first stanza, the procedure is adhered to but he momentarily deviates from it in the second stanza by not including a river in each line and using the second-person pronoun as the subject of the sentence:

>   ...Crested birds
> Watch the Ucalyali go
> Through dreaming night. You cannot stop
> The Yenisei. And afterwards
> /.../
> A particle of mud in the Neckar
> Does not turn it black. You cannot
> Like the Saskatchewan, nor refuse
> The meandering Yangtze, unleash[66]

Ashbery is absent as the subject of the poem because the formal procedure is prioritised over spontaneous composition and expression but is present due to his agency in determining the procedure and in the decisions to either adhere to or deviate from it. A procedural poem "enables prosthetic practices of writing" [67] because the procedure replaces spontaneous

---

[64] John Ashbery, "Into the Dusk-Charged Air, *CP*, 131.
[65] David Huntsperger, *Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry: Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, Hejinian* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 25.
[66] Ashbery, *CP*, 133.
[67] Brian Mc Hale, "Poetry as Prosthesis," *Poetics Today* 21 (2000): 24.

composition while still extending the poet's capability, thereby achieving both absence and presence. The poet's limited vocabulary and the rule of one river per line completely demystify the occasion of writing. Consequently, what seem to matter are the circumstances informing "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" and whether the reader can identify them or not. The unnamed other "cannot stop" the flow of the poem and Ashbery denies the potential for aesthetic value since "you cannot/like" it. A procedural poem epitomises the multi-centredness of collaboration in that it requires the poet to firstly determine a procedure and secondly for the reader to identify it. They require the "response-ability" of the reader to realise it. S/He must identify the procedure in order for it to be a procedural poem, otherwise it is just another conventional free-verse composition. The reader is asked to "retrace...the process of the poem's generation," to not only participate in creating the poem's subject but to also "be conscious of participating." [68] The procedure makes the conditions of the poem's composition immediately discernible and the reader must only identify this procedure in order to understand the circumstances conditioning the poem. Ashbery, therefore, makes the reader acknowledge that the poem's composition is conditioned by unique circumstances that s/he can never change or completely appreciate; they can be identified but will ultimately always be different to and distant from the circumstances informing the reader's interpretation. "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" relies on collaboration between the poet and the reader, making it a multi-centred event in which the interpretation is equally as important as the composition because if the reader does not identify the procedure then it is not a procedural poem.

(3.3) "This Leaving-Out Business" in "The Skaters"

Organised into four sections that, respectively, establish an argument, elucidate through contextualisation, deepen understanding and finally recapitulate, providing an extended meditation on autobiography, and is without the type of disjunctiveness seen already with only a sparing use of collage, "The Skaters" should be a relatively easy, or at least easier, poem to grasp. Such expectations, however, are both anticipated and negated by Ashbery who makes the present and presence the subject of his poem, "calling attention" to the "now heres" of composition and interpretation, which "Isn't the same thing as explaining," [69] that is, not

---

[68] Ibid, 18-19.
[69] Ashbery, "The Skaters," *CP*, 152.

clarifying how the poem was written and how it might be read. "The Skaters" is probably Ashbery's noisiest and most densely populated poem, admitting at the beginning that "These decibels/Are a kind of flagellation, an entity of sound/Into which being enters and is apart."[70] The innumerable intertexts and non-/literary allusions make it difficult to determine who is speaking at any one time, but this sense of other voices being present, or the presence of others, is heightened by Ashbery's "dim intuition that I am that other "I" with which we began."[71] He creates a poem that is "all there and available to the reader," so s/he will "be able to experience the poem without having to refer to outside sources to get the complete experience."[72] In this regard, "The Skaters" confronts us with the complete failure of the reading strategy of selecting key lines and passages, "treating these as interpretative centres around which to organise the [otherwise] heterogeneous materials" and thus reducing the poem "to a skeletal structure of points that yield most readily to a particular interpretative orientation."[73] While there is no way to decide how the poem should be read and, therefore, no single reading will suffice, "there is error/In so much precision,"[74] meaning that paying close attention to decontextualized quotations as the basis for a complete interpretation is how "The Skaters" should not be read, which:

        …is a portion of the subject of this poem
    Which is in the form of falling snow:
    That is, the individual flakes are not essential to the
        importance of the whole's becoming so much of a truism
    That their importance is again called into question, to be
        denied further out, and again and again like this.
    Hence, neither the importance of the individual flake,
    Nor the importance of the whole impression of the storm, if
        it has any[75]

"The Skaters" consists almost entirely of others' voices, it is constitutively informed by the presence of others. Echoing "Some Trees" in the image of a "varied assortment of trees,"[76] "their merely being there/Means something." Ashbery declares that "Everything is trash!"[77]

---

[70] Ibid, 147.
[71] Ibid, 149.
[72] Ashbery, "Craft Interview," 122-123.
[73] Brian Mc Hale, *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 139
[74] Ashbery, "The Skaters," *CP*, 151.
[75] Ibid, 152-153.
[76] Ibid, 153.
[77] Ibid, 150.

like the discarded objects in Cornell and the "garbage" in *TCO*, capable of being (re)made meaningful once a particular type of attention, one not in the service of explanation, is paid to it. The poem makes "a new kind/Of demand" on the reader because it is "not new/In the sense of the next one in an infinite series/But, as it were, pre-existing or pre-seeming,"[78] it complicates the notion of the singular, original poetic utterance and the type of poetic subject this normally gives voice to.

This element of secondhandness points to the business aspect of "The Skaters:"

> This leaving-out business. On it hinges the very importance
>   of what's novel
> Or autocratic, or dense or silly. It is as well to call attention
> To it by exaggeration, perhaps. But calling attention
> Isn't the same thing as explaining…
> /…/
>   …Except to say that the
>   carnivorous
> Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving
> Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we
>   know involves presence, but still.
> Nevertheless these are fundamental absences[79]

Once the presence of other voices is acknowledged, the fundamental absence of Ashbery as the original source of the text is made apparent, he is the "professional exile."[80] Yet this still involves presence in the sense of the selections he has made when writing the poem, what he has paid attention to, such that there is "so much snow, but it is littered with waste and *ashes*,"[81] traces of Ashbery who is absent but also present. His absence allows for a different kind of presence, the presence of others in terms of different voices but also the other "I"s, or eyes, the different perspectives of others who inhabit their unique spatial-temporal position as embodied subjects:

> The figure 8 is a perfect symbol
> Of the freedom to be gained in this kind of activity.
> The perspective lines of the barn are another and different
>   kind of example
> (viz. "Rigg's Farm, near Aysgarth, Wensleydale," or the

---

[78] Ibid, 147.
[79] Ibid, 152.
[80] Ibid, 171.
[81] Ibid, 149, my emphasis.

     "Sketch at Norton")
   In which we escape ourselves – putrefying mass of
     prevarications etc. –
   In remaining close to the limitations imposed.[82]

"Rigg's Farm…" and "Sketch…" suggest landscape paintings, viewing an environment from another person's perspective, but Ashbery reaffirms the sense of absence and presence, "The lines that draw nearer together are said to "vanish."/The point where they meet is their vanishing point."[83] The vanishing point is where the perspectives lines converge and is directly opposite the viewer's eye. Ashbery is clearly punning with "eye" and "I" here, with the contrapositions of the viewer's eye and the vanishing point suggesting the contrapositions of "I" and that other "I," or you. Ashbery seems to be suggesting that rather than continue to create false impressions of how things might be, we can escape our singular perspective by acknowledging that the "limitations [it] impose[s]" are actually opportunities for encounter between "I" and "you," between different and distant perspectives. Phonetically, "I" and "you" are "entit[ies] of sound/Into which being enters, and is apart."[84] Ashbery's self-displacement, therefore, is to allow for the placement of the reader who becomes a part of the poem but remains "apart," different to and distant from the poet because his/her perspective is informed by his/her unique spatial-temporal position.

   Of all the different voices included in "The Skaters," the voyager and "island dweller" Robin Crusoe's is the most important because Ashbery uses it to encourage a particular misreading. Following his description of the desert island in the castaway episode, Part III, of being ""Frei Aber Einsam" (Free but Alone), the ensuing passage appears to be a thinly veiled autobiographical account of his expatriate years in Paris, in a "middle-class apartment" where he "feel[s] cut off from the life in the streets."[85] Some of the most astute Ashbery critics are misled by the juxtaposition between obvious fictional constructions and apparent autobiography. For example, David Lehman reads the poem as a "latter-day equivalent of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*…[offering] a vision of urban alienation, a portrait of a 'professional exile'" that relies on whether or not Ashbery "ever [actually] lived in a slum" or a middle-class apartment;[86] David Shapiro argues that the "snow is not only the snow of evocation and

---

[82] Ibid, 161.
[83] Ibid, 162.
[84] Ibid, 147.
[85] Ibid, 171.
[86] David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1999), 116.

childhood scenes, the farmyard perhaps where Ashbery lived as a child, but also the February snow of the present time of the poem;"[87] and Shoptaw suggests that through the "four chapters, corresponding roughly to the four seasons of childhood, youth, maturity, and old age," a faint autobiographical design can be traced outlining "Ashbery's snowbound childhood in upstate New York, his 'voyage' to Cambridge and New York City, his coming of age in Paris, and an imagined, Prufrockian old age."[88] More specifically, the appeal is to read the passages following his description of the desert island as authentic autobiography after he admits that "In reality of course the middle-class apartment I live in is nothing like a desert island,"[89] suggesting the intertext is intended to correspond with Ashbery's own experiences as an expatriate. An autobiographical reading of "The Skaters" is further encouraged by the proliferation of "disarmingly direct first-person speakers"[90] and Ashbery's insistence that:

> I mean this. Through the years
> You have approached an inventory
> And it is now that tomorrow
> Is going to be the climax of your casual
> Statement about yourself, begun
> So long ago in humility and false quietude.[91]

However, Ashbery is only "calling attention" to the act of autobiography, which "Isn't the same thing as explaining" a particular life, compiling an inventory of the events that constitute a life. Autobiography points to the business aspect of Ashbery's "leaving-out," the need to account for oneself, for the actions one has performed. It is an instance of self-representation but Ashbery's self-displacement to allow for the placement of the reader means it is the reader, the "other I" who must account for him/herself, who must be answerable for his/her interpretation. The content of autobiography is irrelevant, as Ashbery questions "How much of any one of us survives?"[92] but the act itself matters, of authoring a self as the writer and the reader of the poem who must be answerable for the composition and interpretation respectively, thereby suggesting the possibility of authoring a responsive and responsible ethical subject through an

---

[87] David Shapiro, *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York, NY: Coulmbia University Press, 1979), 102.
[88] Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 89.
[89] Ashbery, *CP*, 171.
[90] Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out*, 90.
[91] Ashbery, *CP*, 175.
[92] Ibid, 147.

encounter between the contrapositions of "I" and "you," between "(my)Self" and that "other I," "(an)Other."

(3.4) "Begin[ning] Again:" Reading as Writing in *The Double Dream of Spring*

Developing on the understanding of the poem as an event between the contrapositions of I and other, *DDS* contains numerous references to the idea of dwelling and what Ashbery identifies as "a kind of signature poem," "Soonest Mended" being a "One Size Fits All Confessional Poem" in the style of "what Gertrude Stein called 'everybody's autobiography.'"[93] Similar to adapting the "now-here" of poems in *RM* to the particular circumstances of the poet and reader, Ashbery suggests in *DDS* that his poems can be inhabited, with the result that the occasion of reading becomes equally as important as the occasion of writing because the reader occupies the poem as an embodied subject who must be answerable for his interpretation in the same way the poet is answerable for his initial composition. To this end, the opening poem, "The Task," evokes Stein's 1926 lecture "Composition as Explanation," which proposes that composition is repeatedly reconstituted through subsequent acts of interpretation. Ashbery's opening line, "They are preparing to begin again:"[94] uses the colon to suggest that the poems to follow will serve to explain his version of Stein's approach to composition as interpretation:

> Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing. It is understood by this time that everything is the same except composition and time, composition and the time of the composition and the time in the composition.[95]

Stein's distinction between the "time of" and the "time in" the composition is important because it signals the two occasions of composition, the time of the initial composition by the poet and the time of the reader's composition as s/he interprets the text and makes it coincide with his/her particular circumstances. These two occasions will always be different to and distant from each other because they correspond with the spatial-*temporal* positions inhabited by the poet and the reader. Everything is the same because "nothing changes from generation

---

[93] Ashbery, "In Conversation with John Tranter."
[94] John Ashbery, "The Task," *CP*, 181.
[95] Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla E. Dydo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 497.

to generation except the thing seen" but "what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything."[96] As a material object, the text does not change but how it is seen does, how it is perceived, described and explained, which for Stein *is* the act of composition. Composition as explanation or interpretation occurs in what Robert Duncan identifies in "Rites of Participation" as "between *there* and *here* or *then* and *now*,"[97] a "now here" belonging solely to neither the poet (there and then) nor the reader (here and now) because it is between the spatial-temporal positions they inhabit, a shared space of collaboration. While the text itself does not change, the different spatial-temporal positions inhabited by the poet and the reader make "the thing we are looking at very different and...[this] makes a composition."[98] Extending this logic, my interpretation of the text will be different from any other person's, therefore like the poet, I must be answerable for my composition due to the "fact of my non-alibi in Being" as a reader, that is, no one else can be answerable for it.

    DDS is also "poethic" because how the poems are written and designed to be read constitute a way of living in the real world in accordance with Bakhtin's theory of being as an on-going event that is shared. Stein reaffirms the implicit "poethics" in composition as interpretation:

> the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes living a thing they are doing.[99]

Conflating Bakhtin's notion of performative actions and Stein's idea of composition as interpretation results in the performative act of authoring, which has pronounced "poethical" importance because it refers to both the act of authoring a text and the act of authoring a self through the performance of particular actions for which one is answerable. The classic representative figure of "Everyman"[100] in "The Task" suggests *DDS* has a double function in the form of an allegory that creates the ethical meaning of the collection:

> I plan to stay here a little while
> For these are moments only, moments of insight,

---

[96] Ibid.

[97] Robert Duncan, "Rites of Participation," *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1995), 111, author's emphasis.

[98] Stein, 497.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ashbery, *CP*, 181.

And there are reaches to be attained,[101]

The "one size fits all," or what Ashbery terms character, poems of *DDS* provide "moments of insight" into the event of being using the analogy of authoring, how the poet and the reader can inhabit the space ("here") and time ("a little while") of the poem, writing an embodied subject into existence through the performative act of authoring. A "poethics" is apparent because "they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living."[102] Or put another way, the commitments involved in writing and reading that Ashbery foregrounds make these activities part of everyday living, how we perform actions as embodied subjects for which we are obligated to be answerable, how we encounter others and realise our "response-ability."

"Soonest Mended" specifically provides the "one size fits all" type of poem discussed already. As the title suggests, one primary component of the scenario must be erased so the other can be foregrounded, "~~Least Said,~~ Soonest Mended." Accordingly, Ashbery removes the particulars that would make the poem correspond solely with him as the subject, until it becomes "About [the everyday question shared by everyone of] how to receive this latest piece of information./*Was* it information?…/… [and] our little problems (so they begin to seem),/Our daily quandary about food and the rent and bills to be paid?"[103] In the authentically personal and autobiographical confessional poem, the emphasis is on self-disclosure but, he asks, aren't "we rather acting this out/For someone else's benefit."[104] He further argues how:

> It was still a shock when, almost a quarter of a century later,
> The clarity of the rules dawned on you for the first time.
> *They* were the players, and we who had struggled at the game
> Were merely spectators, though subject to its vicissitudes
> And moving with it out of the tearful stadium,[105]

Self-disclosure according to the standards of confessional poetry is intended to move the reader, to emotionally and/or intellectually affect him/her in a certain way by having him/her identify with the experiences disclosed by the poet. Quite unlike Ashbery's approach,

---

[101] Ibid.
[102] Stein, 497.
[103] John Ashbery, "Soonest Mended," *CP*, 184.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid, 185.

explained in "Years of Indiscretion," where "It's all there./[because] These are things offered to your participation."[106] But as Ashbery suggests:

> This is what you wanted to hear, so why
> Did you think of listening to something else? We are all
>   talkers
> It is true, but underneath the talk lies
> The moving and not wanting to be moved, the loose
> meaning, untidy and simple like a threshing floor.[107]

Communication should not just facilitate uncertainty reduction to reaffirm what is already known since beneath the content is the more important function of communication, the "loose meaning" that is at once simple but apparently disorganised, indeterminate and disrupted, in a word, difficult. The sense of "moving and not wanting to be moved" is similar to the pronounced uncertainty and indecision at the end of the poem, "For this is action, this not being sure, this careless/Preparing…/Making ready to forget, and always coming back/To the mooring of starting out."[108] The compulsion to talk and the attendant need to always begin again make uncertainty and indecision important actions because they suggest not-knowing, or at least demarcate the limits of knowing, resulting in "a kind of fence-sitting/raised to the level of an esthetic ideal" because "meaning could be cast aside some day/When it had been outgrown" and "the promise of learning/Is a delusion."[109] As Ashbery further explains in "For John Clare," "There is/so much to be said, and on the surface of it very little gets said."[110] Instead, "Underneath the talk lies" this not-knowing, therefore, communication refers to something prior to information transference and hermeneutic disclosure. In this sense, the least said the better because what matters is not simply the content of the poem but the occasion it provides. As a "one-size fits all" poem, "The being of our sentences, in the climate that fostered them,/[are] Not ours to own, like a book, but to be with, and sometimes/To be without,"[111] such that "Soonest Mended" *is* "fence-sitting/raised to the level of an ["aesthethic"] ideal" because it is shared between the poet and the reader and functions, as Ashbery explains in "Summer," "just as life is divided up/Between you and me, and among all the others out there."[112] Just as

---

[106] John Ashbery, "Years of Indiscretion," *CP*, 205.
[107] Ashbery, "Soonest Mended," *CP*, 185.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] John Ashbery, "For John Clare," *CP*, 198.
[111] Ashbery, "Soonest Mended," *CP*, 185.
[112] John Ashbery, "Summer," *CP*, 186.

living is an event of co-being, the interactions of embodied subjects, so too the poem is a shared event between the contrapositions of I and other embodied by the poet and the reader as they perform acts of composition and/as interpretation for which they are singularly answerable from the different and distant spatial-temporal positions each inhabits. To reiterate Stein, living, then, "is the composition of the time in which they are living."

(3.5) Ash(es)bery: Absence and/as Presence

Two recurrent ideas in *DDS* make the purpose behind Ashbery's self-displacement as the subject of his poems and his simultaneous effort to encourage the placement of the reader in his stead more apparent. Firstly, "dwelling" appears in a number of different guises, such as the "house, a parting of the ways"[113] in "Song," the "building...on the edge of the street"[114] in "For John Clare," "Popeye's apartment"[115] in "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape," "the great urban centres, with/Their office buildings and populations, at the centre of which/We live our lives"[116] in "French Poems," the "house in which you may wish to live"[117] in "Years of Indiscretion," the "house"[118] in "Parergon" and the "rectangular shapes"[119] in "The Bungalows." In addition, home also refers to a place of dwelling and belonging, as in "Soonest Mended," "the avatars/Of our conforming to the rules and living/Around the home have made – well, in a sense, "good citizens of us;"[120] in "Variations, Calypso and Fugue on a Theme of Ella Wheeler Wilcox," "Now that once again I have achieved home/I shall forbear all further urge to roam;"[121] and in "Definition of Blue," "the permanent tug that used to be its notion of 'home.'"[122] However, Ashbery is "a vigorously homeless poet…[who] tracks the mental journey of our search for home even though he is less than confident that such thinking is enough to summon us into dwelling."[123] The numerous places of inhabitation mentioned in *DDS* are not dwellings per se, they are not intended as places that engender familiarity and

---

[113] John Ashbery, "Song," *CP*, 195.
[114] Ashbery, *CP*, 198.
[115] John Ashbery, "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape," *CP*, 206.
[116] John Ashbery, "French Poems," *CP*, 201.
[117] John Ashbery, "Years of Indiscretion," *CP*, 205.
[118] John Ashbery, "Parergon," *CP*, 213.
[119] Ashbery, *CP*, 224.
[120] Ashbery, *CP*, 186.
[121] Ashbery, *CP*, 191.
[122] John Ashbery, "Definition of Blue," *CP*, 211.
[123] Bonnie Costello, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 177.

identification with all the negative connotations of being *in*-habit, which explains the second recurring feature of the collection. There are numerous references to limits, such as "the barriers of that other"[124] in "Spring Day;" "living on the margin"[125] in "Soonest Mended;" "growing in that knowledge/We may perhaps remain here, cautious yet free/On the edge"[126] in "Evening in the Country;" the "margins that care and are swept up again like branches/Into actual closeness"[127] in "Sunrise in Suburbia;" the "thresholds/Above the tide of others"[128] in "The Bungalows;" and the "central perimeter/Our imagination's orbit, Other words"[129] in "Fragment;" as well as what potentially occurs there, such as occasions of "closeness"[130] in "Song," of sociability in "The Chateau Hardware," "And turning out the way I am, turning out to greet you,"[131] and of contact in "Sortes Vergilianae," "It is the nature of these people to embrace each other."[132]

Ashbery's concurrent emphases on places of inhabitation and the function of limits as places of potential contact, closeness and sociability suggest *DDS* is concerned with the potential when inhabiting such limits. If difficulty marks the furthest reach of poetic meaning, then it too signals a limit, a place of potential contact, closeness and sociability. The difficulty of this collection derives from the momentariness of meaning, how it provides "moments only…of insight" as Ashbery eschews certainty, preferring to reduce the immediate relevance of meaning in favour of deferring it further since the poems are ultimately going to change, "Tomorrow would alter the sense of what had already been learned/That the learning process is extended in this way, so that from this standpoint/None of us ever graduates from college."[133] This is intended to make the reader aware that s/he is constantly reaching the limit of meaning, as he explains in "The Bungalows:"

> For only you could watch yourself so patiently from afar
> /…/
>   …always *on the way*,
> For it all builds up into something, meaningless or
>   meaningful
> As architecture, because planned and then abandoned when

---

[124] John Ashbery, "Spring Day," *CP*, 183.
[125] Ashbery, *CP*, 184.
[126] John Ashbery, "Evening in the Country," *CP*, 197-198.
[127] John Ashbery, "Sunrise in Suburbia," *CP*, 210.
[128] Ashbery, *CP*, 224.
[129] Ibid, 232.
[130] John Ashbery, "Song," *CP*, 195.
[131] John Ashbery, "The Chateau Hardware," *CP*, 226.
[132] John Ashbery, "Sortes Vergilianae," *CP*, 227.
[133] Ashbery, "Soonest Mended," *CP*, 186.

> completed,
> To live afterwards, in sunlight and shadow, a certain amount
>   of years.
> Who cares what was there before? There is no going
>   back,[134]

The effect on the reader is that s/he is at the limit of meaning, "Waiting for something to be over before [s/he] is forced to notice it."[135] Using the almost pastoral idyll of "Growing up under the shade of friendly trees, with our/brothers all around" in "Variations, Calypso and Fugue…," Ashbery immediately dismisses any rooted sense of belonging by admitting that "all good things must come to an end, and so one must move forward/Into the space left by one's conclusions."[136] Stasis is denied as the poet moves beyond his conclusions into uncertainty, on to an*other* different topic:

> …I can tell you all
> About freedom that has turned into a painting;
> The other is more difficult, though prompt – in fact
> A little too prompt: therein lies the difficulty.[137]

Poems that consistently confront the reader with the limits of meaning, whether it is deferred further or denied because the poem will inevitably change, have the constant effect of "begin[ning] again," or as he phrases it in "Sunrise in Suburbia:"

> A blank chart of each day moving into the premise of difficult
>   visibility
> And which is nowhere, the urge to nowhere,
> To retract that statement, sharply, within the next few
>   minutes.
> For it is as though it turns you back,[138]

Despite his committed self-displacement as the autobiographical subject of his poems in *RM* and *DDS*, we still encounter Ashbery but as an absent presence; the "Ashes" O'Hara uses to refer to him in "At the Old Place" suggests the remains of either a physical body or the remnants

---

[134] Ashbery, *CP*, 225-226.
[135] Ashbery, "For John Clare," *CP*, 199.
[136] Ashbery, *CP*, 190.
[137] Ashbery, "Fragment," *CP*, 240.
[138] Ashbery, *CP*, 209.

of a tangible object no longer present. Ashbery is present in "The Skaters" in *RM*, "And so much snow, but it is to be littered with waste and ashes,"[139] and in "Rural Objects," "Mountain ash mindlessly dropping berries: to whom is all this?"[140] in *DDS*. However, the dichotomy of absence and presence, or an absence that allows for different kind of presence, differentiates him from the other prominent example of self-displacement in innovative American poetry of the period, Olson's "Projective Verse." While Ashbery's attitude toward reading as a further act of writing reaffirms Olson's practice of "composing as though verse was to have the reading its writing involved" and both consider poetry a way of living in the real world because it "involves a stance toward reality outside a poem as well as a new stance towards the reality of the poem itself,"[141] Ashbery's "leaving out business" is more radical than that theorised in Olson's "Projective Verse" as the "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego."[142] The individual might be displaced from the poem as ego but the poet projects himself into it instead as a physiological presence through the dictates of breath. Darren Wershler-Henry reveals how the typewriter is key to Olson, "functioning as a tool [or prosthetic device] with which to restore to both the writer and reader the sense of the poet's presence in this finished work, a presence [normally] stripped away by the conversion of manuscript to the printed page."[143] Due to its immediacy, the typewriter makes accurate notation possible, recording "exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases which [the poet] intends."[144] Because the breath of the poet determines the typographical arrangement of the poem on the page, s/he also "indicate[s] how [s/]he would want any reader, silent or otherwise, to voice his[/her] work."[145] This is quite at odds with Ashbery's "one size fits all" poetry. While he might confess to writing in Olson's style, "It's nothing that [he's] ever codified into a practice,"[146] the purpose behind his self-displacement is to encourage the placement of the reader as he uses "fundamental absences" to allow for a different type of presence, unlike Olson, whose presence is inscribed according to the principles of "Projective Verse."

---

[139] Ibid, 149.
[140] John Ashbery, "Rural Objects," *CP*, 204.
[141] Olson, "Projective Verse," 246.
[142] Ibid, 247.
[143] Darren Wershler-Henry, *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 169.
[144] Olson, "Projective Verse," 245.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ashbery, "Craft Interview," 125.

In "Definition of Blue," Ashbery provides his most explicit statement about the treatment of the individual in modern poetry, or poetry since "the close of the nineteenth century,"[147] arguing that:

> In our own time, mass practices have sought to submerge the
>   personality
> By ignoring it, which has caused it instead to branch out in all
>   directions[148]

According to this logic, Olson's "projective verse," characterised by the "one steady, intense line,"[149] would be a continuation of such "mass practices" since the absence of the individual as ego means it is present in an even more immediate form. Despite the radical formal innovations of the period, "there is no point in looking to imaginative new methods/Since all of them are in constant use," they amount to little more than "'packaging'" for Ashbery.[150] Ashbery practices the "imaginative new methods" but pushes "them further"[151] to achieve something altogether more radical: an absence that allows for a different type of presence, the presence of "(an)Other:"

> …erosion produces a kind of dust or exaggerated pumice
> Which fills space and transforms it, becoming a medium
> In which it is possible to recognise oneself.[152]

Gradually eroding himself as the subject of his poems still results in ashes, the dust or pumice. Complete self-disclosure is precluded but self-articulation, writing a self into existence, is still possible once the poet commits to being only an absent presence, "being hidden and present."[153] Pre-empting what will become a central tenet when he investigates the fundamental ethical commitments involved in acts of self-representation in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," he insists that completed representations of the self deny poetry's value as a way of living in the real world:

---

[147] Ashbery, *CP*, 211.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid, 212.

> Each new diversion adds its accurate touch to the ensemble,
>   and so
> A portrait, smooth as glass, is built up out of multiple
>   corrections
> And it has no relation to the space and time in which it was
>   lived.[154]

For poetry to be considered amongst the other activities of living, for it to be informed by the temporal-spatial circumstances of the poet during its composition and of the reader during its interpretation, completion, accuracy and improvement must be eschewed in favour of incompletion, indeterminacy and misunderstanding, which leave the poem open for subsequent readers to make it fit their particulars and encounter the poet as "(an)Other who is not and cannot be known. The result? The opportunity to "begin again," to "Waken each morning to the exact value of what you did and said, which remains."[155] Ashbery is absent but he is still answerable for what "remains," for what he "did and said."

"Rural Objects" is an example of a "poethics of proximity." Most importantly, it demonstrates how despite his committed self-displacement, we still encounter Ashbery when we read his text:

> Mountain ash mindlessly dropping berries: to whom is all
>   this?
> I tell you, we are being called back
>
> For having forgotten these names
> For forgetting our proper names, for falling like nameless
>   things
> On unfamiliar slopes. To be seen again, churlishly into life,
> Returning,[156]

The reader is "called back" to the poem where s/he encounters "ash...berr[y]" as an absence "which as we/know involves presence." Writing poems that are potentially everybody's autobiography are not intended to allow the reader to identify the poet according to his proper name. Similarly, Ashbery does not attempt to predetermine who his reader will be. Instead, the poems are about returning, turning back to the former position, to the "first philosophy," that

---

[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid, 204.

is constitutive of his "poethics of proximity," the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" in the poem as event.

Conclusion: Giving All Our Attention to You

In *RM* and *DDS*, Ashbery gives his readers "moments only" but this is not so much occasional poetry as it is an occasion in itself, an event that momentarily posits different individuals *in* common and where the poet and the reader can potentially encounter each other. In "The Poem as Event," Louise Rosenblatt suggests the reader is "engaged in a creative process at once intensely personal, since the poem is something lived through, and intensely social, since the text…can be shared with others."[157] Her emphasis on the lived experience of the text, which includes both the author's *and* the reader's creative activities, was intended to remedy the sterility of new critical orthodoxy. While New Criticism initially provided a counter to "irresponsibile impressionism and dogmatic subjectivity" [158] as they informed particular reading methods, it ultimately went too far by ignoring the reader's potential contribution altogether and insisting on an impersonal and objective approach to the text. For Rosenblatt, the poem must be "thought of as an event in time [and space]…an occurrence, a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text…[and this] encounter gives rise to a new experience, a poem."[159] This sense of encounter is not merely textual, however, because it involves the experience of proximity to another person, to the poet as someone who is present and absent, which becomes part of the reader's lived experiences. It is significant, therefore, in both its aesthetic and its ethical capacity. One way Ashbery thinks we can "begin again" is, as he explains in "Spring Day," to give "all our attention to you,"[160] to turn our attention to the "other 'I' with which we began" and confirm our heteronomic as opposed to our autotelic subjectivity, to give primacy to others rather than "(my)Self." For him this involves turning toward the other "I's" of the readers whereas for the reader it requires approaching Ashbery as an "other I," as "(an)Other," who can be encountered but never properly comprehended.

---

[157] Louise M. Rosenblatt, "The Poem as Event," *College English* 26 (1964): 126.
[158] Ibid, 127.
[159] Ibid, 126.
[160] Ashbery, *CP*, 183.

Chapter 4: "The Pragmatic and Kinetic Future" in *Three Poems* and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"

Refusing to posit the poem as an object separating the poet and the reader and instead configuring it as an event of potential encounter involving the contrapositions of "I" and "you" as different and distant subjects means Ashbery correlates poetic practice with a philosophy, or more specifically an ethics, of everyday living. In *TP* and the eponymous poem in *SPCM*, Ashbery articulates an ethics of the creative act, an ethics of writing and reading poetry that is readily transmissible to the commitments involved in living in the social world of others as an ethical subject. In doing so, he, firstly, affirms the centrality of "poetic making" [or poiesis] as an "activity…to the pragmatist sense of what meaning is"[1] and, secondly, exposes the pragmatic aspects of Levinas' phenomenological ethics that make it particularly suited to conceptualising a "poethics of proximity" as enacting a way of, not just expressing or representing a potential way of, living in the social world of others.

(4.1) A Pragmatic Conversation

It is important to remember that *TP* was Ashbery's first collection written entirely in America following his return from Paris in 1965. While the immediate pressures exerted by the strategies of containment and discourses of consensus associated with the early Cold War period were probably less apparent, their residual effects were undoubtedly still palpable in the form of heightened surveillance and the backlashes against feminist and sexual equality movements. One area in particular where the intellectual effects of the Cold War were more readily apparent was the country's "best-known and most widely disseminated philosophical tradition, pragmatism."[2] From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey and John Herbert Mead utilised the "disestablishment impulse in American culture"[3] and the principle of uncertainty in Transcendentalism to create an anti-foundationalist philosophy as an alternative for those

---

[1] Kristen Case, *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 18.

[2] Douglas Anderson, "Peirce and Pragmatism: American Connections," *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39.

[3] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 89.

disillusioned with absolutist philosophies. However, a philosophy arguing against the absolute, transcendental value of truths so that its practitioners could attend to what Dewey called the "problems of [wo/]men"[4] was marginalised because the "Cold war in general, and Mc Carthyism in particular, produced strong institutional incentives for academics in the United States to retreat from the public sphere and adopt more insular concerns and methodologies."[5] Despite, or perhaps even because of, this situation, pragmatism provides Ashbery with the means of articulating an ethics of writing and reading poetry as a way of living in the social world of others and gesturing toward a future beyond the Cold War logic of containment and consensus he has insistently resisted since *ST*. Most important to understanding why Ashbery might be attracted to American pragmatism in his attempt to realise a "poethics of proximity" is the centrality placed on the performed act in this indigenous philosophy. According to the pragmatist maxim first formulated by Peirce, "the meanings of hard words and abstract concepts"[6] can only be ascertained by considering the practical consequences of them. For Peirce, the pragmatist should "consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the objects of our perception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object."[7] Or put another way, the consequences of our thoughts and perceptions can only be identified when they are put into action through practical application. Mead advances a corresponding proposition in his pragmatist world view, where (self-)awareness is only possible by acting in what he terms a "problematic situation," the occurrence of conflicting tendencies to act. This "situation [is] the source of consciousness," awareness of oneself as an embodied subject in a particular environment, because "it is only when we are confronted with a problem that inhibits our action that we become aware of the world in which we live."[8]

For both Peirce and Mead, meaning requires putting our thoughts and perceptions into action in a particular environment. Yet it is not just that meaning is related to consequences but that action itself, or the performed act, is at the centre of how we understand the world outside us, the others who inhabit it and our position within it. Dewey supplements this pragmatic theory of meaning with his more instrumentalist approach to pragmatism in the form of a specific method of inquiry that suggests learning is always experimental. For him, pragmatism

---

[4] John Dewey, *The Problems of Men* (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1946), 4.
[5] Robert Talisse, "Pragmatism and the Cold War," *The Oxford Handbook to American Philosophy*, 255.
[6] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers Volume 5: Pragmatism and Pragmaticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 464.
[7] Ibid, 402.
[8] Cornelis De Waal, "A Pragmatist World View: George Herbert Mead's Philosophy of the Act," *Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, 147.

"inevitably turn[s] out persons who [are] alive to the necessity of continually testing their ideas and their beliefs by putting them into practical application."[9] Consequently, philosophical inquiry must "necessarily [contain] a *practical* factor, an activity of doing and making which reshapes antecedent intellectual material which sets the problem of inquiry."[10] The objects of inquiry are created and manipulated through experiment because the inquirer actively intervenes in rather than merely represents the world. A pragmatic method of inquiry is not simply concerned with altering how we view the social world of others and our position within it but with irreversibly changing how we might act in and interact with it.

Peirce's theory of meaning and Dewey's method of inquiry lead to practical, or pragmatic, intelligence, which "involves the creative construction of new values."[11] Most importantly, there is an implied ethics that makes it particularly relevant to Ashbery's "poethics of proximity." Because pragmatic intelligence requires that our thoughts and perceptions are made actual through performed acts so their practical consequences can be ascertained, it necessitates acting in the social world outside us and interacting with those others who inhabit it. A particular ethical commitment is involved since the consequences of one's acts are seldom limited to one's own perspective. Mead explains this fact using the "principle of sociality," the capacity for an action to be "multiple [different] things at once" because when it is experienced from "other perspectives [it is] set into new contexts."[12] This principle is also important to approaching the poem as event. Rather than being seen as an object that is distorted by the different perspectives considering it, it is actually constituted as the occasion of multiple perspectives encountering each other. Posited as an event as opposed to an object, the poem allows for the exercise of pragmatic intelligence in that it "liberate[s]…action" by "project[ing] new and more complex ends."[13] Rather than being restricted to pre-formed and fixed ends, pragmatic intelligence "develops within the sphere of action for the sake of possibilities not yet given…[and is] inherently forward-looking."[14] Since the poem requires the performed acts of the reader to make it actual, it is inherently oriented toward the "pragmatic…future."[15]

---

[9] John Dewey, "The Bearings of Pragmatism upon Education," *The Middle Works, 1899-1924: Volume 4, 1907-1909*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 188.
[10] John Dewey, "Logic: The Theory of Inquiry," *The Later Works, 1925-1953: Volume 12, 1938*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 162.
[11] Matthew Festenstein, "John Dewey: Inquiry, Ethics, and Democracy," *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, 103.
[12] De Waal, 151.
[13] John Dewey, The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy." *The Middle Works, 1899-1924: Volume 10, 1916-1917*. ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 45.
[14] Ibid, 43.
[15] John Ashbery, "The System," *CP*, 317.

Being "forward looking" means being oriented toward uncertainty and the unknown in the sense of possibilities not yet realised *and* toward another person with whom I interact with through my actions. Conversation, the act of communicating, is not about uncertainty reduction, however, quite the contrary in fact. It provides the opportunity to put one's thoughts and perceptions into action by interacting with another person and determining their consequences depending on how that person responds to them. In terms of a poem, this other person is unknown and ultimately unknowable, s/he is "(an)Other," an absence that permits a different kind of presence through the performance of actions by the poet and the reader for which each is answerable. As will be seen, Ashbery's orientation toward the "pragmatic…future" addresses the central pragmatist question: "how we should go from present practice to a future practice."[16] Approaching the poem as an event, a conversation between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other," highlights the practical applicability of Ashbery's "poethics," how the meaning of his texts consist of their consequences for subsequent experience, their capacity to be put into action as the poet and the reader author, and in doing so enact, their ethical subjectivity.

While Levinas could never be considered a pragmatist along the lines of Peirce, Dewey, et al, his approach to ethics is resolutely pragmatic. In *TI*, he uses the everyday, concrete experience of the "face-to-face" encounter that occurs during conversation to delineate an ethics founded on proximity between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other." Levinas is primarily concerned with what he terms "the calling into question of the same by the other."[17] For him, "the strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity [my ability to act without premeditation and uninhibitedly], as ethics."[18] Therefore, "the relation between the same and the other is not always reducible to knowledge of the other to the same."[19] A conversation between two people perfectly captures his pragmatic, inherently dialogic, ethics, the "*face to face approach, in conversation*."[20] Because I cannot completely comprehend the content of another person's consciousness, because I can never understand another person's perspective entirely, s/he is "(an)Other," inaccessible to me and outside my understanding, intentionality

[16] Cheryl Misak, "The Reception of Early American Pragmatism," *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, 220.
[17] Levinas, *TI*, 43.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid, 28.
[20] Ibid, 71, author's emphasis.

and control, or as Levinas puts it, "over him[/her] I have no power. [S/]He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension."[21]

For Levinas, this discursive relation with "(an)Other" constitutes ethical subjectivity. While a poem can never be considered a literal conversation, Levinas modifies his claim by suggesting discourse, the communication of thoughts and perceptions by words as in conversation, is "an original relation with exterior being"[22] and consequently "the first ethical gesture."[23] Therefore, poetic discourse can be taken as an example of a conversation between at least two different people because its language "presupposes interlocutors, a plurality."[24] Ashbery's poetry, founded on absence to allow for a different kind of presence, adheres to Levinas' view that "language precisely maintains the other – to whom it is addressed, whom it calls upon or invokes."[25] The "other called upon is not something represented, is not a given, is not a particular" which is why "language institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation."[26] As in language, therefore, the reader as "(an)Other" to the poet is absent in the sense that s/he is located in the future as someone yet to read the poem and the poet as "(an)Other" to the reader is absent because he is displaced as the subject (matter) of the poem. As Levinas explains:

> The *who* involved in activity is not *expressed* in the activity, is not *present*, does not attend his own manifestation, but is simply signified in it by a sign in a system of signs, that is, as a being who is manifested precisely as absent from his manifestation: a manifestation in the absence of being – a phenomenon.[27]

To speak, to engage in conversation with another person or to perform the acts of composition and interpretation as in poetic discourse, is "to make the world common, to create commonplaces" by laying "the foundations for a possession in common."[28] In *TP* and "SPCM," Ashbery articulates an ethics of writing and reading poetry that confirms Levinas' insistence that "only in approaching the Other [do] I attend to myself."[29] Only by approaching the reader as "(an)Other" can the poet attain self-consciousness as an ethical poet. Similarly, only by

---

[21] Ibid, 39.
[22] Ibid, 66.
[23] Ibid, 174.
[24] Ibid, 73.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, 178, author's emphasis.
[28] Ibid, 76.
[29] Ibid, 178.

approaching the poet as "(an)Other" can the reader achieve self-consciousness as an ethical reader. In the act of communication, understood as either conversation or poetic discourse, "I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of response…engenders me for responsibility."[30] The face-to-face encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" Ashbery achieves in *TP* and "SPCM" *is* proximity, the actualisation of intersubjectivity as the poet and the reader interact with one another as embodied subjects during the event of the poem, responding to each other as others and, therefore, realising their ethical subjectivity in a pragmatic manner. However, his poetics of proximity are radically "poethic," that is, they are readily transmissible into how one lives in the social world of others as an ethical subject because of their practical applicability. In an interesting way, Ashbery's return to America results in a poetry of return, of returning to America's indigenous philosophy and a return to, or a turning toward, the other in conversation, the event of communication that is proximity.

(4.2) Ashbery's "Whether System" in *Three Poems*

TP begins with Ashbery dealing with a very practical situation that is crucial to his decision to compose a collection consisting of three poems exclusively in prose:

> I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.
>
>   clean-washed sea
>   The flowers were.
>
> These are examples of leaving out. But, forget as we will, something soon comes to stand in their place. Not the truth, perhaps, but – yourself. It is you who made this, therefore you are true.[31]

Despite the impression that prose somehow includes more details or information than poetry, a sense heightened by Ashbery literally covering each page with words so that "everything and everybody were included after/all, and any thought that might ever be entertained about

---

[30] Ibid.

[31] John Ashbery, "The New Spirit," *CP*, 247.

them,"[32] *TP* is fundamentally informed by the same "leaving out business" identified in the two previous collections. The omission of explicit autobiographical correspondences and extratextual references means "putting it all down" is still an example "of leaving [it all] out," an absence that allows for a different type of presence, the presence of "you" or "(an)Other." What differentiates *TP* from earlier examples of prose poetry in Ashbery's oeuvre, such as "The Young Son" in *ST* and "Variations, Calypso and Fugue…" and "For John Clare" in *DDS*, is his emphasis on poiesis, the creative act of making poetry. Ashbery's decision to write *TP* in prose is also integral to the ethics of writing and reading poetry he advances for two reasons. Firstly, the prose poem "aspires to be poetic/literary language's own coming to self-consciousness, the place where poet and reader alike become critically aware of the writer's language."[33] Arriving at self-consciousness in the prose poem suggests that poiesis in *TP* is as much about the making of poetry as it is about making the self, how a particular type of subject is authored in the acts of writing and reading this poem. Secondly, in his study *The New Sentence*, Ron Silliman charts the meaning of "prose" and "verse" back to their shared root, "*proversus*, the past participle of *provertere*, meaning 'to turn towards,'" so that the "single Latin verb lies at the etymological root of both [words]…, verse coming from the root which meant 'to turn' and prose from 'towards.'"[34] The prose poem, therefore, is founded on the action of "turning toward" and is inherently suited to arriving at self-consciousness, understood as being oriented towards "(an)Other" who questions "(my)Self" and obligates a response. Consequently, if *TP* is to be read as a creative act involving the contrapositions of I and other, or as a conversation between the poet and the reader, it is not due to the reductive proposal that prose is more dialogic than poetry but rather because of the fundamental action of "turning toward" that the prose poem is etymologically founded upon.

The choice Ashbery posits between "put[ting] it all down" and "leaving [it all] out" is equally, if not more, important to how the poem is read as it is to how the poem was written. Standard methods of analysis are consistently precluded because any attempt to substantiate a specific interpretation with a relevant quotation is problematised by Ashbery, for example:

> It's just beginning. Now it's started to work again. The visita-
> tion, was it more or less over. No, it had not yet begun, except
> as a preparatory dream which seemed to have the rough tex-

---

[32] Ibid, 278.

[33] Jonathan Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 35-36.

[34] Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence*, (New York, NY: Roof Books, 2003), 97.

ture of life, but which dwindled into starshine like all the un-
wanted memories.[35]

TP is intended to engender a very particular reading *experience*. The "truer way" of "leaving
[it all] out" refers to how the collection should be experientially engaged with rather than just
hermeneutically analysed in terms of its content, how as an:

>   …intervening space [it] now came
> to advance toward us separately, a wave of music which we
> were, unable to grasp it as it unfolded but living it[36]

As a "self-critical," even self-reflexive, genre, the prose poem has "genre-testing potential"
because it "consists in speaking of genre not as a given 'thing' but as the expression of a
relationship between a reader and a text."[37] The genre of Ashbery's *Three [Prose] Poems*
expresses the immersive relationship between the reader and the text. Its length, density,
consistency of tone and complete dissolution of poetic form creates a "much more – I hate to
say environmental [type of poetry] because it's a bad word – but more of a surrounding."[38] For
all that is said in *TP*, a lot remains unsaid; so much so that it is best approached in terms of the
experience that reading it engenders, than in terms of its teleological meaning. In arguing that
Ashbery creates "a surrounding," I am subscribing to Angus Fletcher's definition of
environmental poems, where the poet writes neither about the surrounding world nor
analytically represents that world but actually shapes the poem to surround the reader, "such
that to read them is to have an experience much like suddenly recognising that one actually has
an environment, instead of not perceiving that surround at all."[39] Ashbery's "whether system"
requires a different kind of attention, so the text can be "something new. Outside, can't you
hear it, the traffic, the trees, everything getting nearer. To/end up with, inside each other."[40]
The environmental poem collapses any distinction between text and context until it becomes a
lived space that functions as an analogue for desirable social circumstances not yet achieved,

---

[35] Ashbery, *CP*, 249.
[36] Ashbery, "The New Spirit," *CP*, 270.
[37] Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), 12.
[38] Ashbery, "Craft Interview," 126.
[39] Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 9.
[40] Ashbery, "The New Spirit," *CP*, 248.

somewhere "One may at least stay…a while hoping for more and better things to come."[41] *TP* is staged as both a lecture, for example, Ashbery's explanation of the difference between frontal and latent happiness in "The System" (293-304), and a performance, as suggested in the closing statement:

> …The performance had ended, the audience streamed out; the applause still echoed in the empty hall. But the idea of the spectacle as something to be acted out and absorbed still hung in the air long after the last spectator had gone home to sleep.[42]

Approaching the collection as a performative lecture highlights a further correlation with Cage but in an entirely different manner than the "Aesthetics of Indifference" discussed in *ST*. If Cage's performative lecturers reveal how "silence [is always] already filled with noises," Ashbery's text provides noise already filled with silences. What matters for Cage and Ashbery is the activity of paying attention itself, engendering self-consciousness during the experience of listening and reading in order to realise a "poethics," a way of living in the real world as a responsive and responsible ethical subject.

In his "Lecture on Something" (1949), Cage professes his non-dualistic sensibility, which views sound and silence, nothing and something, and perhaps most importantly, composer and spectator, as unopposed rather than components of an oppositional hierarchy that implicitly privileges one over the other. He describes his lecture as "a talk about something and naturally a talk about nothing. About how something and nothing are not opposed to each other but need each other to keep on going."[43] He also defines poetry in his "Lecture on Nothing" as having "nothing to say…[and] saying it" because "words help make the silences," comparing it to "an empty glass into which at any moment anything may be poured. As we go along."[44] His silent composition *4'33"* puts his theory of poetry into musical practice, demonstrating how "in the dualistic sense of sound versus silence, there was no silence…only intended and

---

[41] Ashbery, "The System," *CP*, 306.
[42] Ashbery, "The Recital," *CP*, 326.
[43] John Cage, "Lecture on Something," *Silence: Lectures and Writing* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2011), 129.
[44] John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," *Silence: Lecture and Writing*, 109.

unintended sounds." [45] Like Cage's similarly immersive performances and lectures, *TP* necessitates a different kind of attention:

> …Suddenly you realize that you have been talking for a long time without lis-tening to yourself; you must have said *it* a long way back with-out knowing it…
> …Now there is so much to talk about that it seems neither of you will ever get done talking. And the word that everything hinged on is buried back there; by mutual consent neither of you examined it when it was pro-nounced and rushed to its final resting place[46]

Both seem to advocate that we simply listen (to) ourselves, that we become self-conscious of ourselves as listeners by paying attention to how and to what we listen to. Cage makes the performance of his silent composition dependent on listening, thereby transposing "the performance onto the audience members both in their utterances and the acts of shifting their attention to other sounds."[47] *4'33"* is both nothing *and* something, an occasion of what Liz Kotz identifies as Cage's "self-effacing desubjectivisation"[48] so the audience can pay attention to what is normally categorised as the others of music: noise and silence. *4'33"*, therefore, is a performative site because paying attention to noise and silence in the context of a formal musical composition radically and irrevocably changes the meaning of each term.

It might seem a misnomer to discuss what is without doubt the best example of Ashbery "put[ting] it all down," his attempt to "include everything: the furniture of this room, everyday ex-/pressions, as well as [his] rarest thoughts and dreams,"[49] in terms of what remains unsaid, what is excluded and silenced, but this highlights the necessary difficulty of his "whether system." Like Cage, he "dismantle[s] dualistic separations"[50] by shifting attention to what is normally considered other to expose the profound interdependence between apparent oppositions. Ashbery and Cage both demonstrate how possibilities exist other than those currently being practised by reorienting our attention toward what is normally considered other.

---

[45] Christopher Shultis, "Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the Intentionality of Nonintention," *The Musical Quarterly* 79 (1995): 317.
[46] Ashbery, "The System," *CP*, 310.
[47] Douglas Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," *The Musical Quarterly* 81 (1997): 560.
[48] Liz Kotz, *Words To Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 108.
[49] Ashbery, "The New Spirit," *CP*, 254.
[50] Shultis, 323.

Ashbery enacts how things might be using the concrete, everyday encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" that occurs during conversation in the lived space Levinas terms proximity. Retallack's entire concept of "poethics" derives from a similar capacity she identifies in Cage, what she terms an "aesthetic pragmatics of everyday life."[51] By relying on both sound and silence, Cage creates a "whether system," a "terminal either/or complementarity" in which it is "conceptually…impossible to take in both possibilities at the same time, since each one is in part constituted by the functional absence of the other."[52] The dualism of such a "whether system" is similar to that created by Ashbery's competing options to either "put it all down" or "to leave [it] all out." While ultimately irresolvable, it nevertheless demonstrates the powerful role of the reader "to determine the way in which at any given time it's to be read."[53] *TP* is necessarily difficult, therefore, because of what it asks of the reader, "getting down to business, or back to the business of day-/to-day living with all the tiresome mechanical problems that/this implies" when "philosophy [has] broke[n] down/completely and [is] of no use" and the "new situ-/ations that arise each day…re-/sist categorization to the point where any rational attempt to/deal with them is doomed from the start."[54] The situation confronting us has not become more complex, it:

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

                    has prob-
ably been with you always; now it has a different name and a
different curriculum vitae; its qualities are combined in such a
way as to seem different from all that has gone before, but ac-
tually it is the same old surprise that you have always lived with.[55]

</div>

The difficulty is "the business of day-to-day living," the obligation to realise one's "response-ability" as an embodied, ethical subject by choosing and remaining answerable for that choice, which requires "the ability to enter into the complexities of/the situation as though it really weren't new at all."[56] His "aesthetic pragmatics of everyday life" return back to the "first philosophy" Bakhtin and Levinas pursue. Parodying Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," "You discovered/that there was a fork in the road, so first you followed what/seemed to be the

---

[51] Joan Retallack, *Musicage:Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xx.
[52] Retallack, "Poethics of a Complex Realism," 216.
[53] Ibid.
[54] John Ashbery, "The System, *CP*, 304.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid, 304-305.

less promising…the more obvi-/ous, of the two branches" before returning to "investigate the tangled/way,"[57] Ashbery accordingly dismisses the supposedly different choices available to us:

>   …And in so
> doing you began to realize that the two branches were joined
> together again, farther ahead; that this place of joining was in-
> deed the end, and that it was the very place you set out from,
> whose intolerable mixture of reality and fantasy had started
> you on the road which is now come full circle.[58]

Like the impetus to "begin again" in *DDS*, Ashbery is being intentionally anti-teleological here, elsewhere comparing *TP* to the system of prose writing, to:

>   …the clear, compact shape
> of the plot of a novel, with all its edges and inner passages laid
> bare for the reader, to be resumed and resumed over and over,
> that is taken up and put aside and take up again.[59]

What matters is the capacity to choose rather than the choices themselves as he provides the opportunity to realise one's "response-ability" instead of delineating a set of prescribed responses, so *TP* remains "a permanent medium in which we are lost, since/becoming robs it of its potential."[60] The "whether system" creates "the impression of a climate in which nothing/can go wrong, including the major question that revolves/around you, your being here."[61] Because each option is equally valid, there is no right or wrong response, and by extension, no correct interpretation. *TP* is a performative site, "a time of doing…an active time,"[62] in which the poet and the reader can realise their "response-ability" by responding to the question posed to them by the presence of "(an)Other." As Ashbery explains:

>   …At that point one must, yes, be selective, but not selec-

---

[57] Ibid, 306.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid, 316.
[60] Ashbery, "The New Spirit," *CP*, 253.
[61] Ibid, 280.
[62] Ibid, 248.

tive in one's choices, if you see what I mean. Not choose this or
that because it pleases, merely to assume the idea of choosing,
so that some things can be left behind. It doesn't matter which
ones. I could tell you about some of the things I've discarded
but that wouldn't help you because you must choose your own,
or rather not choose them but let them be inflicted on and off
you.[63]

TP reduces writing and reading poetry to their most basic and, consequently, their most difficult

fundamentals. Confronted with innumerable choices but without recourse to right or wrong

answers, the collection is "an open field of narrative possibilities"[64] the reader must act in and

interact with it because "its meaning inheres in the performance of the text."[65] The difficulty of

TP is necessary because reading it, acting in and interacting with this textual environment, is

supposed to engender a similar experience to living in the social world of others:

…the complex climate that is formed by the vac-
ilating wills and energies of the many who surround you
[…]
            …[living] in that labyrinth that seems to be di-
recting your steps but in reality it is you who are creating its
pattern, embarked on a new, fantastically difficult tactic whose
success is nevertheless guaranteed.[66]

TP's success or failure depends on whether the actions performed during the writing and the

reading of it can be acted out in the social world of others, hence Ashbery's disinterest in the

particulars of the choices available. What concerns him is the capacity for poetry "to cite social

practice without itself being that social practice, or at least being some other form of social

practice which indicates [its] potential…as critique," [67] its ability to enact a way of living in

the real world that changes things. In terms of cultural constitution, the "proposition that

poetry forms while it refers points to the complicity of poetry with the realities and

significations of cultural process"[68] but the actions by which poets and readers constitute these

---

[63] Ibid, 250.
[64] Ibid, 273.
[65] Stephen Fredman, *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 112.
[66] Ashbery, "The System," *CP*, 305.
[67] E. Warwick Slinn, "Poetry and Culture: Performativity and Critique," *New Literary History* 30 (1991): 167.
[68] Ibid.

norms and boundaries foreground that such actions also have the potential to simultaneously disrupt by questioning them.

(4.3) "No Longer a Figure of Speech But an Act"

"The New Spirit" contains the most explicit indication of how the experience of reading *TP* is intended to engender "response-ability" in the reader as an embodied and embedded agency within the material reality of the larger environment of other subjects, "the/multitudes that swarm past one in the street…Who are all these people? What does/it mean that there are so many? Is it possible that the desires of/one might not conflict with the desires of all the others, and/vice versa."[69] Using constellations of stars as an example of how one can read and write ethically, Ashbery raises *TP* above the status of a mere aesthetic paradigm by "calling attention" to the commitments involved in these creative acts and revealing their coexistence amongst the other acts we perform in the extratextual environment that constitute our ethical subjectivity, "one moves closer…to come to examine the merit of its individual parts so as to en-/joy even more connecting them up to the whole."[70] As an open field of narrative possibilities, one image above all else captures the type of environment Ashbery has created and the consequent responsibility he envisions for his reader:

> ...That space
> was transfigured as though by hundreds and hundreds of tiny
> points of light like flares seen from a distance, gradually merging
> into one wall of even radiance like the sum of all their possible
> positions, plotted by coordinates, yet open to the movements
> and suggestions of this new life of action without develop-
> ment, a fixed flame.[71]

Like the silence Cage immerses his audience in so they can decide themselves what sounds they listen to and in doing so radically change that environment, *TP* is "one wall of even radiance" until the reader realises his/her "response-ability" by paying attention to and selecting particular coordinates until a constellation is formed. Ashbery even reads the "hundreds and hundreds of

---

[69] Ashbery, "The New Spirit," *CP*, 275.
[70] Ibid, 274.
[71] Ibid, 270.

tiny/points of light" first by including "Aries, the Ram, the agent of Mars and fire and the first of the/twelve signs of the Zodiac"[72] as an example of what the reader must do subsequently. This way of reading as a responsive and responsible subject is "another way" to that represented by the "horrible vision of the completed Tower of Babel, flushed in the/sunset as the last ceramic brick was triumphantly fitted into/place, perfect in its vulgarity."[73] The tower is an example of a homogenous, easily understood language becoming an object and Ashbery counters it using constellations:

> ...In the other
> direction one saw the desert and drooping above it the con-
> stellations that had presided impassively over the building of
> the metaphor that   seemed   to erase them   from the skies.[74]

The text as object can only ever be a metaphor, it can make comparisons to a real situation but can never be that situation itself. As Ashbery argues, mapping out the constellation above the complete textual object, "the Archer, languidly stretching/his bow," is "no longer a figure of speech but an act." [75] This performed act is a response to the "major question that revolves/around you, your being here," which:

> ...is again affirmed in the
> stars: just their presence, mild and unquestioning, is proof that
> you have got to begin in the way of choosing some one of the
> forms of answering that question, since if they were not there
> the question would not exist to be answered, but only as a
> rhetorical question in the impressive grammar of cosmic unrav-
> ellings of all kinds, to be proposed but never formulated.[76]

TP is the stars, the "hundreds and hundreds of tiny/points of light," whose very presence questions the reader and obligates him/her to answer for him/herself, to realise his/her "response-ability" by paying attention to it and selecting certain parts to make a constellation for which s/he is answerable for. It is possible, therefore, to "consider poetic utterance as a

---

[72] Ibid, 274.
[73] Ibid, 279.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid, 280.

version of performativity where the text itself is an act: a performative…to the extent that it is uttered (written [and read]) by an appropriate person (a poet [or reader]) in a certain set of historical and cultural circumstances."[77] Configuring writing and reading the poem as plotting a constellation suggests that poetry can be seen as homologous with performatives as it creates something that was not there beforehand, it "creates its own meaning, and above all does something with words."[78] The collection, therefore, can never be seen as a "completed Tower of Babel," a homogenous, closed-off and finished text, because it is not about the teleological pursuit of completion. Such an approach can never be anything else but partial because other possibilities always exist and Ashbery, like Cage, denies the authority of a single centre in favour of a plurality, a multi-centredness, based "not [on] coercion but choice, not hierarchy but egalitarianism, not self-promotion but sharing, nor conformity but freedom."[79] Ashbery's inclusion of constellations also refers to astrology, reading the stars so as to determine "the plans of the cosmos" and create a "sense of destiny."[80] This sense of predestation is affirmed by the figures from tarot cards, "The Hermit," "the Hanged Man," "The Archer" and "The Five of/Cups."[81] Ashbery incorporates such predestation by including a reading of the future, "'Trouble from a loved one. Trouble introduced into/the midst of an already realized state. Amorous dangers. Perils/through a woman.'"[82] He also emphasises the comfort it affords despite the reality of the situation by quoting another person:

..."You born today,"…

          …'a life
of incredulity and magnanimity opens out around you…
[…]
      …But draw comfort meanwhile from the fact
that the planets have congregated to haruspicate at your birth;
they can no longer disentangle themselves but are fixed over
you, showering down material and immaterial advantages on
whoever has the patience to remain immobile for a while, mind-
less of the efforts of his coevals to better themselves at the ex-
pense of humankind in general.'[83]

[77] Slinn, 67.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Marjorie Perloff, "Difference and Discipline: the Cage/Cunningham Aesthetic Revisited," *Contemporary Music Review* 31 (2012): 25.

[80] Ashbery, "The New Spirit," *CP*, 275-276.

[81] Ibid, 273.

[82] Ibid, 273-274.

[83] Ibid, 278.

Reading the stars, "the hundreds and hundreds of tiny/points of light," to predetermine certain events can be applied to *TP* as Ashbery himself gestures toward "the pragmatic and kinetic future."[84] However, the only event he predestines to happen is that the collection will be read by another person at a later date. Just as the "even wall of radiance" contains all the potential constellations that indicate possible futures, *TP* indicates its own future:

> …to have one
> person's affirmation of the way it happens for him . . . Yes,
> but you do not know this person.
>
> He exists, but he is a stranger for you in your own home.
> Just his being there beside you makes him a stranger because
> you can't tell how he got there. Nor can he, or at least he never
> seems to feel the urge to do so.[85]

The reader's interpretation is a future composition that questions Ashbery's by detailing how "it happens for him[/her]," explaining him/herself by recounting his/her experience of reading it. This situation necessarily involves others who confirm or oppose the poet's assertions and hence points to a relation between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" in the poem. The presence of another person is implied throughout *TP*, whether in the form of an intimate partner to whom "The New Spirit" is addressed, the audience listening to his lecture on how the "system was breaking down"[86] in "The System" or the spectators leaving after "the spectacle…to be acted out" finishes in "The Recital." This constitutive relationship between the contrapositions of "I" and "you" is a "first philosophy," the presence of "(an)Other" who questions "(my)Self" and makes a response obligatory. The "past is dust and ashes," consisting solely of traces of the poet, but the "incommensurably/wide way"[87] of *TP* "leads to the pragmatic and kinetic future." It is only actualised when the reader realises his/her "response-ability" and acts out what was done in the performative, or poethic, site of *TP* in the social world of others, in the lived space of proximity where s/he authors him/herself as an ethical subject.

---

[84] Ashbery, "The System," *CP*, 317.
[85] Ashbery, "The New Spirit," *CP*, 269.
[86] Ashbery, "The System," *CP*, 280.
[87] Ibid, 317.

(4.4) "(an)Other" Tradition

Expanding on the idea that every interpretation is a further, or "(an)Other's," composition, how a text is read is equally important to how it is written. The self-referential aspects of *TP*, however, means the occasion of composition is more readily foregrounded, "it turns/out you have been pursuing the discussion in a leisurely way/throughout January and February."[88] While the "actuality of writing,"[89] the occasion of composition, is pronounced, the actuality of reading is, albeit of equal if not more significance, more difficult to depict:

> It could be anything, you say. But it could not have been an
> exercise in defining the present when our position, our very
> lives depend on those fixed loci of past and future that leave
> no room for the nominal existence of anything else.[90]

Depicting the past is relatively easier because it can be known by articulating experiences the reader can identify with, "its every contour is at last revealed for/what it was, but this can be known only in the past."[91] Similarly, representing the future is possible because it is what can be known once the reader is convinced by and adheres to the prescriptions provided by the poet. However, determining the present, how the reader will actually respond to the text is not and cannot be known. Including the present of reading is characterised by its "necessary difficulty" because it signals where "(my)Self" ends and "(an)Other" begins, thereby marking the very limit of the known and the knowable.

According to Levinas, turning toward "(an)Other" is to be open toward the "unforeseeable future"[92] which, as the full title *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* implies, exists outside of or beyond the totality of my comprehensible, or graspable, time, the "now here" of my present. Understood as the spatial-temporal position of "(an)Other," the future is unknown and unknowable because it is more than just the projection of possibilities determined by either my past experiences or intentions. Understanding another person is to grasp his/her interiority, the content of his/her consciousness that determines how s/he will

---

[88] Ibid.
[89] Margueritte S. Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 191.
[90] Ashbery, "The System," *CP*, 317.
[91] Ibid, 315.
[92] Levinas, *TI*, 158.

respond in a particular situation. However, this would result in the merging of his/her consciousness with my own and my interiority, my perspective and past experiences, would contain both mine and his/her's, thereby making the other part of myself and reducing his/her alterity to categories of the same. For Levinas, self-consciousness is plural since it emerges from the face-to-face encounter between two different and distant embodied subjects who are exterior to each other, resulting in "a multiplicity in being, which refuses totalisation but takes form as fraternity and discourse."[93] Conversation is the commonplace required for this encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other," the lived space of proximity. Levinas' definition of ethics as "a calling into question of the same...by the other"[94] requires conversation to conceptualise it. Conversation is not about uncertainty reduction but about exposing oneself to what exceeds the limits of what I currently do and potentially can know that calls me into question and obligates me to answer for "(my)Self," to respond to the interpretation of the other and in doing so realise my "response-ability." As Levinas explains, "the relation with the Other, or Conversation...is an ethical relation...a teaching...because it comes from the exterior and brings to me more than I contain."[95] This phenomenon reveals that the fundamental condition of self-consciousness is plural and because of this condition something new is possible. Conversation with "(an)Other," therefore, is to encounter that which cannot be appropriated into "(my)Self" but nevertheless is constitutive of my self-consciousness as an ethical subject because it requires me to realise my "response-ability" by putting my interpretation into question and obligating me to be answerable for it.

While plurality is crucial to proximity, Levinas is arguing for "a radical multiplicity, distinct from numerical multiplicity"[96] where each individual is "one" and therefore similar to every other "one." Because "(an)Other" exceeds any concept I have for him/her, its alterity is the result of an uncontainable excess so that "multiplicity therefore implies an objectivity [or exteriority] posited in the impossibility...of conjoining the I and the non-I in a whole [or totality]."[97] However, this impossibility is not negative because the "primordial multiplicity [of "(my)Self" and "(an)Other"] is observed within the very face-to-face that constitutes it. It is produced in the multiple singularities and not in a being exterior to this number who would count the multiples."[98] Only in the experience of conversation can the "multiple singularities"

---

[93] Ibid, 216.
[94] Ibid, 43.
[95] Ibid, 51.
[96] Ibid, 220.
[97] Ibid, 221.
[98] Ibid.

of "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" come into proximity "[w]here the alterity of the other does not result from its identity but constitutes it…[as] Other."[99] Its alterity results not simply from his/her being different to or distant from "(my)Self" but in its exteriority, what exceeds my own perspective and past experiences and prevents "(an)Other" being appropriated by reducing him/her to the categories of the same used to understand "(my)Self," a surplus "exceeding the limits"[100] of the known and knowable that demarcate "(my)Self." "(an)Other" is the "pragmatic and kinetic future" due to his/her irreducible alterity. By extension of this logic, the reader is "(an)Other" who is unknown and ultimately unknowable to the poet, someone who inhabits a different and distant spatial-temporal position the poet can only gesture toward as he responds to a potential reader in poetic discourse, that is, in conversation.

 TP rather appropriately contains the first instance of what Ashbery terms the "other tradition," the "unrelated happenings that form a kind of sequence/…/according to an inner necessity of their own" and have a "living aspect" that has never been examined but has "developed/parallel to the classic truths of daily life."[101] This phrase is particularly significant as it was the first stage in the genealogy that provided the title for his "Charles Eliot Norton Lectures," *Other Traditions*. Between "The Other Tradition" and "Other Traditions" Ashbery termed it "Another Tradition,"[102] which suggests he is not concerned with othering particular authors but instead identifying that there always exists a different way of doing things, a way of being different that is not always assimilable because it remains troublingly other despite our efforts to comprehend it. In these lectures he concentrates on the "certifiably minor poets" John Clare, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Raymond Roussel, John Wheelwright, Laura Riding and David Schubert who "are not…of the centre stage" but are more importantly of the "jump-start variety," those he "reads habitually in order to get started," those he turns to "when [he] really need[s] to be reminded yet again of what poetry is." [103] In a body of work that is oriented toward "(an)Other," his comments on the poets he reads in advance and responds to suggest he is delineating and positioning himself within "'(an)Other" Tradition" founded on "response-ability" and proximity, a tendency that has gone unrecognised because it so closely parallels "the classic truths of everyday life" and consequently makes poetry or poiesis, the making of poetry, a fundamental activity of living in the social world of others.

---

[99] Ibid, 251.
[100] Ibid, 26.
[101] Ashbery, "The System," *CP*, 282.
[102] Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 122.
[103] Ibid, 4-5.

Three features define Ashbery's "'(an)Other' Tradition." Firstly, Clare achieves a sense of encounter because of the "sudden, surprising lack of distance between poet and reader [that] is in proportion to the lack of distance between the poet and the poem; he is the shortest distance between poem and reader."[104] He also continually "re-insert[s himself] in [the] present…[by] re-establishing 'now.'"[105] Clare represents for Ashbery the ability to stage an encounter between the poet and the reader as embodied subjects who occupy a "now here," the unique present they inhabit, through the commonplace of the poem, the shortest distance between them that is the lived space of proximity. Similarly, Roussel is championed for having nothing to say yet still saying it and creating a "totally neutral medium for the 'nothing' he is telling us" that brings "us face to face with…the now where anything can and must happen, the *Locus Solus* [lonely place] where writing begins."[106] Again, the "now here" as a place of beginning again, where composition and interpretation as a further act of composition begins, is foregrounded to make the writing and reading of poetry "something like daily life as it is actually lived."[107] Secondly, Ashbery focuses on Beddoes' dramatic fragments, which provide "a place where he can test approaches to life"[108] and which "require a specially trained audience" due to "the practical questions they pose."[109] His reading of Schubert affirms the performative capacity of "response-ability" since "the ideal situation for the poet is to have the reader speak the poem" because the poems consist "of speaking of what cannot be said to the person I want to say it."[110] A conversation is possible between the poet and the readers who utter the poem from multiple points of view to create a multiplicity of possible interpretations, thus "transform[ing] the mundane experience" of writing and reading a poem "into one of life's major points" because it reveals the "first philosophy" of ethical encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" that occurs through conversation *and* poetic discourse.[111] Thirdly, Riding's poetry is assessed in terms of its difficulty, how her poems are to be misread, which exploits the fact that "no poem can ever hope to produce the exact sensation in even one reader that the poet intended."[112] Ashbery quite tellingly posits the "reader/critic," making both interchangeable to suggest that every act of interpretation is a further composition for which s/he is answerable. He also explains how our "inability to understand it does not affect [our] assessments of its beauty or

---

[104] Ibid, 17.
[105] Ibid, 19.
[106] Ibid, 68.
[107] Ibid, 67.
[108] Ibid, 37-38.
[109] Ibid, 41.
[110] Ibid, 13.
[111] Ibid, 139.
[112] Ibid, 102.

ugliness,"[113] that is, its aesthetic validity, which is always an axiological issue for Ashbery. Such difficulty "demands more attention and attentiveness" because the poems require "some previous adjustment or tuning."[114] Her poems are characterised by a "necessary difficulty" that demands a different type of attention or increased attentiveness to oneself as an embodied, answerable subject in the social world of others. Ashbery's preference for poems that require "'special treatment'…writing that isn't simple, where there is more than at first meets the eye"[115] extends to his reading of Wheelwright, whose poems are defined by their "repeated stretching toward opposite poles wherein he stops just short of closure."[116] Contradictions are not resolved and opposites are not reconciled because Wheelwright provides choices for his readers, opportunities for them to become responsive and responsible subjects that respond to his "call to social action…[in the form of] a call to all human action."[117]

All of the primary characteristics identified thus far to explain Ashbery's "poethics of proximity" also define his ""(an)Other" Tradition," how the necessarily difficult poems require a different kind of attention, a new way of writing and reading, because they provide the occasion for an encounter between the poet and the reader in conversation that enacts the ethical encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" in the lived space of proximity. As Ashbery demonstrates, ""(an)Other" Tradition" that "parallel[s]…daily life" has always existed but by articulating an ethics of writing and reading poems as commonplaces inhabited by the poet and the reader poetry becomes "poethic," enacting a way of living in the real world.

(4.5) The "Poethics" of Ekphrasis

That Ashbery chooses a self-portrait as the subject of his most detailed ekphrastic poem is not accidental, especially if we consider how looking at Parmigianino's painting visualises the face-to-face encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other," and how ekphrasis itself literalises the fact that interpretation (analysing a painting) is a further composition (writing a poem about it), an example of poetic discourse based on conversation. More importantly perhaps is that the consistent concern in the eponymous poem from *SPCM* is the "representation of (self)

---

[113] Ibid, 104.
[114] Ibid, 95-96.
[115] Ibid, 96.
[116] Ibid, 82.
[117] Ibid, 92.

representation." [118] As Ashbery understands it at least, self-representation, like self-consciousness, involves interacting with the interpretations of others and responding to the questions they pose to answer for myself. In this sense it does not correspond to a pronoun, to the self-contained "I," but is rather a "pro(cessual)noun," part of an ongoing, open-ended conversation in which I am questioned by the interpretations of others that exceed the limits of the known and knowable circumscribing "(my)Self" and obligated to realise my "response-ability." The ekphrastic poem highlights interpellation, thus emphasising the sense of interpellation that makes language crucial to the ethical encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other." In addition to responding to preceding utterances, the poem is always addressed to a not predetermined interlocutor in the future, someone who cannot be called by name because s/he is unknown and unknowable to the poet, s/he is "(an)Other."

Ashbery's decision to use ekphrasis to highlight the "aesthethic" issues surrounding self-representation is crucial to him developing on all the features identified in the preceding collection to finally realise a "poethics of proximity" in a single poem for two reasons. Firstly, ekphrasis is not a poetic form but a "rhetorical situation and set of practices that offer non-prescriptive possibilities," [119] thus making it particularly suited to articulating an ethics of writing and reading poetry. In other words, it is a discursive strategy. Ashbery immediately comes full circle in his description of Parmigianino's painting (Fig. 5), identifying the same combination of "reticence," [120] the word itself is included in "SPCM," and accentuation from "Some Trees" in how:

> …Parmigianino did it, the right hand
> Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
> And swerving easily away, as though to protect
> What it advertises[121]

This circularity, or return to source, is also important to how Ashbery uses ekphrasis, elsewhere "beseech[ing Parmigianino to] withdraw that hand,/Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,/The

---

[118] Lee Edelman, "The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," *Twentieth Century Literature* 32 (1986): 95.
[119] Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Twentieth Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10.
[120] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 481.
[121] Ibid, 474.

shield of a greeting"[122] and in doing so evoking the first example of ekphrasis: Homer's description of Achilles' shield in *Iliad*.

(Fig. 5) Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524)

Returning to source also means James Heffernan's reductive definition of ekphrasis as the "verbal representation of visual representation"[123] is eschewed in favour of its etymological meaning "to speak out" (*ek* (out) *phrasis* (to speak)) and its traditional rhetorical function, to articulate the experience of a person, place or thing in such a way that a reader who never encountered the work in question can share in that experience, "This past/Is now here: the painter's/Reflected face, in which we linger."[124] This return makes ekphrasis perfectly suited to articulating an ethics of reading and writing based on the principle of conversation because "to speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces,"[125] to create a "now here." The ekphrastic poem, therefore, is such a commonplace, occupying a place between the visual and the verbal but also transforming poiesis, the making of poetry, into the performative act of creating commonplaces, occasions of encounter between the poet and the artist, and by extension the poet and the reader, that enact a "poethics of proximity," the lived experience of an ethical relation between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other."

---

[122] Ibid, 487.

[123] James Heffernan, *The Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7.

[124] Ibid, 486.

[125] Levinas, *TI*, 76.

In speaking out to create a commonplace, the ekphrastic poem embodies the crucial function language itself performs in this ethical relation. It makes one's world common, opening one's perspective and past experiences to oneself and to the other, thus accomplishing "the primordial putting in common."[126] Language does not simply "exteriorise a representation pre-existing in me: it puts in common a world hitherto mine" and is a "first action…that inserts us into the world, with the risks and hazards of all action," thereby "answer[ing] to the face of the Other or…question[ing] him[/her to open]…the perspective of the meaningful."[127] While the material details of the ekphrastic setting are foregrounded, "Vienna where the painting is today, where/I saw it with Pierre in the summer of 1959; New York/Where I am now"[128] and how "we must get out of it even as the public/Is pushing through the museum now so as to/Be out by closing time,"[129] the ekphrastic poem can never properly recreate the actual place. Consequently, the site is "transformed from a physical location to a discursive"[130] one, a commonplace made in language, or more specifically through poetic discourse. Using Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* demonstrates Levinas' assertion that "the face speaks" because the "manifestation of the face is already discourse," as Ashbery describes the "gloss on the fine/Freckled skin, lips moistened as though about to part/Releasing speech."[131] Like language itself, the ekphrastic poem "presupposes interlocutors, a plurality"[132] because the poet is responding to something that preceded his composition, "as Parmigianino *did* it." Ashbery is writing in response to the painter's interpretation, contemplating "the silence in the studio as he considers/Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait" and the "many people [who] came and stayed a certain time" according to his perspective and past experiences, "I think of the friends/Who came to see me, of what yesterday/Was like."[133] The ekphrastic poem captures "the ethical condition or essence of language" because it relies on both "expression and responsibility."[134] In writing an ekphrastic poem, the poet is obligated to realise his/her "response-ability" because in the "relationship with the Other that is cast in the relation of language…the essential is the interpellation, the vocative."[135] Ashbery's use of a self-portrait

---

[126] Ibid, 173.
[127] Ibid, 174.
[128] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 480.
[129] Ibid, 484.
[130] Barbara K. Fischer, *Museum Meditations: Reframing Ekphrasis in Contemporary American Poetry* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 144.
[131] Ashbery, "SPCM," 486.
[132] Levinas, *TI*, 73.
[133] Ashbery, "SPCM," 476.
[134] Levinas, *TI*, 200.
[135] Ibid, 69.

in which the face of "(an)Other" is foregrounded makes the ekphrastic poem crucial to understanding this sense of interpellation, how the "face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation," the conversation that "obliges [my] entering into discourse" that cannot be "evade[d] by silence."[136] By including the interpretations of art critics, such as Giorgio Vassari's identification of *Self Portrait…*'s mimetic qualities, "'Francesco one day set himself/To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose/In a convex mirror…/…he set himself/With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass,'"[137] and Sydney Freedberg's comment, that "Realism in this portrait/No longer produces an objective truth, but a *bizarria* . . . ./…/…[that] retain[s]/A strong measure of ideal beauty,"[138] Ashbery's "SPCM" captures the poet entering into conversation with others, responding to their interpretations and answering for himself by expressing his own. While Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait…*as the subject of Ashbery's "SPCM" helps us conceptualise the ethical impetus behind the face-to-face encounter, it also reminds us that a literal encounter in the poem is impossible, "…the soul is a captive…/…unable to advance much farther/ Than your look as it intercepts the picture,"[139] it can only occur in discourse, entering into conversation with "(an)Other" who puts me into question by resisting my interpretations and obligating me to realise my "response-ability" by answering for myself.

If ekphrasis exploits the ethical condition of language to illustrate how poetry can be informed by the same principle of interpellation and "response-ability" motivating conversation between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" then, secondly, such poems also demonstrate how an encounter with what is other is possible in poetry. According to W. J. T. Mitchell's description of ekphrasis as the "genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic 'others,'"[140] the ekphrastic poem has a certain ethical imperative because it does not just resemble the self-other relation but is the fundamental model of this encounter. More importantly, the engagement with otherness or alterity is "not determined systematically or a priori, but in specific contexts of pragmatic application,"[141] in the "working through" of the encounter between text and image, and by extension self and other, in the acts of writing and, as will be seen, reading an ekphrastic poem. "SPCM" is a third term since it is the ekphrastic depiction of Parmigianino's "reflection, of which the portrait/Is the reflection once

---

[136] Ibid, 201.
[137] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 474.
[138] Ibid, 478.
[139] Ibid, 474.
[140] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representations* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 156.
[141] Ibid, 157.

removed," [142] the commonplace of encounter between apparent opposites, otherwise understood as the lived space of proximity between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other." However, the poem also utilises ekphrasis as a "universal principle of poetics"[143] to affirm the importance of absence in how we engage with otherness, how we might encounter "(an)Other," in a poem. Because the complete verbal re-presentation of visual experience is impossible, "the ekphrastic encounter in language is purely figurative. The image...cannot literally come into view,"[144] unlike, for example, the verbal and visual encounters that occur in "imagetexts" such as *The Vermont Notebook*, the collaboration between Ashbery and the poet-painter Joe Brainard that immediately preceded the publication of *SPCM*. The other of the text, the image, can never be properly present, it exists only as "a potent absence or a fictive, figural present."[145]

In "SPCM," Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait...* presents such a "presenced absence" but Ashbery heightens the difficulty by emphasising the ethical imperative behind his use of ekphrasis. Just as Parmigianino's painting arrests the occasion of its composition, Ashbery's poem catches him in the act of not only interpreting the painting but responding to Parmigianino who is literally absent yet figuratively present as the subject of the self-portrait. This relation between the poet and the painter is made more difficult to portray because self-portraiture is informed by Levinas' argument that the presence of the other is qualified by a certain absence, it's a face "whose presence is discreetly an absence."[146] The self-portrait, the face of Parmigianino, is the source of radical otherness that interpellates Ashbery. According to Levinas, the face "determines a relationship different from that which characterises all our sensible experiences"[147] because it at once denotes a particular, embodied subject who is present but also a source of radical otherness that is not present. Levinas calls this "imperialism of the same" because it "consists in negating or possessing the non-me."[148] Appropriately, Ashbery does not mimetically describe Parmigianino's face but rather enacts the experience of encountering it, exploiting the ethics of ekphrasis founded on the fact that the poem does not, cannot, appropriate the painting, therefore, the image, in this case the face of Parmigianino, is "(an)Other," both a particular person and a source of radical otherness. An ekphrastic poem whose subject is a self-portrait perfectly captures how the face of another person confirms that the world is seen from innumerable different perspectives informed by experiences otherwise

---

[142] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 474.
[143] Mitchell, 156.
[144] Ibid, 158.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Levinas, *TI*, 155.
[147] Ibid, 187.
[148] Ibid, 87.

inaccessible to me and why language, why entering into conversation with another person, is necessary because through it I am called to escape containment in and the consensus of my singular point of view, how "it is certain that/What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific/Life, experienced or not."[149] Because of "The distance [and difference] between [them],"[150] Parmigianino is a source of otherness that cannot be properly represented because he exceeds all categories of the same determined by Ashbery's experiences, "he overflows absolutely every idea [he] can have of him."[151] It also demonstrates the "necessary difficulty" of ekphrasis because it is impossible to determine where the poetic ends or begins in relation to the other artistic text. Ekphrasis enacts a social practice since by its nature it "opens into networks of social encounter within and beyond the boundaries of the poem"[152] that includes at least one other than "I." In this sense, it can be seen as enacting how one might respond to others in a way that constitutes him/her as an ethical subject. As a poem in which interpretation is a further act of composition, it shows how one realises his/her "response-ability" by reading someone else's work, how one can write a responsive and responsible ethical subject into existence within the social world of others by the way one reads. "We live from acts – and from the very act of being...What I do and what I am is at the same time that *from which* I live"[153] and according to Ashbery's "poethics," writing and reading poetry are just such constitutive acts.

(4.6) Face-to-Face with Ashbery

If aesthetic experience, how one encounters and responds to a particular artwork, can be considered a source of individuation, a means of making "I" different from "you," then its most suitable symbol is the human face due to its uniqueness, irreducibility and untransferability. In its physical uniqueness, the face of Parmigianino "is a sign of the individuality," of the difference, of another person and "is simultaneously symbolic of the originality, difference, polyphony, and veracity of art."[154] Accordingly, as Ashbery posits it in "SPCM," the aesthetic

---

[149] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 482.
[150] Ibid, 477.
[151] Levinas, *TI*, 87.
[152] Loizeaux, 3.
[153] Levinas, *TI*, 113, author's emphasis.
[154] David-Antoine Williams, "Tête-à-Tête, Face-à-Face: Brodsky, Levinas, and the Ethics of Poetry," *Poetics Today* 30 (2009): 214.

experience of poetry involves a face-to-face encounter, "it is a facing toward one another, a proximity of faces which reveals the one to the other."[155] Therefore, the face of Parmigianino is more than just an image, it reveals "(an)Other," it intimates in the same way art and, as Ashbery hopes to, poetry intimates. He writes a poem that is, like Parmigianino's self-portrait, revealing of the other and in being so demands the reader to engage face-to-face with that potentiality. Since "it is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself…that I expose myself to the questioning of the Other" which "engenders me for responsibility,"[156] the type of attention involved required for an ekphrastic poem about a self-portrait is concurrent with the ethics of writing and reading poetry that Ashbery advances. As Levinas explains, "attention…[is] not a refinement of consciousness, but consciousness itself…Attention is attention to something because it is attention to someone."[157] If attention is "consciousness itself," how we pay attention to others determines the type of person we are. Therefore, how Ashbery reads Parmigianino is crucial to the ethics he advances. This emphasis on attention to someone other than "(my)Self" reveals that "the act of reading is inscribed upon the ekphrastic text and serves as its basic...presupposition" since the "reader of the literary text must read and interpret the reading process of the writer, who, in turn reads and interprets a visual text."[158] More importantly, "in reading the poet reading another text, we...as readers have the opportunity to get a glimpse of how we read,"[159] of how and to what we pay attention to, thus realising self-consciousness. In reading, therefore, "we find ourselves...but only in the language of the other."[160] That is, only by entering into conversation with the poet as "(an)Other" in the commonplace, the lived space of proximity, made by language, can I hope to attain self-consciousness of "(my)Self" as a reader, as an embodied ethical subject who has realised his/her "response-ability."

That Ashbery intends his own "SPCM" to perform the same function as Parmigianino's does for him is apparent when he describes how "A breeze like the turning of a page/Brings back your face."[161] Like the painter, he captures the occasion of his own interpretation as composition so accurately "that you could be fooled for a moment/Before you realise the reflection/isn't yours." [162] The eponymous poem is Ashbery's self-portrait and, like

[155] Ibid, 215.
[156] Levinas, *TI*, 178.
[157] Ibid, 99.
[158] Margaret H. Persin, *Getting the Picture: The Ekphrastic Principle in Twentieth Century Spanish Poetry* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997), 19.
[159] Ibid, 20.
[160] Robert Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 50.
[161] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 481.
[162] Ibid, 479-480.

Parmigianino's does for him, it allows whoever is interpreting it to perform his/her own act of self-representation, to author "(my)Self" because "The words are only speculation/(From the Latin *speculum*, mirror)."[163] In an identical manner to the poet, the reader is meant to author his/her own self-portrait by responding to Ashbery as "(an)Other," a source of otherness who is both present and absent:

> ...the whole of me
> Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
> Otherness of the painter in his
> Other room.[164]

Replacing "painter" with "poet" and "Other room" with the "now here" of the poem's composition reveals how the ekphrastic encounter between Ashbery and Parmigianino, "the painter's/Reflected face, in which we linger,"[165] makes "you notice life,"[166] it is:

> ...a metaphor
> Made to include us, we are a part of it and
> Can live in it as in fact we have done[167]

and must continue to do if the ethics of writing and reading poetry he articulates is to have "poethical" implications. Ultimately, how Ashbery reads Parmigianino, how he realises his "response-ability" in the face-to-face encounter of the aesthetic event, is how we might read Ashbery and in doing so author "(my)Self" by responding to "(an)Other." As with ekphrasis, when the reader interprets Ashbery's "SPCM" s/he provides a further composition similarly informed by a "poethics of proximity," s/he writes an ethical subject into existence in the way s/he reads and responds to the poet. Parmigianino's face confronts the poet with an irreducible, inassimilable otherness:

> an unfamiliar stereotype, the face
> /…/

---

163 Ibid, 475.
164 Ibid, 480.
165 Ibid, 486.
166 Ibid, 481.
167 Ibid.

> …[that] looks like everything
> We have forgotten, I mean forgotten
> Things that don't seem familiar when
> We meet them again, lost beyond telling,
> Which were ours once.[168]

Ashbery's self-portrait, "a bitter impression of absence, which as we know involves presence," is meant to do the same for the reader, meaning that the conversation, the call and response, between poet and reader is not about uncertainty reduction, quite the opposite in fact:

> ...This always
> Happens, as in the game where
> A whispered phrase passed around the room
> Ends up as something completely different.
> It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike
> What the artist intended. Often he finds
> He has omitted the thing he started out to say
> in the first place[169]

Just as I cannot predict or control the other due to "the *unforeeableness* of his reaction,"[170] the painter cannot control what happens to his painting, cannot determine how "(an)Other" in the "pragmatic, kinetic future" will respond to it. Such explicit dependency on the interpretation of another person means the poet cannot have any certainty about something as basic as the content of his poem, thereby signalling the complete negation of his singular authority during the poem's composition in favour of making each subsequent interpretation a further composition because it produces "something completely different" to "What the artist intended." [171] This otherwise aesthetic encounter has important ethical implications that irrevocably thicken Ashbery's poetics with an "h:"

> ...Is there anything
> To be serious about beyond the otherness
> That gets included in the most ordinary
> Forms of daily activity, changing everything
> Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter

---

[168] Ibid, 479.
[169] Ibid, 485.
[170] Levinas, *TI*, 199.
[171] Ibid.

Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near
Peak, too close to ignore, too far
For one to intervene? This otherness, this
"Not-being-us" is all there is to look at
In the mirror[172]

Ashbery's text, the speculative words, is a mirror placed before the reader, who confronts an irreducible, inassimilable otherness to which s/he must respond and in doing so compose his/her own self-portrait. Creation here refers to both the aesthetic activity *and* the act of creating, or authoring, a self, or put alternatively, self-representation is the correlative of self-consciousness. Consequently, the act of creating as posited by Ashbery is like any other action performed during one's daily activities of acting in and interacting with the social world of others, that is, it precludes "(my)Self" as an autotelic subject because it means engaging with the otherness of "(an)Other" that constitutes the subject in the first place. It is the "first philosophy" that occurs in the commonplace of the face-to-face encounter, the lived space of proximity. Like Levinas' ethics, Ashbery's "poethics" is an "optics,"[173] a way of seeing beyond the totality of the singular, autotelic self, with its categories of the same that reduce all differences to its self-centered ontology, and toward the social world of others, learning that "(my)Self" is never alone but always already encountering "(an)Other."

Without Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait…*, Ashbery's insistence on the crucial role played by the face-to-face encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" in all acts of self-authoring could not have been so committed. Nevertheless, this experience is purely aesthetic and visual, which differs significantly from the experience of proximity possible in a poetic text. Therefore, it functions only as an analogue for the face-to-face encounter between the poet and the reader as respective others in the commonplace of the text:

Each person
Has one big theory to explain the universe
But it doesn't tell the whole story
And in the end it is what is outside him
That matters, to him and especially to us
Who have been given no help whatever
In decoding our own man-size quotient and must rely
On second-hand knowledge.[174]

---

[172] Ibid, 485-486.
[173] Levinas, *TI*, 29.
[174] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 486.

Unlike Parmigianino, whose convex mirror allows him as the composing subject to see himself as the interpreted object in the environment he inhabits, situated amongst "A few leaded panes, old beams,/Fur, pleated muslin,"[175] Ashbery cannot be both subject and object, his self-portrait requires at least two perspectives, his own and some other's "second-hand knowledge." Such reliance on another person's perspective, an exteriority to supplement one's own interiority and help "tell the whole story," is best explained using Bakhtin's "excess of seeing,"[176] the fact that:

> When I contemplate a whole human being who is situated outside...me, our concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide. For at each given moment, regardless of the position and the proximity to me of this other human being whom I am contemplating, I will always see and know something that he...cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze...the world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, which...are accessible to me but not to him...this ever-present excess of my seeing...in relation to any other human being is founded on the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world.[177]

This "excess of seeing" confirms the importance of outsideness for Bakhtin, or in this case, for a Bakhtinian understanding of "aesthethic" activity, since we cannot author ourselves because we cannot see ourselves from within the self, we "lack any approach to ourselves from outside the self."[178] Another person is required who "has a unique position of outsideness"[179] that engenders an "excess of seeing" due to my inability to properly see myself within my immediate environment, the impossibility of experiencing "I" as just another object amongst others. The reader provides the "excess of seeing," the exteriority that exceeds the interiority of the poet, because s/he is informed by the circumstances of the unique spatial-temporal position s/he inhabits and from which s/he interprets the poet in his/her environment. As he explains, it "is very difficult to decide at certain moments what the ideal reader is going to know about and what he isn't going to know about."[180] The reader's "excess of seeing"

---

175 Ibid, 474.
176 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 22.
177 Ibid, 23.
178 Deborah Haynes, *Bakhtin Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2013), 56.
179 Ibid.
180 Ashbery, "Craft Interview," 123.

prevents him/her being appropriated by the poet into categories of the same, it allows the reader to retain his/her alterity as "(an)Other" because his/her perspective remains inaccessible to the poet.

Due to the nature of the aesthetic event, Parmigianino cannot respond to Ashbery, the encounter is one-sided, hence his request that the painter "withdraw that hand,/Offer it no longer as shield or greeting" [181] because he is confined to the past, "cold pockets/Of remembrance" [182] and cannot inhabit the "now here" with Ashbery, his "soul is a captive…/…unable to advance much farther/…/…[it] has to stay where it is:" [183]

> Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
> Posing in this place. It must move
> As little as possible. This is what the portrait says. [184]

In the poem as an event, on the other hand, the call and response between the poet and the reader is possible because Ashbery's "past/Is now here," [185] "New York/Where I am now, which is a logarithm/Of other cities," [186] it is potentially any place. The reader is "(an)Other" for Ashbery, an absence and a presence, to whose interpretation in the "pragmatic and kinetic future" he responds in order to answer for himself, to write himself into existence as a heteronomic yet non-appropriative ethical subject. Because the reader cannot be known to Ashbery, only proximity is possible. Ashbery enters into communication as proximity with his reader where the intention is not uncertainty reduction but the ethical encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other:"

> But we know it cannot be sandwiched
> Between two adjacent moments, that its windings
> Lead nowhere except further tributaries
> And that these empty themselves into a vague
> Sense of something that can never be known
> Even though it seems likely that each of us
> Knows what it is and is capable of
> Communicating it to the other. [187]

---

[181] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 487.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid, 474.
[184] Ibid, 474-475.
[185] Ibid, 486.
[186] Ibid, 480.
[187] Ibid, 482-483.

Because it will be changed by each subsequent reading, the actual content of the poem is not as important as the act of communication itself, the moment of interacting with another person beyond my limits of the known and knowable. This suggestion of communicating the unknown gestures toward what subsequently replaces Levinas' ethics of the face-to-face encounter, the saying and the said, which, as will be seen later, is central to Palmer's "poethics." The reader's projected interpretation obligates Ashbery to explain himself, to realise his "response-ability" by writing a poem and in doing so authoring a self. That Ashbery does not try to prescribe particular readings or coerce his readers into assuming a particular perspective is proof that he does not appropriate the other, he does not reduce his/her alterity by assimilating the other into the categories of the same through which he perceives and makes sense of the world, thereby writing an ethical subject into existence.

However, since Ashbery's "SPCM" is supposed to allow whoever is interpreting it to compose his/her own self-portrait, it is a "moment of attention,"[188] an occasion that calls readers' attention to how they make, or author, themselves through the acts they perform when responding to another person in the commonplace of the text. The reader must respond to Ashbery as "(an)Other," that is, without completely identifying with him or reducing his alterity by trying to understand the world from his unique perspective, hence him being consistently "reluctant as any landscape/To yield what are laws of perspective."[189] Ultimately, we must "miss each other"[190] because "SPCM" is "a gauge of the weather, which in French is/*Le temps*, the word for time."[191] Like any other poem, it can be used to determine the environment or times in which it was written but, perhaps more importantly, it must be made to correspond with the times in which it is read or rewritten by the reader who completes the act of communication because as a material text it is literally "sandwiched/Between two adjacent moments,"[192] the two "now heres" inhabited by the poet and reader as they encounter each other in the lived space of proximity. The reader is called to respond by Ashbery since he inscribes further unknown and unknowable compositions into his own text, "which/Follows a course wherein changes are merely/Features of the whole."[193] This ethics of writing and reading poetry, however, has practical application, it is a "poethics," because the actions performed by such a responsive and responsible ethical subject are the same as those performed

---

[188] Ibid, 475.
[189] Ibid, 477.
[190] Ashbery, "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," *CP*, 698.
[191] Ashbery, "SPCM," *CP*, 476.
[192] Ibid, 482.
[193] Ibid, 476.

when one acts in and interacts with the social world of others, they are all "the most ordinary/Forms of daily activity."[194] Responding to the interpretations of "(an)Other" who challenges my singular interpretation of our situation in order to answer for myself while never appropriating him/her is to enact a "first philosophy," it is to write a non-appropriative, heteronomic subject into existence constituted by "response-ability" during the experience of proximity, the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" as different and distant subjects that occurs in the commonplace of conversation or, in this case, the event of the poem.

Conclusion: The Shield of a Greeting

Despite the reader's best efforts, s/he can never properly comprehend Ashbery, but this is precisely the point because the epistemological aspect of understanding him can never be separated from the problematic ontological issue of appropriating "(an)Other" into the categories of the same through which "(my)Self" interprets the world and his/her position within it. Just as he "beseech[es Parmigianino to] withdraw that hand,/Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,/The shield of a greeting," Ashbery too withdraws his hand. This is not due to an inability to self-disclose, as will be seen with Palmer, but a decided unwillingness and refusal due to a persistent reticence for personal and political reasons. While he does extend a gesture toward the reader, intimating the possibility of a handshake due to his reliance on another's "second-*hand* knowledge,"[195] they ultimately "miss each other."[196] The potential to "touch, love, explain"[197] identified at the beginning of Ashbery's exploration of self-representation is never actualised. To encounter Ashbery as an "(an)Other," to experience proximity, he can never be properly grasped, a difference and distance remains to prevent a complete identification either of or with Ashbery and ensure his constitutive alterity is preserved. Miscomprehension, therefore, is crucial to any attempt at "self-representation" for Ashbery because it ensures, even forever prolongs, this longing, calling out for someone else's interpretation to pose a question and interrupt the autotelic subject. Consequently, it also affords the reader both the permission and the obligation to realise his/her "response-ability," to answer Ashbery's call as someone who remains unknown and unknowable, thus writing

---

[194] Ibid, 485.
[195] Ashbery, "SPCM," 486.
[196] Ashbery, "Paradoxes and Oxymorons," 698.
[197] Ashbery, "Some Trees," 26.

"(my)Self" into existence as a responsive and responsible reader. The experience of proximity engendered by his work is always a lived experience, a "poethics" readily applicable to how "(my)Self" acts in and interacts with the social world of others. As with Parmigianino for Ashbery, the poet is not empirically available to the reader, he is an absence and a presence, at once the face of a particular person *and* every other person, such that our response in the "now here" of the poem is both particular to the textual occasion of reading but also a performed act with consequences in the extratextual world for which "(my)Self" is answerable. The difficulty of his work should not detract from the fact that he does extend a gesture toward the reader, the "other I with which we began,"[198] as he turns his attention toward him/her in conversation. How one decides to respond, with either a shield or a greeting, is secondary to the act of responding itself, acknowledging Ashbery as "(an)Other" and, in turning his/her "attention to you,"[199] representing "(my)Self" as a responsive and responsible subject through his/her performed acts. If "everything is surface,"[200] as Ashbery proposes, his "words are only speculation/(From the Latin *speculum*, mirror)." This ensures the surface he creates is one that reflects the reader's own speculations and uncertainties regarding what it means to act in and interact with the social world of others as an ethical subject. As a result, the difficulty is necessary because it prolongs the experience of proximity to what is unknown and unknowable, posing a question to "(my)Self" that interrupts any attempt at self-representation and ensuring "response-ability" is realised.

---

[198] Ashbery, "The Skaters," *CP*, 149.
[199] Ashbery, "Spring Day, *CP*, 183.
[200] Ashbery, "SPCM," 476.

Part II: "Difficult but not Impossible:" The Saying of the Said in Michael Palmer

The eponymous, concluding poem in *S* immediately orders whoever is reading it to "Write This," to articulate the "secrets beyond the boundaries of speech," and to "Say This," to enunciate a "poem…called What Speaking Means to Say."[1] However, Palmer's imperative to the reader simply extends his own vocation, the call from an unknown and unknowable source outside the self that expresses nothing but irrevocably calls one's attention to a possible way of living. The collections up to and including those gathered together in *CA*, *NEL*, *FF* and *S*, are his response to the calling to write and say "this," a deceptively simple task because it "return[s us] to where it [all] began," to when we "never used words, never/knew any."[2] Writing as saying, or saying as writing, "this" foregrounds the various commitments involved in self-articulation prior to any consideration of the semantic content of what is written or spoken, to what is "beyond the boundaries of speech," to what speaking itself says. Signifying my presence as a subject amongst innumerable others who not only permit but obligate my "response-ability" necessitates the difficult task of living according to an ethical sensibility, of being attentive toward others before I attend to myself. For this reason, "poetry is a form of listening"[3] prior to the writing or saying of "this," that **"**here I am."[4] Both the "making and the receiving [of poetry] are forms of listening…to an unknown language found everywhere among our daily words, in the current of our common speech."[5] "Reading [and writing poetry, therefore,] has never been separate from living…for [him],"[6] they are the vital activities that open-up the autotelic subject and make it heteronomic, make it responsive and responsible.

For someone who places such ethical significance on these activities, his work often seems preoccupied with exposing the failures of language and our attendant incapacities to express, comprehend or explain either ourselves or others. Palmer's poetry, however, is informed by what he terms a "scientific/silence,"[7] not careless omissions or conceited erasures but a carefully constructed oeuvre wherein the impossibility of reading and writing in any conventional sense is proclaimed in order to foreground the possibility of listening.

---

[1] Michael Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 233-234.
[2] Michael Palmer, "A Souvenir of Japan," *CA*, 150.
[3] Michael Palmer, "Poetry and Contingency," 54.
[4] Levinas, *OTB*. 143.
[5] Palmer, "Poetry and Contingency," 54.
[6] Michael Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Thomas Gardner," 286.
[7] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 234.

Furthermore, he writes on "Pages which accept no ink,"[8] revealing the inherent difficulty experienced when composing and interpreting since the empty spaces that accompany his often sparse, condensed and muted poems suggest that what is not, cannot and must not be said is equally important to what is said. In his scathing review of *S*, William Logan, more than likely despite his best intentions, highlights a crucial aspect of Palmer's poetics by arguing that "reading [him] is like listening to serial music" and his "language is frequently reduced to surface gestures."[9] Palmer admits there is an undeniable "musicality that the poetry....tends toward" as it:

> build[s] up a rather dense harmonic structure that begins to constellate meanings, not simply on its own but meanings' relationships. Meanings' rhymes...It points you backward and forward; it takes away linearity. It also subverts intent in an interesting way, and creates its own intention, and overcomes the limits of one's momentary thinking by announcing that these two things, so far apart, go together...it can challenge the apparent and multiply meanings, take us beyond what we thought we were talking about to something more like a subject that reveals itself as you go along – which interests me as a way to overcome my own habits of thought.[10]

Musicality allows for a "particular poetic logic that seems to have a dimension of thought to it that's less available in other forms of discourse," such that the "juxtaposition of *fat* and *cat*...is made logical by the music but is countered by the sign itself."[11] Approaching Palmer's work as a kind of serial music "demands from us an involuntary responsiveness...a participation prior to understanding,"[12] a way of thinking otherwise as we give our attention to what is normally silenced by our habitual thinking and listen to what he says prior to analysing the semantic content of what is actually said. Palmer refers to "T. Sphere [Thelonious Monk]...speaking in the dark with his...hands"[13] to explain how listening "prior to understanding" involves approaching language as gesture, a way of speaking a language of the unsayable through poiesis, a matter of the hands making the poem and gesturing toward another person. *S* signals Palmer "closing Mr. Circle with a/single stroke,"[14] suggesting this collection somehow articulates the initiating acts that engender his self-articulation. Therefore, analysing what is

---

[8] Ibid.
[9] William Logan, *Reputations of the Tongue: On Poets and Poetry* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999), 46-47.
[10] Michael Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Peter Gizzi," *The Exact Change Yearbook No. 1*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), 177.
[11] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 290.
[12] Mc Donald, 24.
[13] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 235.
[14] Ibid, 233.

said in subsequent collections is secondary to understanding how he negotiates the various ethical commitments involved in writing and saying "this" in the first place.

The difficulty of Palmer's work has resulted in the critical commonplace of including him amongst the Language poets, the self-styled avant-gardists who rose to prominence in the seventies and eighties. The most in-depth studies of his work to date, for example, Linda Reinfeld's *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* (1992), Nerys Williams' *Reading Error: The Lyric and Contemporary Poetry* (2007) and David Arnold's *Poetry and Language Writing: Objective and Surreal* (2007), determinatively classify him as a Language poet, despite his numerous protestations regarding the "so-called language-oriented identity...[with] its possible suggestion of a purely formal orientation"[15] and his wish "to mute the interest in [critical] theory [and poststructuralist philosophy] that the term implies"[16] when used in connection to the work of the founding poet-critics Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews and Barrett Watten. While I am not suggesting that Palmer ostracises himself from his national and historical contemporaries, his particular approach to how and why someone writes and reads poetry means he is admittedly more at home in the company of Friedrich Hölderlin, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Celan, César Vallejo and Edmond Jabès, who constitute an international genealogy of the modern lyric that ignores national borders and the consequent notions of nationalist identities and foreign languages because their subject is the "daily word," the "current of our common speech," hence his insistence that while he "learned language on this island but did not speak on this island" and his claim to "writing a book, not in my native language."[17] Each poet focuses his attention on the "disintegration of faith in the sign," the "unravelling of the sign" as "involved with the unravelling of the subject," and the resultant "sense of doubt about the relationship between (within a sign, let's say, the signifier and the signified) the acoustical image and the concept."[18] Their work ultimately tries to articulate what cannot be written or spoken in language when understood as a vehicle for self-expression and self-disclosure because their concern is the inexpressible, the limits of language itself and what happens beyond the boundaries of what can be said personally, politically and poetically.

---

[15] Michael Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Keith Tuma," *Contemporary Literature* 30 (1989): 9.
[16] Lee Bartlett, *The Sun is But a Morning Star: Studies in West Coast Poetry and Poetics* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 154.
[17] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 234.
[18] Michael Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practice," 251-252.

In this sense, Palmer, as Ward correctly observes, "wrote poetry before there was Language"[19] in that his poetics originate in an attitude preceding the Language poets' *and* in terms of his attempt to articulate what lies outside the capacities of language, a significance that precedes, even exceeds, what is written and spoken. Furthermore, his friendship with Robert Duncan, whose high Romantic sensibility encouraged his own questioning of the speaking subject, prevented complete assimilation to Language poetics, or any singular poetic movement, by confirming the importance of a "symposium of the whole" in which:

> all the old excluded orders must be included. The female, the proletarian, the foreign; the animal and vegetative; the unconscious and the unknown; the criminal and failure – all that has been outcast and vagabond must return to be admired in the creation of what we consider we are.[20]

Following the example of Duncan, Palmer embodies a sensibility toward difference emerging in the sixties and seventies that finds probably its most explicit realisation in the ethnopoetic anthologies of Jerome Rothenberg, who advanced the idea of a hypothetical worldwide body of poetry that was equivalent in value to "combat cultural genocide in all of its manifestations."[21] Studying "bodies of work that reflected lives and aspirations of politically and socioeconomically underrepresented members of the world's many communities, as well as underrepresented aspects (hidden social…histories, collective origins, [etc]) of more traditionally canonical verse"[22] involved listening out for and responding to others' forgotten, ignored or erased voices. The tendency of aligning Palmer with the Language poets can be understood since his concern for difference corresponds with the classical avant-garde position these poets demarcated and resolutely inhabited. Like them, he "extend[s] modernist experimental traditions…[by engaging] with Left political commitments" but he is also "unabashedly lyric[al]." [23] His work combines a "hermeneutics of linguistic and political suspicion [with] a penchant for…austere elegance," suggesting a poet "committed to interrogating codes and the limits of signification" from the very beginning but who also

---

[19] Geoff Ward, *Language Poetry and the American Avant-Garde* (Keele: Ryburn Press/British Association of American Studies, 1993), 5.

[20] Robert Duncan, "Rites of Participation," 98.

[21] Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock, "Statement of Intention," *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics* 1 (1970): 1.

[22] Maria Damon, "Ethnopoetics," *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Fourth Edition, ed. Roland Greene, et al (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 463.

[23] Robert Kaufman, "Lyric's Expression: Musicality, Conceptuality, Critical Agency," *Cultural Critique* 60 (2005): 208.

"possesses an equal tendency toward the lyric[al]."[24] His insistence on the necessity of this lyrical sensibility as a way of responding to the urgent need for a critique of the discursive systems that subject us in both senses of the term demonstrates the futility of completely aligning Palmer with the Language poets, whose cardinal principle is the deconstruction of the lyrical subject in their de-authorised work. It is important to recognise that from the very beginning, Palmer encourages his readers to "misspell [his] name"[25] and warns "Don't say his name for him,"[26] a strange strategy for a poet so concerned with self-articulation. However, this is neither a reductive attempt at self-erasure nor a self-othering but rather a way of exploring the act of naming itself to determine the possibility of using language to increase uncertainty, ensure miscomprehension, prevent identification, and, by extension, make poetry a space of impossibility where the personal and political failures of language can be redeemed and an ethical subject written into existence.

Throughout his various innovations, Palmer's poetry demonstrates how "writing is also a kind of reading"[27] in order to "question…the identity of the speaker and reader and listener, their interpenetrations."[28] Unlike the Language poets, he is not concerned with critiquing late-capitalism by reconfiguring the relationship between the reader and the text. Palmer goes even further by determining the very possibility of poetry itself, its ability to respond to the political urgencies of the period without imposing equally proscriptive solutions, to acknowledge the experiences of others without appropriating them into the same categories through which I interpret the world, and to oppose prevalent socio-cultural discourses without being oppositional. Palmer's critique is consistently levelled at "confessional expressionism,"[29] a particular method of writing and reading poetry that cannot engage with otherness, difference, alterity, etc., due to its inherent emphasis on *self*-disclosure. For this reason, he pursues the impossible poem, "a poem which does not exist! The absolute poem…[that] certainly does not, cannot exist."[30] For Palmer, poetry is a space of impossibility where he responds to the call of "(an)Other," the question that interrupts him as an autotelic subject. How he writes and reads is a way of living in the social world of others, of listening in order to articulate "(my)Self" as a responsive and responsible subject. Most importantly, Palmer's method of "close

---

[24] Andrew Zawacki, "'Relation Without Relation:' Palmer, Celan, Blanchot," *New German Critique* 91 (2004): 117-118.

[25] Palmer, "Baudelaire Series," *CA*, 164.

[26] Ibid, 178.

[27] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 283.

[28] Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practice," 245.

[29] Michael Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Keith Tuma," *Contemporary Literature* 30 (1989): 2.

[30] Paul Celan, "The Meridian," *Collected Prose*, Trans. Rosmarie Waldrop, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999), 51.

writing…[as] close reading" [31] results in a densely interwoven network of intertextual references intended to make his "poethics" explicit:

> I like the possibility of intertextuality. I am a reader, perhaps too much of one, and I live to some degree in the book…Reading becomes co-extensive with the other experiences in my life…it is also a directive to people to go out and look [or listen to what is outside the self]. [32]

Palmer's "poethics" means that he lives in the social world of others through the acts performed when writing and reading poetry, how he self-articulates. However, his call to the reader to "write this" and "say this" indicates that he is equally concerned with the reader realising his/her "response-ability." The difficulty of Palmer's work is necessary because it confirms there is always something personally and politically at stake in how and why we write and read poetry. By listening "prior to understanding" we are "free to speak and become the things we speak," [33] to articulate "(my)Self" as a responsive and responsible ethical subject in the social world of others.

---

[31] Bartlett, 155.
[32] Michael Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Lee Bartlett," 138.
[33] Palmer, "Sun, *CA*, 234.

Chapter 5: Outside(r) Influence in *Blake's Newton* and *The Circular Gates*

Palmer has always sought the counter-cultural, that which is incompatible with, and consequently excluded by, normative standards. This "counter tradition" exists "at the margins of thought, as the poem so often does, and as the poet all too often exists at the margins of material society"[1] and is consequently characterised by a "necessary difficulty" because it refers to the very limits of the known and knowable, the margins where a profound otherness is encountered. He considers those associated with this "counter-tradition" to canonical mainstream poetry as being "outside, I mean *outside*, unpublished and unpublishable."[2] Beginning with those excluded from the "Frost-Eliot-Auden core of officially accepted Modernist poetry,"[3] such as William Carlos Williams, HD, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and Marianne Moore; he also includes the Objectivists Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, Lorine Niedecker, George Oppen and Carl Rakosi, and the San Francisco Renaissance poets Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser. However, Palmer's "Origins (Plural),"[4] as he terms them, are not confined to his indigenous predecessors. This "counter-tradition" includes those who pursue "a poetry that's demanding and complicated, a poetry that engages all of one's being rather than being something like a decor for culture,"[5] as demonstrated by poets such as Dante, Edmond ées, Friedrich Hölderlin, Paul Celan, César Vallejo, Osip Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetaeva. All these poets, to one extent or another, "tend to be outside, in their lifetimes, outside what becomes defined (very roughly) as the canonical mainstream."[6] For Palmer, each is interested in "the possibility of a life entirely given over to the poem,"[7] to the belief that poetry is a way of acting in and interacting with the social world of others. As a result, a radical reconfiguration of poetry occurs because poiesis is no longer just about writing and reading poems but also about poetry as making, as a performative action that demarcates a space for outsiders, a space beyond the categories of the same where encounters with what is normally considered "Other" are possible. Such a space for outsiders allows for what Palmer

---

[1] Ibid.
[2] Michael Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practice," 244, author's emphasis.
[3] Ibid, 237-238.
[4] Ibid, 237.
[5] Ibid, 239.
[6] Ibid, 245.
[7] Ibid, 242.

terms a community that is "not so much defined as imagined,"[8] a community of differences rather than sameness that precludes strategies of containment and discourses of consensus.

Palmer refuses "to support any exclusionary authentication of focus or practice by a particular group,"[9] which often turns out to be as exclusive as it is subversive. However, while he deliberately positions himself as a complete outsider from the beginning, Norman Finkelstein is correct in suggesting that his relocation to San Francisco in 1969 signalled the "heir to some of [the] most important figures [of the Renaissance] symbolically [coming] home."[10] Consequently, his early work, especially *BN* and *CG*, can be seen as being informed by what Blaser identified as the "practice of outside"[11] to explain Spicer's poetics but which Duncan and himself also practiced to varying extents. Blaser's admission that he "come[s] to poetry with a definite sense of foreignness"[12] is equally applicable to Spicer's poetics of dictation and Duncan's derivative poetics, as each is moved by a "desire…to write of that other, outside world."[13] This requires recognising that poetry surpasses individual authorial intention and denies a singular perspective because it exceeds the individual and admits the outside, what lies beyond the self, into the poem in its multiple manifestations as the unknown, the indeterminate, the unintentional and, as will be seen, "(an)Other." However, Palmer does not just repeat the "practice of outside." Instead he reconfigures it into a position of ekstasis, the initial result of his interest in a "counter-tradition" of outsiders that, through the influence of Duncan's derivative poetics, eventually develops into a "poethics of proximity" as a way of living in the real world. He identifies a prominent example of ekstasis in Duncan's:

> dialectical contention between creation and decreation...form and void, being and non-being...[as] the creative imagination struggles endlessly to manifest itself, and by that, paradoxically, to transcend the limits of the self, to obliterate the self, to become other. [Poetic work]...involves a form of *psych-osis*, a standing outside the boundaries...Ec-stasis would offer the brighter image of this state...[as] forces formed within...the "I"...must be channelled toward the obliteration of that "I" or self.[14]

I am not suggesting a limiting genealogy of influence that posits Duncan as the only source from which Palmer derives his poetics since he himself acknowledges "obvious difference[s]

---

[8] Palmer, "Active Boundaries," 207.
[9] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Tuma," 9.
[10] Norman Finkelstein, "The Case of Michael Palmer," *Contemporary Literature* 29 (1988): 518.
[11] Robin Blaser, "The Practice of Outside," 173.
[12] Robin Blaser, "The Fire," *The Fire*, 20.
[13] Ibid, 3.
[14] Michael Palmer, "On Robert Duncan's *Ground Work*," *Active Boundaries*, 20.

in [their] work."[15] Nevertheless, the reason they "could have a conversation for close enough to twenty years was that [they both] had so profound a sympathy about what the vocation of poetry was and about the responsibility of the poet to the work through the poem itself."[16] Following the example of Duncan firstly and his experience at the Vancouver Poetry Conference (1963) secondly, Palmer confirms the importance of 'outside(r) influence' in *BN* and *CG* as a practical means of resisting the residual containment culture and consensus politics persisting from the fifties into the sixties and beyond.

(5.1) Ekstasis: The Practice of Being an Outsider

"Ekstasis," as it functions in Palmer, involves both positioning himself outside particular groups in a practical, everyday sense to avoid questions of orthodoxy, assimilation and oppositionality, and gesturing toward otherness in terms of the poem and the self it writes into existence. From the beginning, Palmer demonstrates a committed "determination not to begin with an entirely preconceived and circumscribed subject or a normative predisposition toward the form and informing nature of poetry,"[17] which refers to "a model for poetry" that "was proposed to [him] in school" and "came out of the New Critical attitude…a model that had become very pedantic…[and] had social implications that were noxious to [him]"[18] In this sense, questions about poetic form as being either open or closed are, whether intentionally or not, involved in the larger political debates surrounding strategies of containment and discourses of consensus. For this reason, whether the poem is considered a self-enclosed, autotelic object of original poetic utterance or an open, heteronomic event conditioned by outside influences is more significant than the reductive, commonplace opposition between closed and open forms implies. Poetry as poeisis refers to the performative act of making, which involves acting in and interacting with the always politicised social world of others.

In "Figure," for example, Palmer uses "the gammadion"[19] to demonstrate how these changing circumstances can radically alter the meaning of a text despite the intentions of the poet:

---

[15] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 288.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid, 272.
[18] Michael Palmer, "The River City Interview," Interviewed by Paul Naylor, Lyndsay Hill and J. P. Craig, River City 14 (1994).
[19] Michael Palmer, *Blake's Newton* (Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1972), 24.

> formed of four capital
> gammas
> in a cross
> or voided Greek cross
> the same gammadion
> the gamma she reads
> meaning cornerstone.[20]

The gammadion originally symbolised both the unity of the four corners of the world and the four constitutive elements of water, fire, air and earth. However, given its appropriation by the Nazis and its subsequent identification with right-wing politics, it is now "voided" and no longer "the same gammadion." Because the symbol consists of Greek letters, "four capital/gammas," it is also a word, thus demonstrating how the meanings of words are often outside the individual's control but also, and perhaps more importantly, how even the personal use of language cannot be separated from the politics of the period. Palmer relates this to:

> not seeing
> the Gegenschein
> or counterglow
> an elliptical light
> opposite the sun[21]

As will be seen, this is not the only use of astrological terms to explain how his poetry might be read. Palmer is identifying the need to at least acknowledge the complete opposite of what might be intended by the author of any particular utterance. The reference to "Sagittarius the centaur,"[22] the wanderer of the Zodiac, suggests that only those who remain beyond the bounds of society can properly understand oppositions without becoming confined within them. Palmer's early poetry indicates how a position of ekstasis encourages readers to become outsiders in this sense, capable of reading the poem to engage with the other of what the poet intends and consequently encounter the otherness implicit in the text. Developing this theme, he explains in "The Old Movie (Or Le Fou, June 1967)" how:

> I'm in it and it's
> dark

---

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

and I'm reading Kit Smart.[23]

Reading Christopher Smart, an eighteenth century English poet who wrote his most famous poems while confined in numerous mental asylums during a period when the very nature of madness and its treatment were being debated, illustrates Palmer's interest in the position of the outsider, s/he who deviates from the normative standards of the period:

> Last night I lost my
>
> watch (my clock),
> but I'm coming out to
>
> get it
> and get you too.[24]

Palmer aspires to "coming [or getting] out" in a personal and political sense, to becoming an outsider and in doing so enacting how his readers can do the same. *BN* is concerned with madness as a relative construct according to rational thinking since it is named after William Blake's *Newton*, a poet and painter who embodies the outsider position as he was regarded a madman by his contemporaries when he was actually a visionary who was ahead of, and therefore outside, the habitual epistemological systems of his time.

It is in this context that Duncan's poetry proved so revelatory as a way of living in the social world of others; a way of exploring the personal and political issues pertinent in the sixties that remained open to others' differences. Furthermore, it also explains why Palmer's relocation from the East to the West Coast to, amongst other things, converse with Duncan proved so significant. As he explains, Duncan proposed an alternative "to the poets I was encountering at that time in Harvard, the confessional poets, whose work was grounded to a greater or lesser degree in New Criticism."[25] Palmer's movement westward is his literal distancing himself from poetry that had "a cultural frame already attached to" it and was closely related "to the cultural centre" that manifests within this work.[26] During his formal education at Harvard from "'61-'65," [27] Palmer experienced an "eagerness to laud formulaic

---

[23] Ibid, 42.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Palmer, "The River City Interview."
[26] Ibid.
[27] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 273.

contemporary verse, verse which displayed its theme and culture in no uncertain terms and which tended to subscribe to conventions of voice, tone, etc."[28] Similar to Ashbery's decision to remain in Paris for ten years to evade the appropriative, neutralising force of the "acceptance world"[29] in mainstream American culture, Palmer's relocation to San Francisco represents a complete rejection of the establishment. In his case the normative critical standards of East Coast poetry centred around the Ivy League universities, due to the dominance of New Criticism's normative critical standards as the authority despite it "aesthetically and politically...[tending] toward a reactionary nostalgia,"[30] and the expressivist poetics of the confessionalists. While the "practice of outside" associated with the San Francisco Renaissance poets was important to Palmer's own developing poetics, he provides an indication in "Bad to the Bone: What I Learned Outside" as to why Duncan in particular would prove so influential, addressing what he identifies as his search for a "door out of [normative standards] and into alternative [personal and political] values and bahaviours,[31] a positive gesture of negation and anarchic refusal of temporal and spatial boundaries that circumscribe what can be said in poetry. Duncan is intrinsic to what Palmer identifies as an "evolution of the relationship with inside and outside."[32] Even before considering how his derivative poetics preclude a distinction between the inside and the outside because both are inscribed in the text, "Relativity, A Love Letter, and Relative to What; A Love Letter" (1937/1938) is an early example of how Duncan radically complicates these categories:

> To come suddenly upon something. Suddenly upon something and
> And partly only in being. To be outside and partly in being in by the
> inside. Suddenly inside to come suddenly partly only to being. Being
> only as for one partly understanding and a shut door.
> Shutting out and shutting in. Shutting out shutting in and shutting
> in shutting out. Inside and outside shut in. Inside and outside shut out.
> Shut out. Shut, partly being shut and partly being shut. Inside and shut.
> To come suddenly out and shut in.[33]

---

[28] Ibid, 272.
[29] Ashbery, "American Sanctuary in Paris," 91.
[30] Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practices," 241.
[31] Michael Palmer, "Bad to the Bone: What I Learned Outside," Lecture at the Jack Kerouac Centre of Disembodied Poetics (2002), 14' 25''.
[32] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 280.
[33] Robert Duncan, "Relativity, A Love Letter, and Relative to What; A Love Letter," *The Collected Early Poems and Plays,* ed. Peter Quartermain (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 106.

The final line suggests that Duncan's negation of the binary opposition that the categories of inside and outside reinforce is informed by his unique homosexual politics, his understanding that to "come…out" as gay is to be simultaneously "shut in" the category of homosexual.

It is easy to understand why Palmer, who himself warns that being oppositional "will eventuate in futility, with our own means turned against us,"[34] would identify so completely with the author of "The Homosexual in Society," who argued that "minority associations and identifications were an evil wherever they supersede allegiance to [fellow-manhood] and share in the creation of a human community good...[where there is] only the tribe and its covenant that are good, and all of mankind outside and their ways are evil."[35] While Duncan's stance was pioneering, his homosexuality was always a secondary concern to his deconstruction of any bounded sense of identity in order to make a difference by making something different:

> What I think can be asserted as a starting point is that only one devotion can be held by a human being seeking a creative life and expression, and that is a devotion to human freedom...To do this one must disown *all* the special groups (nations, churches, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance. To hold this devotion every written word, every spoken word, every action, every purpose must be examined and considered.[36]

This is the vocation Palmer identifies with, a way of living in the social world of others and negotiating "the old fears, the old specialities [that] will be there, mocking and tempting; the old protective associations [that] will be there."[37] Duncan's politics take precedence over his sexuality as he critiques oppositional minority groups for perpetuating the same strategies of containment and discourses of consensus exercised by the normative majority, the "somehow hostile, the sinister affiliation offered by groups with whom [he] had no common ground other than the specialised sexuality" and the attendant "anxiety concerning the good opinion of the community."[38] As a result, Duncan always writes "*against* closed communities...in order to appeal to a general public trust, rather than allied or exclusive group interests."[39] Because he is aware of the "multiple exclusions and the dynamics between them and the included categories,"[40] he *makes* a "community of values [in his poetry that] is more openly defined."[41]

---

[34] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Tuma," 8.
[35] Robert Duncan, "The Homosexual in Society," *A Selected Prose*, 38.
[36] Ibid, 47.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid, 48.
[39] Eric Keenaghan, "Vulnerable Households: Cold War Containment and Robert Duncan's Queered Nation," *Journal of Modern Literature* 28 (2005): 60.
[40] Ibid, 62.
[41] Duncan, "The Homosexual in Society," 48.

In a period marked by a "terror and hatred of all communal things, of communion,/of communism,"[42] Duncan's refusal to perpetuate the exclusionary ethos of minoritising, oppositional groups in favour of inclusivity and openness toward individual differences illustrates the politics of ekstasis.

Ekstasis, positioning oneself outside the body-politic, is not to deny one's responsibility but an opportunity to realise one's "response-ability," albeit without the "protective associations" provided by strategies of containment and discourses of consensus. Duncan's example was crucial for Palmer at a time when "a much more nomadic human responsiveness" was needed; he was someone who didn't "think political responsibility [was] diminished by that...if anything, the immediate political responsibility [was] increased but it's a responsibility to the actual human world rather than to abstractions."[43] He believed "effective political poetry…[should avoid] oppositional, polarising attacks," such as those found in the Vietnam War-era.[44] This led to his infamous disagreement with Denise Levertov, whose involvement in the war resistance movement Duncan saw as the absorption of the "participating individual into factional group opinion"[45] that only further polarised debates and reduced the capacity to effect social change. Duncan "was always against the coercion of group action, or a movement with a cause"[46] because he was an advocate of individual volition and Levertov's overt political alignments not only circumscribed her agency but "betrayed the position of the artist"[47] by limiting her imaginative activity and abandoning her individuality by accepting the mass position. His ground-breaking, or opening, triptych from the sixties, *The Opening of the Field* (1960), *Roots and Branches* (1964) and *Bending the Bow* (1968), demonstrates how poetry is about *making* a space for political agency rather than advancing a particular political position that might exclude others and erase individual differences. The opening poem of this period, "Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," complicates the distinction between open and closed forms, and inside and outside, by "turning continually on the dichotomy of inner and

---

[42] Robert Duncan, "Uprising Rising, Passages 25," *Bending the Bow* (New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1968), 81.

[43] Palmer, "The River City Interview."

[44] Andy Weaver, "Promoting "a community of thoughtful men and women": Anarchism in Robert Duncan's *Ground Work* Volumes," *ESC* 34 (2008): 71.

[45] Anne Dewey, "Poetic Authority and the Public Sphere of Politics in the Activist 1960s: The Duncan-Levertov Debate," *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, The Politics of Poetry*, ed. Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 115.

[46] Robert J. Bertholf, "Decision at the Apogee: Robert Duncan's Anarchist Critique of Denise Levertov," *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, The Politics of Poetry*, 11.

[47] Ibid.

outer world,"[48] thereby indicating how a position of ekstasis functions as an immediate counter to strategies of containment and discourses of consensus. The "meadow" refers to:

> a scene made-up by the mind,
> that is not mine, but is a made place,
> that is mine, it is so near to the heart,[49]

"Composition by field" is the dominant metaphor as Duncan's poem is the manifestation of the creative act, of poiesis as the *making* of a communal space where the poet, "all architectures I am," is acted upon by outside(r) influences:

> I say are likenesses of the First Beloved
> whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.
>
> She it is Queen Under the Hill.[50]

Duncan is responding to his muses here, he is realising his "response-ability" toward others so the poem is about the primal act of language. Like the "children's game/of ring a round of roses told,"[51] the poem is a variation on a codified ritual despite its apparent originality and is literally brought round to its origins with the repetition of the title, which is also the opening line, in the closing sentence. The circularity of "Often I am Permitted..." makes the poem enclosed but it is not closed-off due to the "disturbance of words within words."[52] This suggestion that words inherently contain other, even others', words, foregrounds the profound sense of intertextuality in Duncan's work, so meaning cannot be contained within the boundaries of single poems or even collections. *The Opening of the Field* introduces the serial poems "The Structure of Rime" and "Passages" that feature throughout the sixties' collections and beyond, so that this opening poem is "an eternal pasture folded in all thought/so that there is a hall therein."[53] Duncan's "made place" is a common space, a point of entry into his work but one that remains "a place of first permission,"[54] not a prescriptive guide to how the poems should be read but an opportunity for the reader to realise his/her "response-ability" by, as Palmer himself notes,

---

[48] Norman Finklestein, "Robert Duncan, Poet of the Law," *Sagetrieb* 2, (1983): 81.
[49] Robert Duncan, *The Opening of the Field*, (New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1960) 7.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

"wandering...through the passages...finding one's way without a map beforehand, to see what specific information [and intertextual references] would arise from the words themselves."[55] Duncan's work necessitates a certain responsiveness in the reader and Palmer envisions *BN* having a similar function, demarcating and thus making a space for the reader to realise his/her "response-ability:"

> This is a room
>
> Give me this and
> this. This
>
> book ends some
> time when it ends and
>
> this is a room.[56]

By referring to both a "made-up" and a "made place," Palmer's poem is an imagined common space and an actual space of political agency where he enacts how strategies of containment and discourses of consensus can be undermined by allowing the aberrant voices of outsiders to enter the poem. In this sense, the poem is a:

> place for prohibited content (there's a politics of sexuality and a politics of the political involved here) and as a place where things can be inscribed, for attending to the...problematic limits that our everyday discourse tends to put on what we are able to say...as something that can shatter those limits rather than address those limits and inscribe itself within those limits.[57]

Like Duncan, Palmer is concerned with returning poetry to its origins, to making, in this case, a space where "response-ability" can be realised by those who want to remain outside the bounds of the body-politic.

---

[55] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 272.
[56] Palmer, "I Trapped a Fish," *BN*, 40.
[57] Palmer, "Counter Poetics and Current Practice," 245.

(5.2) The Poetics of Derivation in *Blake's Newton*

In the final pages of Palmer's first collection, two inclusions are particularly important for appreciating how he begins developing a position of ekstasis learned from the San Francisco Renaissance poets into his own "poethics of proximity." Firstly, Duncan provides the autobiographical blurb for the book and is, therefore, inseparable from Palmer's first act of writing himself into existence as a poet, he is present at the origins of Palmer's body of work. Secondly, Palmer provides an index detailing *some* of the sources he has "drawn [on] or distorted,"[58] for example, "New Spring" by Heinrich Heine in "Its Form," the diary of Jacopo da Pontormo in "Holy Tuesday" and letters by Hart Crane in "Here (2)" and "Here (3)." Palmer also includes phrases "from books such as [Noah] Webster's Second [Edition of *The American Dictionary of the English Language*], Colin Cherry, *On Human Communication*; Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object, From a Logical Point of View*."[59] As seen with Duncan previously, Palmer begins *BN* with "Its Form," a poem that is "somewhat in fragments – fragments of, constellations of voices"[60] and which enacts the poetics, and the political and personal commitments**,** he will concern himself with as a recurring topic throughout his work. It is the primal act of language Palmer will constantly return to. This constellation of voices makes Duncan's presence even more pronounced, especially since he describes himself in the jacket copy of *Roots and Branches* "not [as] experimentalist or [as] an inventor, but a derivative poet, drawing [his] art from the resources given by a generation of masters." Consequently, Palmer's index can only be seen as a partial list of his sources, with the result that the reader is constantly questioning whether a particular poem, or the entire collection in fact, is an original utterance by the poet, a distortion of other material, or the presence of others' voices. Such an effect is intentional given Palmer's use of Cherry's *On Human Communication* (1966), which addressed the "cocktail party effect," the ability to selectively attend to a single voice amid a cacophony of other voices. "Speech (Across Time)" further substantiates Palmer's investigation of voice according to Cherry's premise:

> The tract of voice
> now in wave form.
> Relative energy, decibels
> a woman's rising

---

[58] Palmer, *Blake's Newton*, 61.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 274.

pitch clearly graphed.[61]

The constellation of voices is "'A stream of sound'" similar to Cherry's analogy of the cocktail party, "…a large crowd/laughing. Spectrum/of harmonics."[62] While "Speech (Across Time)" might be derived from Cherry's text, it also indicates how derivation itself functions in Palmer's poetry, how "sound/pulls on sequent sound."[63] This opportunity for the reader to realise his/her "response-ability" is necessarily difficult because s/he is encouraged to identify and isolate the voice of the poet from the constellation of other voices in the text.

Palmer's use of Quine's *Word and Object* (1960) further emphasises his interest in the "necessary difficulty" attendant upon a "poetics of derivation." This text contains the American analytic philosopher's thought experiment "radical translation," which proves his thesis regarding the inscrutability of reference. For Quine, translation is always indeterminate because no determinate interpretation is possible since the meaning of a word changes according to its context. For this reason, multiple translations of the one sentence are possible because any given sentence can be changed into a whole range of other sentences where the different parts will change what they reference but the meaning of the whole sentence is maintained nonetheless. "After Picabia" demonstrates Palmer's use of the inscrutability of reference in his "poetics of derivation:"

how pretty you are
maybe
more
than you think
you are pretty
you are prettier
than they[64]

The inscrutability of reference is absolute here since, in terms of its semantic content, the referent of the second-person pronoun is completely indeterminate, while the original source of the derivation cannot be determined. Palmer's inclusion of what appears to be the title of a poem by Francis Picabia, "L'Abime de la Perfection," means it could literally be a translation. However, by repeatedly emphasising the beauty of its subject, Palmer's poem could equally be

---

[61] Palmer, "Speech (Across Time)," *BN*, 10.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Michael Palmer, "After Picabia," *BN*, 56.

referring to Picabia's *Portrait of a Young American Girl in a State of Nudity* (1915) or *Behold a Woman* (1915), where the depiction of women in perfectly utilitarian, mechanical terms also represents "l'abime de la perfection," the depths of perfection. Palmer's derivations are designed to create "imbrication[s],"[65] layers of multiple possible meanings that mediate between the poet's intention and the reader's interpretation. As he explains:

> I don't think the reader has any responsibility per se. I think it depends on the reader involved. I'm unhappy to think of the idea of readers reading at a level untouched by the notions of where I'm sampling from. Some readers will recognise more initially; some won't recognise any. I don't think one kind of reading is privileged over another; I think that they're interestingly different.[66]

Quite significantly, this discussion of the extent of the reader's responsibility explains how Duncan's example influences Palmer's nascent "poethics of proximity." Duncan's insistence that "Responsibility is to keep/the ability to respond"[67] confirms the possibility of "response-ability," of the reader encountering a profound otherness in the text, "a disturbance of words within words." For Palmer, if he "frame[s his derivation] as a text from elsewhere, it loses that multidirectionality that it has in relation to the *I* of the poem in here."[68] In providing the source, Palmer insists, you're "depriving the reader" of the ability to question "that *I* who is speaking."[69] A poetics of derivation raises important ethical questions about the type of self being written into existence. Rather than seeing it as an instance of the postmodern preclusion of originality and authenticity, it is the proposal of a "composite identity grafted from a range of citational particulars."[70] The self is shown to be entirely dependent on external sources, or outside influences, and is realised by the poet's "response-ability" to these through his/her derivations. Consequently, a "poetics of derivation" bears similarities with the act of translating because the derivations are not simply repetitions but instances of interpretive re-composition as the poet changes the meaning of the source material by placing it in a different context. For Palmer:

---

[65] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 286.
[66] Palmer, "The River City Interview."
[67] Robert Duncan, "The Law I Love is Major Mover," *The Opening of the Field*, 10.
[68] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 286.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Andrew Mossin, "Unveiling Expectancy: Nathaniel Mackay, Robert Duncan, and the Formation of Discrepant Subjectivity," *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 551.

all poetry is, of course translation, a bearing across from one region to another, a crossing of borders, a conjoining of same with other. It is a voyage out of the self-same...into a fluid semantic and ontological field...The extensions of voice, beyond that one with which we come into the world. The elsewhere so necessary to any understanding of the here-and-now.[71]

Considering derivations as translations allows for an encounter with otherness, with what lies beyond the "self-same," because it accepts difference through engagement with others' voices rather than refusing or excluding them as foreign. As a result, the poems are always at least two-voiced, which fundamentally reconfigures the category of poet and the conventional notion of authorship as autonomous, spontaneous self-expression. In such poems, the line between poet and reader is blurred since this compositional method is predicated on "a dual practice of reading writings and writing readings," such that "reading becomes a type of writing and writing becomes a type of reading."[72] Any discussion of the reader's responsibility to determine the various sources for the poet's derivations consequently changes to the question of the reader's "response-ability," his/her capacity to determine the extent of his/her level of participation. The difficulty of derivative poems is that the innovations in how such poems are written require similar innovations in how they are read. They require a method of "open reading" that "extends beyond the poet's own work,"[73] so both the poet and the reader are involved in poiesis, in the act of making. In the case of the poet, this refers to making a space for political agency, whereas for readers it involves making another text by translating and in doing so writing him/herself into existence as a particular type of reader.

As mentioned already, Palmer uses the visual metaphor of constellations to indicate his intention to make a space for the reader and how reading his poems serves an insistently political function. Commenting on itself, "A Vitruvian Figure by Juan Gris:"

begins with a line from Donne
or anyone, that drawes Natures works
from Natures law[74]

---

[71] Michael Palmer, "Poetry and Contingency," 55-56.

[72] Andy Weaver, "Divining the Derivers: Anarchism and the Practise of Derivative Poetics in Robert Duncan and John Cage," *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*, Ed. Stephen Collis and Graham Lyons (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 197.

[73] Graham Lyons, "Is the Queendom Enough (without the Queen)?: Poetic Abdication in Robert Duncan and Laura Riding," *Reading Duncan Reading*, 104.

[74] Palmer, "A Vitruvian Figure by Juan Gris," *BN*, 28.

When Palmer explicitly discloses the source of his derivations, as demonstrated by the index containing Cherry and Quine, he is revealing its particular purpose. By quoting from John Donne's "Sappho to Philaenis," a poem that defends the lesbian relationship between the women in its title to advance the possibility of complete equality, Palmer reveals the similarly utopian vision in *BN*. These outsiders embody a non-hierarchical relationship between individuals that is accepting of difference. The title might imply a standard ekphrastic poem but the subject is "an unidentified painting."[75] It can even be argued that Gris' *A Vitruvian Figure* is a derivation of Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, albeit reinterpreted and translated so the gender hierarchy of the original is negated:

> features this time a woman's figure
> defining a circle compressed
> where the arms are too weak to extend.
> /.../
>   ...and the legs
> spread wide marking
> the limits of the ring. [76]

While radically different, Gris' translation, "supposedly/building up forms from/the separate parts,"[77] reaffirms Quine's proposal that the constituent parts might change but the overall message remains unchanged, or as Palmer phrases it, "Each day some features change."[78] Palmer's poem can be read as heightening the interrelationship between the personal and the political as it evokes Da Vinci's reconciling of the microcosmic with the macrocosmic. *Vitruvian Man* was part of his "larger project to show how the human body illustrated and replicated all the processes at work in the larger cosmos," to provide a "cosmography of the microcosm" that showed how "normal units of measurement were derived from the dimensions of the human body" and would result in "knowledge of the human body" revealing the workings of the world and of the political...order."[79] The subsequent poem, "A Measure," reinforces Palmer's interest in this aspect of the scientist-artist's original drawing. "A Vitruvian Figure...," therefore, lends a whole new meaning to the body-politic Palmer concerns himself

---

[75] Robert D. Denham, *Poets on Paintings: A Bibliography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc, 2010), 158.

[76] Palmer, "A Vitruvian Figure…," *BN*, 28.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Sarah Tarlow, *Ritual, Belief and the Dead in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 70.

with since in referring to an alternative, female body to collapse the gender hierarchy, the political system he envisions must be equally alternative to establish non-hierarchical relationships between individuals.

Through the arrangement of *BN*, Palmer encourages the reader to consider how the collection as a whole might be read, thus making the politics of his poetics more readily apparent. The first three poems "Its Form," "Speech Across Time" and "Holy Tuesday," which immediately introduce his "poetics of derivation," are followed by "A View of Miaplacidus," "A Curious Thing The" and "Among Various," three poems that address constellations. Firstly, Miaplacidus, one of the brightest stars, is mentioned as a demonstration of how one particular derivation can be used by the reader to determine how the entire collection is interpreted. *BN* is a constellation of different voices but being able to identify one to begin with allows for the particular constellation Palmer has in mind to be mapped out:

> Mid-December of our year
> nearing solstice
> a view of Miaplacidus
> at a third remove.[80]

The reader's interpretation is at "a third remove" since it translates Palmer's translation of an initial text through his derivation. Multiple texts and subtexts, therefore, might exist in a single poem but its structure, "Its Form," ensures that each component contributes to the whole rather than subordinating certain elements to privilege others. This feature of his emerging poetics is correlated to his formative years in New York City, a culture where no single "coherent narrative [is] at the centre" that consequently made him "interested in representing the constellations of voices."[81] As will be seen, the painting Palmer names the collection after, Blake's *Newton*, casts an "invisible light"[82] throughout that encourages reading the entire collection as a response to, if not a derivation of, it. Secondly, "A Curious Thing The" refers to "…Pegasus/whose stars; in October/the Centaur opposite the sun."[83] This poem conveys the "counter-visuality" in Palmer, a "resistance to the static image:"[84]

---

[80] Michael Palmer, "A View of Miaplacidus," *BN*, 12.
[81] Palmer, "River City Interview."
[82] Palmer, *Blake's Newton*, 12.
[83] Michael Palmer, "A Curious Thing The," *BN*, 13.
[84] Palmer, "The River City Interview."

> houses are red and green
> the ducks have gone while there's
> room
> and the ice is clear[85]

The scene described here requires a lot of work to make it complete because its subject moves between the houses, the ducks and the ice, producing "an invocation of [an image] that is more nomadic and that forces the reader into a somewhat more active mode of reading."[86] A more active, responsive approach to reading inscribes the role of the reader using the figure of the wanderer Sagittarius, "the Centaur." S/He must wander through the non-hierarchical "field of oriented possibilities," [87] the multiple derivations that each poem consists of, without a predetermined map. The reader is constantly questioning what is a derivation, which "can be answered/'everything,' [88] since his method of not appropriating a source verbatim but translating it, radically altering it according to "the impetus of the poem itself, the demands of the rhythm, the surrounding material"[89] creates the suspicion that every poem is a derivation of some sort. Extending Palmer's mention of the centaur here, a "poetics of derivation" figures writing and reading as hybrid activities because writing is informed by what the poet is reading and reading constitutes a further act of writing. Thirdly and finally, "Among Various" asks:

> Can you still mark each
>
> interval by stars.
> Two
> colours mix in the pipe
>
> one hiding l's and r's
> and then the lost letters.[90]

Palmer seems to be questioning the possibility of keeping his various derivations separate and the reader's ability to differentiate between them when they are so rarely repeated verbatim but instead translated so that some parts of the original are hidden and some parts are omitted. This method of composition leads the reader to question who is actually speaking:

---

[85] Palmer, "A Curious Thing The," *BN*, 13.
[86] Palmer, "The River City Interview."
[87] Palmer, "A Curious Thing The," *BN*, 13.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Michael Gardner," 286.
[90] Palmer, "Among Various," *BN*, 14.

> ....Later
> that night
>
> she uses a different voice
> to tell the future after
> it arrives
>
> without surprises.[91]

Palmer explicitly accentuates an important feature of his "poetics of derivation," the "fact that all of these voices are coming through even though you're doing the saying,"[92] which inevitably disorients the reader and limits his/her ability to separate the "I" of the poet from that of others in the constellation of voices he creates. The question of who is speaking raises important "poethical" issues, as the subject is being written into existence through an extended conversation with others.

To remedy what might otherwise be considered a failure on behalf of the reader, Palmer advocates trusting "a kind of errancy, which is also an erring, making errors…to see what specific information would arise from the words themselves."[93] The emphasis here is on "*making* errors," on the reader utilising the opportunity to realise his/her "response-ability" by resisting normative standards and avoiding habitual thinking in order to pursue a particular derivation that s/he considers significant but others potentially don't. In realising his/her "response-ability," the reader must be responsible for that particular response, for whatever derivations s/he has selected and paid attention to in his/her interpretation. By insisting that error is a vital part of this process, Palmer is encouraging his readers to be outsiders and makes a space for them where their "response-ability" can be realised. As "Its Form" demonstrates, with its constellation of voices, he achieves what Duncan always hoped his readers would, identifying the alternative political model he advances and consequently enacting it in his/her daily life, in his/her work.

Rather than dismissing derivative poems as mere quotation, they should be seen as advancing quite radical ideas about language as a communal entity, creativity as a non-hierarchical collaboration and form as open-ended, inclusive and organic. By enacting how one might position oneself outside the normative standards of the body-politic, derivative poems embody a "model of political anarchism."[94] Despite the negative, and often misinformed,

---

[91] Ibid.
[92] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Michael Gardner," 282.
[93] Ibid, 272.
[94] Weaver, "Promoting "a community of thoughtful men and women," 71.

attitudes toward anarchism, its basic philosophical principles endorse a system of "continual evolution – such as we see in Nature," a system in which the "mutual relations of its members are regulated, not by laws, not by authorities, whether self-imposed or elected, but by mutual agreements between the members" that continually develop and readjust "in accordance with the ever-growing requirements of a free life."[95] This should not be confused with some kind of utopian democracy, which would still require that the "individual abdicate his sovereignty by handing it over to a representative"[96] and the minority "submit to an external...force: the will of the majority."[97] Palmer's "poetics of derivation" and the method of "open reading" they encourage help normalise an anarchist politics through its emphasis on the poem as a communal space that displays the non-hierarchical interdependency of the constituent derivatives, the different voices of others. The constellation of voices "tends to set up its own valences of cross-referencing…the words begin to do the talking…[and] to speak to each other."[98] Derivative poems are "a social art, things known/written down"[99] because they make the communal activities required for an alternative political model to be achieved more evident. Because *BN* raises the possibility that every poem is a potential derivation, the "idea of volition, the freedom to make a choice, and then the perseverance to maintain the decision"[100] is foregrounded as the reader is free to pursue derivations without being coerced into a particular interpretation or having to adhere to a prescribed method of reading.

Without knowing it, the reader enacts an alternative political model where "the individual is free to act as long as his actions do not impinge on the freedom to act of other people,"[101] similar to the reader being responsible for his/her interpretation while also acknowledging the possibility of innumerable different interpretations by other readers. Palmer effectively engages the reader through the "political consciousness…[in his] work…[rather than] an overriding ideology"[102] to imagine and enact an alternative way of living through his/her activities of reading his work, of interpreting and translating it. He, like Duncan, opposes only oppositionality, the segregating movements that isolate the individual from society and ultimately deny individuality. Therefore, *BN* advocates a way of living in the social

---

[95] Peter Kropotkin, *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 157.

[96] George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2004), 30.

[97] Ibid, 31.

[98] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner, 277.

[99] Palmer, "Actual Memories Mostly," *BN*, 39.

[100] Bertholf, 3.

[101] Ibid, 4.

[102] Palmer, "The River City Interview."

world of others "based on the assumption that the most desirable human good is…freedom of the individual human being…[in] a society in which [wo/]men will have the liberty to develop their personalities…in a world where there exist no longer the bonds of…coercion." [103] Realising what he learned from Duncan, the collection is a "made place" of volition, of "individual choice in thought and action in the community of others also acting individually," where "response-ability" is possible *and* being responsible for one's responses is necessitated, which highlights the distinction between individuals acting cooperatively and interacting as equals, and individuals acting uniformly under the coercion of a [hierarchical authority]." [104]

Palmer's anarchism involves changing how we write and read poetry to critique the predominant assumptions about meaning, to question who exactly is speaking, to interrogate the autotelic subject, to complicate the binaries of inside(r) and outside(r), and to negate the hierarchies structuring how we live in the social world of others. Ultimately, this serves the purpose of demonstrating how the reader can participate in similar activities and in doing so position him/herself outside the existing system, how s/he can become an outsider like the poet and join a community of different voices, of voices making a difference. Realising "response-ability" in this instance involves valuing and responding to the activities of others without recourse to coercion and acknowledging that they are irreducibly different to one's own but nevertheless motivated by a common concern.

(5.3) Against Containment

Perhaps *BN*'s most important feature is how it collapses any tenable distinction between the personal, the political and the poetic. For example, the distinct categories of prose and poetry are invalidated in the "Prose" series, six poems typographically arranged into stanzas but whose sentences display the type of enjambment associated with prose. "Prose" also introduces the serial poem, a recurrent feature throughout Palmer's work used to violate the boundaries of single collections. An otherwise simple issue of poetics becomes a significant personal and political question due to a rare autobiographical admission in "Prose 1," "I changed my/name

---

[103] George Woodcock, *Anarchy or Chaos* (London: Freedom Press, 1944), 6.
[104] Bertholf, 5.

not to be recognised."[105] Palmer, "who changed his own name after college"[106] from George to Michael, personally enacts the complicated, political problem of naming, "Today I woke up and it was the following/stage.../...In the/mirror nothing was the same."[107] As he explains, changing his name was vital to him becoming a poet as it "was a very modest way of freeing myself of an identity that I had grown up with. I think for me to become a poet…was a project of self-rearticulation out of the…social expectations that had been laid upon me, out of the habits of…obedience." [108] This act constituted "alternative possibilities for constructing a life that would be other than" the bourgeois reality he was accustomed to, "that would be other."[109] By insisting on the arbitrariness of the signs used to define identity, Palmer problematises the corresponding categories that contain individuals, limit their thinking within prescribed epistemological systems and determine how they act in and interact with the social world of others.

In naming the collection after Blake's *Newton*, Palmer conflates the imaginary and the intellectual and using the visionary poet's monotype of the empirical scientist indicates the constitutive hybridity that complicates any attempt to either impose or maintain determinate categories. Blake is significant as a poet who privileged outside influence through his dictation theory of textual production, his ability to "write from immediate dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will."[110] The importance of Blake is heightened by the fact that the collection is an image-text combining Palmer's poems and Bobbie Creeley's illustrations. The poet's admission that he's "never considered the arts as isolate entities, either one from another or from other pursuits in this life"[111] is corroborated by a subsection entitled "A Ring: Seven Poems," which consists of six poems and one illustration. However, this is not simply a question of poetics since it is coextensive with the other personal and political "pursuits in this life," it enacts a way of living in the social world of others that negates strategies of containment and subverts discourses of consensus. Because of his status as a poet-painter, "any attempt to characterise the typography or calligraphy of Blake's illuminated books is frustrated by his subversion of the normal

---

[105] Palmer, "Prose 1," *BN*, 48.

[106] Eric Murphy Selinger, "Important Pleasures and Others: Michael Palmer, Ronald Johnson," *Postmodern Culture* 4 (1994): para. 27, <http://www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/24/important-pleasures-and-others-michael-palmer-ronald-johnson/>. Accessed: 14th Janurary 2015.

[107] Palmer, *Blake's Newton*, 48.

[108] Michael Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gizzi," 168.

[109] Ibid.

[110] William Blake, "Letter: To M' Butts, Gr' Marlborough Street," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 728.

[111] Michael Palmer, "On the Sustaining of Culture in Dark Times," *Active Boundaries*, 39.

categories into which we sort texts...[since he] deliberately violates the boundary between written and pictorial forms."[112] Palmer appreciates that it is not just about "pushing painting toward the ideogrammatic realm of writing" but also pushing "alphabetic writing toward the realm of pictorial values, asking us to see his alphabetic forms with our senses, not just read through or past them to the signified speech or 'concept' behind them, but to pause at the sensuous surface of calligraphic and typographic forms."[113] In this sense, Creeley's non-figurative, black and white illustrations are much more than just an addendum to Palmer's poems (Fig. 6 & 7).
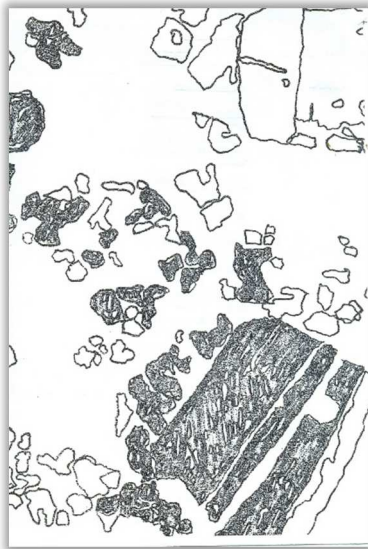
(Fig. 6) Bobbie Creeley, illustration
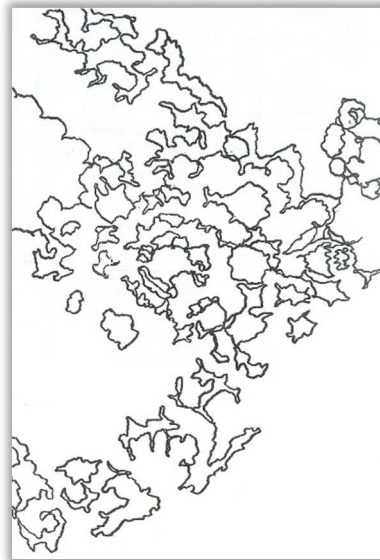
(Fig. 7) Bobbie Creeley, illustration

The majority resemble estuaries, dynamic, semi-enclosed bodies of water situated between the land and the sea where rivers meet the ocean, with the numerous white passages weaving among differently shaped and sized islets of various shades of black. They literally visualise the intended experience of reading *BN*, of having to negotiate the numerous possible passages through the collection and engaging with the constellation of others' voices, some of which consolidate together around a disclosed derivation while the rest remain less apparent allusions or completely altered repetitions. Working together, the relationship between the components

---

[112] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 145-146.
[113] Ibid, 147.

of the image-text demonstrates how differences can be acknowledged without reducing them through assimilation by or appropriation into categories of the same, a prerequisite for the "poethics of proximity" Palmer develops to encourage his readers to realise how they can encounter and respond to another person without reducing his/her constitutive alterity, his/her fundamental difference.

"A Reasoned Reply to Gilbert Ryle (after Blake's Newton)" and "For L.Z." provide the most complete invalidation of oppositional categories in *BN* in a rare example of Palmer's intentions being immediately apparent through the individuals referred to in the titles. Ryle famously introduced the "category mistake" in *The Concept of Mind* (1949) to critique the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. The dualistic theory makes a basic "category mistake" because it attempts to analyse the relation between mind and body as if mental processes could be separated from physical processes. Ryle dissolves the Cartesian mind-body dualism by identifying an implicit misuse of language, of applying properties that are appropriate to one category to make sense of another, a pertinent example of reducing the difference of something by containing it in categories of the same. In addition, Blake's *Newton* collapses the oppositional categories of art and science. Blake and Newton represent the inevitable occurrence of one component in an oppositional construction becoming ascendant over another, which often leads to the latter's exclusion from the normative standards of the period. In this case, Newton's mathematical systems and calculations achieve ascendency over Blake's imagination and prophetic inspiration. The imposition of mathematical forms onto nature symbolises the ultimate denial of difference, the reduction of otherness and the refusal to engage with what cannot be, even should not be, completely known. Palmer provides "A Reasoned Reply..." by invalidating the oppositional categories used to understand, but which ultimately limit the potential of, poetry. His suggestion that "Sound becomes difficult/to dispose of"[114] implies that the sense and the sensuality of poetry cannot be disentangled, that the sound cannot be entirely subordinated to the semantics of poetry. The difficulty highlights "...the problem/of light and air,"[115] or sight and sound, raising the question about poetry as something to be read or something to be listened to. Palmer avoids making the "category mistake" of prioritising one over another and also confuses the apparent opposition between the literal and the figurative:

---

[114] Palmer, "A Reasoned Reply to Gilbert Ryle," *BN*, 16.
[115] Ibid.

> Trouble through the other
>
> eye
> which stays open
>
> unless the window itself
> is broken.[116]

As a result, the distinction between the rational and the imaginative is complicated through the image of the eye representing a physical perspective "through" which things are perceived and a psychical window into someone. As he explains in "Allen Says We Let in No Light," these are "difficult poems/.../as anyone listening or/reading will notice."[117] They are difficult because the poems require analysis both in terms of their semantic sense and their aural sensuality.

"For L.Z." continues this critique of the false dichotomy of mind (intellectual) and body (sensual):

> A reasonable ear
> in music, Bottom,
> let's have it
> out of tongs
> and bones, was it
> tongues?[118]

Palmer values Zukofsky's "combination of eye and intellect,"[119] his "*reason*able ear" that interrelates sense and sensuality. The poetic utterance involves both listening ("ear") and speaking ("tongues"), hinting toward the "response-ability" realised when "(my)Self" encounters "(an)Other" through a "poethics of proximity." As Zukofsky insists, "the sound and pitch emphasis of a word are never apart from its meaning,"[120] the aural sensuality of words is always a part of their semantic sense because the oppositional categories of mind and body are invalidated. Referring to Zukofksy's *Bottom: on Shakespeare* (1963) further reveals Palmer's appreciation for the Objectivist poet as someone who committedly refuses to be contained in stable, clearly demarcated categories. Zukofsky condenses his entire synthetic text into one

---

[116] Ibid.
[117] Michael Palmer, "Allen Says We Let in No Light," *BN*, 22.
[118] Michael Palmer, "For L. Z.," *BN*, 19.
[119] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Michael Gardner," 288.
[120] Louis Zukofsky, "An Objective," *Prepositions+: The Collected Critical Essays*, ed. Charles Bernstein and Mark Scroggins (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 17.

line, "I's (pronounced eyes)"[121] so that speech and vision are interchangeable. The text is intended to engender a synesthetic experience, creating "poets [and readers] who see with their ears, hear with their eyes, move with their noses and speak and breathe with their feet."[122] *Bottom* is Zukofsky's most pedagogical book as it documents his own self-education in how to read Shakespeare to educate his readers about living by evoking the character of Nick Bottom, the weaver from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The first volume is a textual collage that weaves together innumerable quotes as he investigates the "soothsayer – whose physical vision…effuses like an old pictograph thru the syllabary or word it has become. Looking back to see itself with its acquired sounds, it must 'see' with a motion forward to a circuitous self-answer."[123] A simultaneity is suggested here by the soothsayer, who looks both forward and back to "show…the image of voice."[124] This conflation of sight and sound demonstrates another aspect of Zukofsky that Palmer identified with, the "notion of simultaneity…a notion that everything happened at the same time rather than in a linear sequence, that one attended to simultaneous events rather than"[125] restructuring everything into a manageable, coherent sequence of separate, individual parts.

The refusal of oppositional categories in *Bottom* goes further than its theme as the second volume consists of his wife Celia's operatic setting of Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Transcribed in musical notation with accompanying lyrics underneath, the words are beneath the music. Zukofsky inverts the conventional hierarchy by placing the semantic aspect of the text at the bottom while the aural, sensual accompaniment is foregrounded. By negating the logic structuring the binary of sound and sense, the conventional dualism of mind and body is collapsed while the attendant oppositional constructions of speaking and listening, poetry and music, and writing and reading are also precluded. Zukofsky repeatedly argues that "the order of all poetry is to approach a state of music wherein the ideas present themselves sensuously and intellectually"[126] and that poetry should be "an order of words that as movement and tone (rhythm and pitch) approaches in varying degrees the wordless art of music."[127] Palmer's equal emphasis on sight *and* sound in *BN*, on the visual through Creeley's illustrations and the aural through his own densely woven constellation of voices, means that reading and listening are coterminous activities. Further substantiating what Palmer argues

---

[121] Louis Zukofsky, "Interview," *Prepositions+*, 242.
[122] Zukofsky, "An Objective," 17.
[123] Louis Zukofsky, *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, Vol. 1, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1963) 36.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Palmer, "The River City Interview."
[126] Zukofsky, "An Objective," 18.
[127] Louis Zukofsky, "A Statement for Poetry," *Prepositions+*, 19.

through his own "poetics of derivation," Zukofsky's *Bottom* requires the reader to listen and respond to others' voices as they appear in a collage of quotations, to appreciate the sounds that accompany the semantics of poetry. Like his long poem "A" also suggests, Zukofsky exemplifies those poets who write "one poem all one's life" so "all that he has written may be felt as indivisible, and all *one*."[128] While Zukofsky can never be considered an autobiographical poet in the conventional sense, *Bottom* is "a poet's autobiography, as involvement of twenty years in a work shows him up…his words show it, are his life."[129] Palmer finds another example "of a life entirely given over to the poem" in Zukofsky, in turn learning how reading and writing a certain type of poetry can be a way of living in the social world of others that manages to invalidate the oppositional categories used to separate and contain individuals and preclude any possible encounter with what is different.

(5.4) A "Community without Community"

Duncan, and to a certain extent Zukofsky, might have provided the initial catalyst for Palmer's interest in the potential for "living differently…[through] the discursive practice" offered by poetry as a "sort of political resistance" to "state-mandated ways of life" [130] but the Vancouver Poetry Conference (1963) made the personal, the political and the poetic resolutely and irrevocably interrelated for him. From 24th July to 16th August 1963, the University of British Columbia hosted a series of lectures and workshops organised by Warren Tallman during which Olson, Duncan, Levertov, Robert Creeley and Allen Ginsberg encouraged attendees to consider what was at stake, both personally and politically, in the "new" American poetry, in writing and reading poetry that deviated from the normative formal and thematic standards of the time. Firstly, it remedied what Palmer immediately identified as the "deeply flawed"[131] nature of Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960), whose arrangement of innovative poets into relatively arbitrary categories determined by coincidences in geographical location and social proximity reaffirmed the presumed necessity for categorical, homogenising identifiers to help manage the increasing heterogeneity of postwar American culture. Secondly,

---

[128] Robert Creeley, "A Note," *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989) 58.
[129] Louis Zukofsky, "Bottom, A Weaver," *Prepositions+*, 167.
[130] Eric Keenaghan, "Life, War, and Love: The Queer Anarchism of Robert Duncan's Poetic Action During the Vietnam War," *Journal of Modern Literature* 28 (2008): 641.
[131] Palmer, "River City Interview."

the event provided the literal manifestation of the position of ekstasis and the "poetics of derivation" that would feature so heavily in *BN* and *CG* as the foundation for his "poethics of proximity." Because the attendees included poets from both the U.S, such as Palmer, David Bromige, Clark Coolidge and Philip Whalen, and Canada, including Margaret Avison, George Bowering, Frank Davey, Daphne Marlatt and Fred Wah, the Vancouver conference demarcated a position of ekstasis beyond the American body-politic where "outside(r) influence" could be felt.

Due to the presence of Olson, Creeley and Duncan, the Vancouver conference can mistakenly be considered a Black Mountain affair informed primarily by the open-field and projectivist poetics endorsed by its members. However, Palmer was not interested in becoming "a second-generation Black Mountaineer or an Official Projectivist, using breath measure and so on"[132] because of "the presumptions about [a univocal] speaker and subject still carried out in a breath-projected model, with the bodily origins of that metaphor."[133] Instead, he found there "a community of sympathetic writers, people who I had been reading but who turned out – somewhat to my surprise – also to exist. And who provided me, not so much poetic models, but human models of people operating outside the world"[134] of normative personal and political standards. The event is crucial to understanding how the position of ekstasis and the "poetics of derivation" that Palmer espoused are important not just in terms of his poetry but also for how they represent a way of living in the social world of others. The conference was characterised by its openness toward the outside, its receptivity regarding others. In this sense, it literalises a "poetics of derivation," which involves bringing the voices of others from outside the poet into the poem but without normalising their differences. This gestures toward the potential for an encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" based on "response-ability," on listening and responding to others as different rather than appropriating them into categories of the same and denying their difference, reducing their alterity.

The Vancouver conference managed to complicate an understanding of community as a closed, exclusionary group that excludes difference to maintain a stable and cohesive collective identity and in doing so pre-empted the more recent attempts by poststructuralist philosophers to reconceptualise community according to a more ethically informed paradigm, for example, Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* (1983), Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1986) and Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* (1990). Like

---

[132] Palmer, "Counter Poetics and Current Practice," 242.
[133] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Tuma," 9.
[134] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 275.

the attendees at the Vancouver conference, they are responding to the totalising and exclusionary notion of community by asserting the fluidity and instability of identities, opening up "closed communities from within, in order to conceive of a more ethically attuned form of togetherness."[135] Palmer is interested in this sense of what he terms the "'imaginary' or 'negative community,'" a "community of those who have no community, a community of differences" that is the "space of encounter of the poetic imaginary with the social."[136] A "community without community" is realised according to this ethically informed type of togetherness, a community founded on the differences between those within it rather than a collective, essentialist identity. If the "form of togetherness that is proper to modernity, and the most familiar style in which modern community is imagined, is that of the nation,"[137] the Vancouver conference allowed the attendees to "break down the larger containers separating the nation from a global community...and stage a critique of the nationalist politics that set the parameters of universalism."[138] The geographical location of the conference makes the figurative literal, it is a "made place" of ekstasis beyond the national body-politic where the participants could disrupt "the liberal logics underwriting…nationalism and thus reintroduce excluded individuals into a new cosmopolitan commonality which would not erase singular differences between identity groups or individuals."[139]

A "community without community" relies on the commonality *of* differences between those within it rather than the more conventional idea that each member of the community shares some essential quality, "the idea that individual experiences rest on a common social ground, on an ontological fundament."[140] According to the latter, essentialist position, the community is "ultimately unable to positively respond to differences"[141] as it gradually homogenises around a collective identity of essential qualities to celebrate a sense of unity contingent upon either the exclusion of others or the negation through assimilation of individual differences. While a liberalist view of community might contest a definition of community as individuals collectively sharing certain essential qualities, it does not provide a different type of togetherness to counter the essentialist position. Removing the common by showing that

---

[135] Pieter Vermeulen, "Community and Literary Experience in (Between) Benedict Anderson and Jean-Luc Nancy," *Mosaic* 42 (2009): 96.
[136] Palmer, "Active Boundaries," 207.
[137] Ibid, 98.
[138] Keenaghan, "Vulnerable Households," 62.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Andreas Oberprantacher, "Beyond Rivalry? Rethinking Community in View of Apocalyptic Violence," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture* 17 (2010): 178.
[141] Ibid.

community is "a mental construct of identifiable beings"[142] where individual interests are articulated as a means of both establishing relations between individuals and differentiating oneself from others initially seems quite progressive in terms of how it engages with difference. However, by emphasising self-interests, the liberalist view "stresses the individual will as being the sole will responsible for common…agreements," [143] which consequently results in a fundamental and irreconcilable antagonism between the self and the community of others.

Allen's anthology is "deeply flawed" for these two precise reasons. Firstly, his separate categories of (I) Black Mountain, (II) San Francisco, (III) The Beats and (IV) New York suggest that those contained in each can be homogenised together according to a collective identity of essential qualities that determines who is included and who is excluded, thus adhering to the essentialist position on community. Secondly, the categories imply that *The New American Poetry* consists of rival factions where each member pursues the self-interests of the group, prioritising their respective differences from others rather than acknowledging the commonality of difference they all share. The Vancouver Poetry Conference counters the implications of Allen's text by imagining an alternative narrative of community as a counter to the conventional paradigms of both the essentialist and the liberalist position. As a result, the participants actualise a "community without community" based on an ethically informed type of togetherness that precludes both the exclusion of difference and any sense of rivalry between differences. This requires a reconfiguration of community as involving "being with others,"[144] inhabiting a position of ekstasis outside the body-politic and encountering others as others.

Nancy's suggestion that community does not refer to an immanent collection of autotelic subjects but rather to how community is always "being with others," helps explain the significance of the Vancouver conference as an example of "outside(r) influence" that signals Palmer's pursuit of a "poethics of proximity." Nancy's radical thinking about community as "an opening up"[145] toward others is profoundly ethical since it highlights the necessity of "(an)Other" to realise both "(my)Self" and a "community without community." He opens up otherwise closed, exclusionary communities from within by refusing to "locate the sense of community...in a given substance or in a specific essence...shared by the members"[146] and instead insists on the proximity of others *as* others. He provides a counter-

---

[142] Ibid, 179.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid, 184.
[145] Ana Luszczynska, "The Opposite of the Concentration Camp: Nancy's Vision of Community," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 5 (2005): 175.
[146] Vermeulen, 96.

voice to Benedict Anderson's idea of the "imagined community" and "the most familiar style in which modern community is...imagined:"[147] the inherently limited and sovereign nation-state. The Vancouver Poetry Conference not only violates the boundaries of the nation-state but imagines a different kind of community as a literary event, what Nancy terms "literary communism." This term has nothing to do with what is usually understood as communism but instead "designates a general and anonymous speech which is shared by the different members of the society and which utters a particular form of address to them."[148] In this sense, literature refers to a "multiplicity which at the same time unites and divides us,"[149] unites because it is something shared between individuals and divides because it accommodates innumerable, different interpretations. Myth is opposed to literature as the "particular style...in which the community is imagined," the "structure of thought that gives the community its purpose and legitimacy and that thus brings different individuals together in a collective body."[150] It is crucial to the formation of the "operative community," whereas the "inoperative community" Nancy advances uses literature because it allows for "being with others," it confirms one's existence "in common [with others]" while still resisting "fusion into a [singular] body."[151] Because thinking of community as essence constitutes closure, Nancy instead conceives of community as a matter of difference, where "[being] *in* common has nothing to do with communion...[but] means, to the contrary, *no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this...lack of identity*."[152]

Furthermore, removing the "terror and hatred of all communal things, of communion,/of communism" also repudiated the myth that the American capitalist socio-economic system was superior to its alternative, which had to be guarded against through strategies of containment and discourses of consensus. However, Nancy's understanding of myth is not concerned with any specific myth but with the function of myth itself as the "original speech...founding the intimate being of a community."[153] Accordingly, there is nothing "more absolutely common than myth" because it "arises only from a community and for it: they engender one another."[154] For Nancy, "myth communicates the common, the *being-*

---

[147] Ibid, 98.

[148] Ignaas Devisch, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 203.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Ibid, 105.

[151] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xxxviii.

[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid, 48.

[154] Ibid, 50.

common" as it reveals the community to itself and founds it by "say[ing] what is and say[ing] that we agree to say that this is." [155] Ultimately, myth "arranges the spaces and/or symbolises...[it] works out the shares and divisions that distribute a community and distinguish it for itself, articulating it within itself."[156] Whether a narrative of origins, exceptionalism or collective identity, myth is integral to "all the special groups" of nation, religion, gender, sexuality and politics becoming closed, exclusionary entities. Nancy envisions a "community turned toward the outside instead of in toward a centre,"[157] a community open to "outside(r) influence" as it consists solely of others who have only their differences "*in* common."[158] Constantly engaging with the differences of others means the inoperative community is dynamic and never complete, quite unlike the "operative community," which uses "myth...[as] a completion"[159] to engender a totalising, homogenising collective identity that includes what adheres to it and excludes what deviates. There is no potential for change or interruption as difference is either marginalised or neutralised by appropriation. Literature, on the other hand, interrupts myth and precludes completion because it inherently involves "being with others," of experiencing the proximity of "(an)Other" as "(my)Self" encounters another person's unique interpretation of events. Literature:

> does not come to an end at the place where the work passes from an author to a reader, and from this reader to another reader or to another author. It does not come to an end at the place where the work passes on to another work by the same author or at the place where it passes into other works by other authors...It is unended and unending – in the active sense – in that it is literature...[and] puts into play nothing other than being *in* common.[160]

The various processes of dissemination and interpretation means literature allows for "being with others" and constitutes an "opening up" of community by removing the common, the homogenised and consensual, and instead replacing it with the sense of being *in* common with others, of listening and responding to multiple different interpretations.

As a literary event, the Vancouver Poetry Conference provides an example of a "community without community." However, its significance is furthered by the type of poetics that was discussed there. While the processes of literature make it generally conducive to

---

[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid, 60.
[158] Ibid, 61, author's emphasis.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid, 65.

engendering openness and incompletion, the participants at Vancouver were each investigating the potential for a "process orientation"[161] in poetry, a movement away from the preconceived notions of form, the circumscribed idea of the subject, and the normative predisposition toward the informing nature of poetry that posit the poem as a closed-off, complete object. The processual poetics advanced at Vancouver, whether in the guise of Olson's "projective verse," Duncan's "derivative poetics," Ginsberg's "spontaneous bop prosody," Creeley's serial poetics or Levertov's poetics of organic order, means the event exploited and exaggerated the sense of incompletion and openness that Nancy identifies as inherent in literature more generally. The Vancouver Poetry Conference provided an opportunity for the participants to enact what had hitherto only been articulated in their poetry. In this sense, the position of ekstasis and the "poetics of derivation" Palmer identified with manifested in the "community without community" realised there, thus demonstrating how the personal, the political and the poetic are always mutually interrelated. The conference was a further act of poiesis, as the participants "made [a] place of first permission," a place for outsiders where difference was actively encouraged to open up the community to outside influences, to foreground the ethical imperative of encountering others and listening and responding to them as others.

(5.5) Outside Influences: The Serial Poems of *The Circular Gates*

Nancy's radical reconfiguration of community has obvious parallels with Levinas' understanding of ethical subjectivity, while the notion of a "community without community" enlarges a concern for the individual subject to consider its social applications. Levinas' phenomenology of the subject functions as a model for imagining a more ethically informed notion of community in which its members are oriented toward others. This notion of community based on ethical subjectivity also bears similarities with the heteronomic turn seen earlier in Ashbery and Palmer's interest in this reconfiguration as an example of how one might live in the social world of others signals the beginning of his development of a "poethics of proximity." Although Palmer explains that the Vancouver Poetry Conference is "part of the landscape of *NEL*,"[162] the influence of this event is more readily identifiable in the serial poems of *CG*, which show him investigating how what he experienced at the conference might

---

[161] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 272.
[162] Ibid, 275.

function in poetry with the intention of encouraging the reader to consider the work required and the difficulties involved in realising a "community without community." Accordingly, serial poems expose the arbitrary nature of closure and containment, and foreground the simultaneity of singularity and plurality, thus raising similar questions as Nancy does regarding how the individual relates to a community of others. Because the meaning of a series gradually accumulates as the poems are read, the boundary between the single poem and the series, and by extension the singular and the plural, is continuously transgressed. These serial poems, therefore, provide occasions where outside influence is most apparent, which in turn enact the experience of "community without community" valued by Palmer and introduce the constitutive activities of his "poethics of proximity:" listening and responding to others in their singularity within a plurality, that is, within the social world of others.

The first section of *CG* consists of two series, "The Brown Book" and "The Book Against Understanding," and immediately reveals the importance of the personal and the political questions raised by the Vancouver conference for Palmer's emerging poetics, which, like the numerous recurring series he creates, run like threads throughout his collections. The first series begins with a quote from *The Brown Book*, a partially completed attempt by Wittgenstein to transcribe his lectures that was eventually abandoned, "But do we interpret the words/before obeying their order," and the poet's insistence that "This is difficult but not impossible."[163] Palmer indicates the "necessary difficulty" of his poetry here as he indicates words have meanings that exceed the poet's intentions, the order he has put them in, due to the outside influence of language itself beyond his control. "The Brown Book" addresses incompletion not as an instance of failure but rather in terms of circularity, "so that it becomes harder/…/…to distinguish what seems to be/the beginning of the story from the end."[164] Circularity is important because it means "there [is] no teleology," no "point…[to arrive at] at the end."[165] Rather than closing-off the text, the interchangeable relation between the beginning and the end constitutes an opening-up of the text. As he explains in "She It Is," "…the numbers are signs/of a series that's been memorised/…/[But] The words are learned by word of mouth."[166] There are no numbers determining the order in which "The Brown Book" should be read because Palmer is not interested in ensuring a predetermined reading experience. While numbers imply order and a limiting of how the series can be read, his reference to oral

---

[163] Michal Palmer, "The Brown Book," *The Circular Gates* (Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), 13.
[164] Palmer, "Men Without Arms," *CG*, 18.
[165] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted bu Gizzi," 169.
[166] Palmer, "The Brown Book," *CG*, 20.

communication indicates his interest in a more open-ended process of listening and responding that is ultimately beyond his control. Within the series, the end of one poem marks the beginning of another, a feature heightened by Palmer since "…the circle stands for yes//and it doesn't have ends."[167] Similar to the "poetics of derivation" discussed earlier, reading the series becomes an instant of writing as each reading changes the previous reading and is changed by subsequent readings.

The second series, "The Book Against Understanding," makes his motivations more explicit. Communication is important but Palmer is working against understanding, preventing comprehension in order to achieve something different, as he envisions it in "As If By Saying," "Each looked into the water//and was frightened by a different thing/of his or her own making."[168] *CG*, therefore, is opened toward the outside influence of another person, the interpretation of the reader, while s/he is continuously confronted with difference because the serial poems gradually accumulate multiple meanings as the poems in proximity to them are read, with the result that there is "More of everything like motion/…/…More history than today."[169] A more responsive method of reading is required to deal with the difficulty of Palmer's text, the fact that "It is. It was as if."[170] Such a responsive method ensures the reader can deal with the need "To learn what to say to unlearn" and find "Words for *are* and *were not*"[171] because the readings it engenders are as open as the texts themselves, that is, open to further different interpretations. Serial poems accentuate this inherent feature of poetry because "each new combination produces a new meaning," consequently requiring the reader to realise that "each conjunction" of the component parts has meaning, "are capable of rearrangements" and that "subsequent arrangement also has a meaning that is in no way 'secondary' to its original articulation."[172] Without sequential numbers, there is no implied order in "The Book Against Understanding" and no hierarchy regarding its component parts. By extension, the reader's interpretation is in no way "secondary" to the poet's "original articulation," it is simply a single, possible reading amongst a plurality of other, different readings. *CG* allows the reader to appreciate that what Palmer himself values is "difficult but not impossible." As reading the collection demonstrates, living in such a community is difficult because one must be open to different interpretations that constantly interrupt and question one's own but it makes being

---

[167] Ibid, 14.
[168] Michael Palmer, "The Book Against Understanding," *CG*, 28.
[169] Ibid, 25.
[170] Ibid, 23.
[171] Ibid, 26, author's emphasis.
[172] Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 24-25.

with others possible through "response-ability," listening and responding to other interpretations and opening oneself up to outside influences.

In the next section, entitled "Series," Palmer observes how "The circular gates/start to open and close"[173] to help the reader differentiate between the different types of serial poems in *CG*. Firstly, there is the open-ended, incomplete series that features in multiple collections. "Symmetrical Poem," for example, a series of numbered poems, first appears in *CG* and continues into *WM*, *NEL* and *FF*. Or "Prose," again a series of numbered poems that appears in multiple collections but has discrepancies in the sequence due to omissions that heighten the sense of incompletion. Secondly, there is the closed-off, self-contained series, such as "The Brown Book," "The Book Against Understanding" and the eponymous series, that only ever appear in a single collection. However, in "Series," Palmer gestures toward a third type that is more susceptible to, even dependent upon, the outside influence of another person. Consequently, this type of series is more indeterminate than the others, having the qualities of both but belonging to neither:

> ...demonstrating a new way of counting
> to three. We both lose our place
> looking for the prediscovered end
> of the series, in this case
> a shadow instead of the light.[174]

"Series" is different to the other series in *CG* and foregrounds the difficulty of the collection as a whole. It consists of a number of titled and untitled poems, a self-contained series, and the open-ended series "Prose." Any attempt at providing a singular reading is interrupted by the questions "Series" raises. Should "Series" be read as a self-contained series since it does not appear in any subsequent collections? Is it a miniature collection in *CG* and simply named after the eponymous "Series?" Do the untitled poems belong to another series such as "The Brown Book" or "The Book Against Understanding" whose component parts are also untitled? Do the titled poems belong to "Series" or are they stand-alone? Is "Series" interrelated with other series in Palmer's work through the thread of "Prose?" By answering any of these questions, the reader fundamentally changes "Series." "Series 2" demonstrates how one interpretation might be "*in* common" with another but it is always different:

---

[173] Michael Palmer, "Barcelona," *CG*, 60.
[174] Michael Palmer, "Series 3" *CG*, 56.

A body in light and shade
placed between two equal lights
side by side

A body placed
at an equal distance
between two lights[175]

Both utterances describe a common scene but are nevertheless completely different It is "possible to begin again"[176] because the act of reading is another writing, thus emphasising the sense of incompletion and circularity informing *CG* as a whole. The open and closed series can be realised by Palmer alone but the third requires another person:

I try to count to three
and reach two and a fraction before any corrections
become necessary.[177]

The reader provides such corrections, rewriting the series as s/he reads it and answers the questions it poses. In answering these questions, the reader realises his/her "response-ability" by contributing to the series while also being continuously interrupted by the irreducible differences of its component parts.

The eponymous series in *CG* is modelled after Frank Stella's *Protractor Series* (1967-71) as Palmer followed the curvilinear, geometric paintings as an example for his own compositional model. On the most explicit level, his paintings help the reader to visualise perhaps what Palmer hoped to achieve with *CG* (Fig. 8). With its numerous intersections and overlaps, *Firuzabad* provides a visual metaphor for the intended effect of Palmer's series as they interrelate with one another, stand independently and create juxtapositions. However, two features of Stella's series are particularly important to his collection. Firstly, the same shapes and segments reappear throughout the series in different colours (Fig. 9).
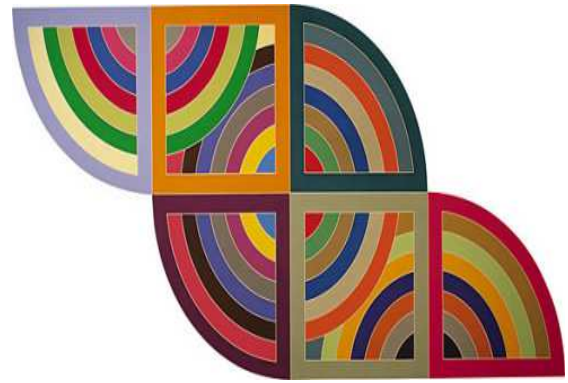
---

[175] Michael Palmer, "Series 2," *CG*, 54.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Michael Palmer, "Series 4," *CG*, 57.

(Fig. 8) Frank Stella, *Firuzabad* (1970)   **(Fig. 9)** Franks Stella, *Harran II* (1967)

Palmer replicates this technique in his own series, immediately foregrounding it even, as the opening lines:

> keys, of tears, the store
> harvested white, and electricity.[178]

are repeated in the series with variations of punctuation, prepositions, omission and enjambment, for example, "The keys of tears and the store"[179] and:

> ...the
> window of the store, keys,
> and electricity.[180]

The structure of *CG* creates a densely interwoven pattern of phrases repeated with variations. Similar to Stella's paintings, where the squares and circles are constantly interrupted and intruded upon by other shapes (Fig. 10 & 11), the boundaries of Palmer's poems are continually violated and exceeded as the repeated phrases interrelate them together.

---

[178] Michael Palmer, "New York," *CG*, 81.
[179] Michael Palmer, "III," *CG*, 91.
[180] Michael Palmer, "Chicago," *CG*, 87.

(Fig. 10) Frank Stella, *Hagamatana II* (1967)   **(Fig. 11)** Frank Stella, *Takht-i-Suleiman* (1967)

However, one recurrent group of words reveals the second and perhaps the most important feature of Stella's paintings for the poet. Palmer repeats words indicating the components of a room throughout "The Circular Gates," such as the walls, the door, the window, and the floor, thus demonstrating his appreciation for Stella's aesthetics as an attempt to make a space. Painting, therefore, does not just represent a pre-existing space but is "the making of space."[181] While his investigations of shape, line and colour are important, they are secondary to his interest in making space, whether it is "the space between lines, the space left out of the canvas, the space you imagine as you look at his shapes, [or] the real space that exists between the painting and the viewer."[182] A Stella canvas is "not a window to another world but a full and complete world unto itself."[183] Each painting in his series is individually named after an ancient, circular-planned town in Asia minor, thus suggesting his paintings are meant to be inhabitable, social spaces.

In his explanation of what motivated him to write "The Circular Gates," he reveals his desire to have a relationship with his material medium similar to certain painters' rather than a poet's:

> Formally, the central thing was trying to deal with recurrence and sequentiality – seriality if you will – in relation to what I derive from someone like Stella, rather than a literary, thematic recurrence, though it does thematise itself as it goes along. I wanted to do it in the material nature of those recurring phrases...designing a pattern of recurrence...And trying to deal with words *beside* any sense of literary consideration,

---

[181] Paul Goldberger, "Frank Stella Architecture," *Frank Stella: Painting Into Architecture* (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 11.
[182] Ibid, 15.
[183] Ibid, 11.

but the way you would deal with them as paint, deliberately ignoring their actual referential nature.[184]

Palmer even bemoans the fact that the same audience who has no problem with the permissions innovative paintings represent will "have all kinds of problems with similar permissions or liberties or deviations performed in the text."[185] His desire for a painterly relation to his material medium is because of the permissions he can provide his audience with, while also explaining why he might appreciate Stella's intention to make a space and how his "Protractor Series" provides a way into it, "There are three kinds of gate:/ fan, interlace and rainbow."[186] Palmer explains that "The Circular Gates" is "about educating oneself toward responsibility toward the world," avoiding "displacement from the world's events" using the example of Stella, whose "position could act as a kind of opening, a gate…into the present."[187] Applying the same logic to his collection, it is a similarly, albeit textually, made space:

> The room is very large
> and my name was George
> This had been a hotel
> I recognise the walls[188]

Palmer's hotel metaphor implies that *CG* is intended to be temporarily inhabited and is designed to put different people in proximity to one another. The hotel metaphor helps the reader conceptualise a "community without community," a community of individuals "being with others." Palmer identifies "There were at least four,"[189] suggesting his series provide a fourth way into an inhabitable, social space, what he terms "the City/of O."[190] Like Stella's *Protractor Series*, the collection, informed by circularity and incompletion as each end is another beginning, is modelled after this circular city. Because the collection is opened up to the outside influence of another person, as demonstrated through the questions posed by "Series," Palmer solves "The problem/of the door/[that] called for an opening."[191] His series

---

184 Palmer, "Counter Poetics and Current Practice," 263-264.
185 Ibid, 265.
186 Palmer, "III," *CG*, 89.
187 Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gizzi," 168-169.
188 Palmer, "New York," *CG*, 83.
189 Michael Palmer, "IV,"*CG*, 95.
190 Palmer, "III," *CG*, 92.
191 Palmer, "IV," *CG*, 96.

provide a way into the collection, into the social space he makes where the reader is required to listen and respond to the differences that constantly interrupt his/her attempt to interpret the text and write him/herself into existence as a subject.

In "The Circular Gates," this sense of difference is accentuated by the phrases that reappear throughout with minor variations to make the reader acknowledge that plurality rather than singularity is prioritised in a "community without community." Palmer likens his use of repetition to a painter "returning and returning to the first moment of the canvas, and the layering process, the process of accretion and the process of emergence" to explain how the differences that appear in his work are "relational and are not limited to what we mistakenly think of as the scale of the poem."[192] The repetition of phrases gives the impression of endless differences and changes the meaning of each poem because it is subject to outside influence, to the different meaning a phrase has in another poem that influences how the phrase might be interpreted in the poem being read. Listening and responding to these differences, however, is not limited to the "scale of the poem" as:

> we aren't able to say this is that and next to it
>   is the rest from your book. Is it any
>   different
> from the flood when instead of turning it off I
> turned it really on[193]

CG gives the reader permission to enact a way of living in this social world that is ethically informed as s/he is continuously confronted with differences and encounters other interpretations to which s/he must respond. By opening up the text to the outside influence of the reader, Palmer not only gestures toward the same sense of heternomic subjectivity seen in Ashbery but also makes a space for outsiders. If a "poetics of derivation" gives the poet permission to listen and respond to others, the serial poetics of *CG* extends this permission to the reader. The personal and political realisations engendered by his experiences at Vancouver are replicated in the poetics of *CG* with the intention of making a space where the reader can realise his/her "response-ability" and appreciate how writing and reading poems in this manner is a way of living in the social world of others, of acting in and interacting with a "community without community" by listening and responding to others as others.

---

[192] Palmer, "Counter Poetics and Current Practice," 263.
[193] Michael Palmer, "Series 1," *CG*, 53.

Conclusion: Addressing the (as yet) Unknown

What makes the Vancouver Poetry Conference so significant is that the poets there had no audience to speak of, no determinate set of readers whose expectations had to be met and, therefore, no prescriptive standards that had to be adhered to. As Palmer later observes of his experience there, he was in the company of poets "intentionally working outside that cultural centre and [who] were not addressing themselves to an audience as yet unknown, an alternative audience that was just then taking shape."[194] His observation of how Duncan, Spicer [although absent], and Creeley" were addressing themselves to "as yet unknown" others is more than just a comment on the residual avant-gardism of the New American Poets. As an exercise in community building, in making an "imagined community" where the poet dwells with others, the conference would have a profound influence on Palmer's "poethics of proximity." It is not incorrect to suggest that the attendees felt othered by the hegemonic centre they were critiquing from their position of ekstasis for reasons pertaining to the personal, political, poetic and any combination of the three. Most importantly, however, the creative and critical dialogues between such others confirmed for Palmer the possibility of talking "to self as well as other as well as self as other,"[195] which manifests in his later reconfiguration of the lyrical mode. Although he repeatedly discusses this event in interviews, the conference never features as subject matter in his poems. Instead his early collections attempt to enact the personal, political and poetic considerations and commitments he himself became aware of when he first encountered poets not only writing about but living according to the "practise of outside."

---

[194] Palmer, "River City Interview."

[195] Palmer, "Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment," 290.

Chapter 6: Writing with Nothing at its Centre in *Without Music* and *Notes for Echo Lake*

Palmer is not alone amongst his contemporaries regarding his interest in "outside(r) influence." Palmer is normally identified with the collective of poet-critics referred to as Language poets which occupied a critical position outside that critiqued the normative standards of the poetic. While Language poets such as Bernstein, Andrews, Watten and Silliman are committed to the project of "becoming outside,"[1] by insisting on private channels of publication and distribution for their work, advancing pedantic pedagogical methods through critical essays, making teleological pronouncements about the function of poetry in a postmodern world, and creating an insular environment of poet-critics to review their work, they inevitably established another institution, albeit an oppositional one. In this sense, there is a significant disparity between the intention and the actuality of Language poetry, due to what Palmer identified as its "hidden orthodoxies,"[2] its commitment to "[creating], let's say, a fixed theoretical matrix" and "work[ing] from an ideology of prohibitions about expressivity and the self."[3] The Language poets might achieve a kind of "uncommunity"[4] but their committed oppositionality, however, means they inevitably perpetuate the same exclusionary principles practiced by the hegemonic institution they initially sought to oppose. As discussed earlier, Palmer refuses to identify with any exclusionary group, oppositional or otherwise, and critiques the closing-off of the term "language" to describe a particular group of poets, differentiating them from by excluding others:

> What troubles me about that "Language" term is that, taken at face value, it is manifestly absurd, as well as insulting to other writers equally committed to exploring the medium...[since] we are [all] questioning ways of understanding, seeing, and various crucial orders of assumption about meaning and representation in a culture where most things seem to have become re-presentation.[5]

[1] Barrett Watten, "The Turn to Language and the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2002): 140.
[2] Michael Palmer, "On Robert Duncan," *American Poet* (1997) Accessed 3rd August 2015. <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/ poets/m_r/palmer/palmeronduncan.htm>.
[3] Michael Palmer, "Jubilat Interview," *Jubilat* 1 (2000): 111.
[4] Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 142.
[5] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Tuma," 9-10.

The "all" refers to innovative poets who intentionally position themselves outside the normative standards of their respective period. Palmer is concerned with the continuous counter-tradition constituted by "outsiders" in poetry rather than containing them in particular groups with their own "exclusionary authentication of focus or practice,"[6] best illustrated by Allen's anthology.

Despite this important distinction between Palmer and the Language poets, both are committed to a deconstructive critique of voice-centred poetry and undermining the "workshop poem," a compositional model that embodied the "official verse culture"[7] during the seventies. Palmer and the Language poets developed an anti-expressionist aesthetic in response to what they saw as the commodification of poetry into discrete objects, thus challenging "the little self"[8] of the post-confessional lyric and the inscription of subjectivity as a static point of reference. As their name indicates, Language poets are concerned with the outside influence exerted by language, how it constitutes the subject. Rather than producing textual objects that embody a specific person's act of self-authoring and are designed to be passively consumed by the reader, they create text-based poems that function as equivalents of language itself because they are constituted by the human capacity for creative agency. The univocality of the singular, autonomous speaker and the attendant autotelic subjectivity is challenged using the inherent polyphony of language, while the creative act is reconfigured according to the dialogic principle to problematise the conventional speaker-addressee dichotomy and complicate the standards used to separate poetry from other types of concrete utterance.

WM is probably Palmer's most explicit reaction against the "official verse culture" of the seventies and helps explain why he is so frequently aligned with the Language poets. "Poem Containing Two Songs" and "Three Poems to be Read as One" capture his departure from the object-nature of the poem to investigate "living language: language whose mode of existence is the event, a language…that lives through and undergoes the experiences of all those who speak it and hear it, and which is therefore never self-identical."[9] "Poem Containing Two Songs" begins with the perfect analogy:

A train passes that other train

---

[6] Ibid, 9.

[7] Charles Bernstein, "The Academy in Peril," *Content's Dream: 1975-1984* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986), 246.

[8] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 289.

[9] Gerald L. Bruns, "The Remembrance of Language: An Introduction to Gadamer's Poetics," *Gadamer on Celan: "Who am I and Who Are You?" and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 16.

so that unmoving we begin
to drift backward, afloat –

the story everyone knows
and repeats to no one else –[10]

The first song uses this illusion of self-motion to call our attention to a fundamental aspect of language that is often "misremembered,"[11] the corporeality of language that moves us into embodying a different perspective. Like the analogy, this movement is never literal or physical but rather imaginative or psychical and means the poem cannot be a static object, it must be engaged with as an event in language. By insisting that "there is no useful distinction between language and poetry,"[12] the Language poets are involved in a similar project to Palmer, of viewing poetry as just another daily activity performed in the social world of others through language. As such, poetry is not some "reflexive confession, but the actual as it respires," as it lives and breathes "hidden in plain sight."[13] Consequently, poetry involves listening and responding to a "lost, or forgotten language, that is, one spoken everywhere in the streets and yet unheard or unlistened to. It comes to us in both its familiarity and its foreignness."[14] Language-oriented poetry can be described as "swelling it seemed/toward two points at once"[15] to convey this sense of language, and by extension the poem, as facilitating movement between two poles of consciousness. This affirms the dialectic of "familiarity and…foreignness" but in a way that suggests the relation between self and other in the encounter with otherness. Language poets illustrate "an openness or receptiveness to the strangeness or otherness of words,"[16] while the resulting poems reconfigure our relation to language as examples of listening and responding to its otherness. Viewing poetry as language means it is living rather than an object that can be grasped, that can be comprehended or understood completely and definitively.

Similar to the Language poets, Palmer reveals to his readers what they have repressed or forgotten, or has been intentionally hidden by the normative standards of representation that protect the political status quo, about their own constitutive relation to language as something

---

[10] Michael Palmer, "Poem Containing Two Songs," *Without Music* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1977), 88.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ron Silliman, "The Chinese Notebook," *The Age of Huts (Compleat)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 156
[13] Michael Palmer, "Poetic Obligations (Talking About Nothing at Temple)," *Active Boundaries*, 88.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Palmer, "Poem Containing Two Songs," *WM*, 89.
[16] Bruns, 8.

living and, therefore, irreducible to an "object, code, system, conceptual scheme, paradigm…
[or] ideology"[17] that reinforces rule-governed forms of monologic behaviour. The second song
discusses the inherent dialogism in the poem when conceived as an event in or an experience
with language:

                    …They have come
        to watch you paint

        and be part of your painting
        they have come to watch you paint

        or to enter your painting

        with open mouth, the suspended figures
        seated or stretched out

        across the ordered space of that 'between world'[18]

Palmer here displays a further affinity with the Language poets and their "postconfessional
quest for a transpersonal poetics…[that] contests the traditional notion of the self as the primary
organising feature of writing."[19] This urge to allow others into his text, not just to watch but to
be part of it, aligns Palmer's work with the "dialogic openness to reader collaboration and
communal production [in Language writing]…that invite[s] the reader's interpretive
participation in the text."[20] Like language, the poem is not something that happened, "yesterday
[is] quiet, empty and//entire," but *is* happening, is an ongoing event similar to living in the
social world of others, "Today the city is//active, imprecise and clouded."[21] By ordering the
"space of the 'between world,'" Palmer provides a made place of first permission similar to
Language poets, whose concept and idealised compositional model of multiple authorship
positions the poem between two or more authors as an intersection between multiple poles of
consciousness. As Bernstein explains:

        Rather than work, which is the product of the author's projection/memory/associative
        process, it is work for the reader's (viewer's) projection/construction. The text calls

---

[17] Ibid, 9.
[18] Palmer, *WM*, 90.
[19] Walter Kalaidjian, "Transpersonal Poetics: Language Writing and the Historical Avant-Gardes in Postmodern Culture," *American Literary History* 3 (1991): 324.
[20] Ibid, 328.
[21] Palmer, *WM*, 90.

upon the reader to be actively involved in the process of constituting its meaning, the reader becoming a neutral observer neither to a described exteriority nor to an enacted interiority. The text formally involves the process of response/interpretation and in doing so makes the reader aware of herself or himself as producer as well as consumer of meaning.[22]

This pronouncement about interdependent agency and collective action is obviously politically charged since it breaks "down the boundaries of the autonomous author in favour of both the work and its immediate reception within its community,"[23] but it also contextualises Palmer amongst those contemporaries who similarly posited the poem as an event where "response-ability" to others can be realised, either in terms of language as an absolute exteriority beyond the individual's control or in terms of other people who are different to and distant from the self, thus exposing it to an otherwise.

"Three Poems to be Read as One" foregrounds the inherent polyphony when the poem is conceived as a "between world" where multiple poles of consciousness encounter each other by emphasising "That love of conversation."[24] However, Palmer also indicates how using multi-voicedness to critique conventional, that is singular, voice-centred poetry is one of the primary reasons for the difficulty of *WM*, "the speakers/are difficult to hear."[25]. Because the poem is de-authorised by being open toward a variety of heteronomic forces beyond the author's control, the poem is "speaking at the edge of voice."[26] If the poem is happening at "the edge of voice," where the potential for articulation or speaking is at its limit, then a different way of responding is required. For Palmer and the Language poets, listening is another way of realising one's "response-ability," paying attention to the language being spoken everywhere in daily life but hitherto unlistened to. As a result, their work offers a "model or theory of the person, a pedagogy of personhood" that, rather than using poetry as a vehicle to advance assumptions about a particular person, uses poetry as an "occasion for re-establishing and reading the concept and value of the person"[27] as an active, participating entity open toward otherness. Like Palmer, the Language poets provide a way of approaching the problem of subjectivity following the poststructuralist critique of the humanist subject because it addresses

---

[22] Charles Bernstein, "Writing and Method," *Content's Dream,* 233.
[23] Barrett Watten, "The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Between Discourse and Text," *Poetics Today* 20 (1999): 581.
[24] Palmer, "Three Poems to be Read as One," *WM*, 95.
[25] Ibid, 92.
[26] Ibid, 93.
[27] Izenberg, 1-2.

something far greater than the authoring of the poem itself, the potential for a life lived together with others through one's performed acts in language.

While the affinities between Palmer and the Language poets are undeniable, there is a disparity between the intentions and the actuality of the latter that make it a mistake to completely identify Palmer with them. The theoretical writings and manifestos of Bernstein, Andrews, Watten and Silliman might advance remarkably progressive and persuasive arguments about the social and ethical function of a poetics that has as its "cardinal principle" the "dismissal of voice" as the foundational operative of the workshop poem and its claims to self-presence and authenticity.[28] However, so much of the poetry itself has an "an-aesthetic"[29] quality that derives from the insubstantiality of the poems they have produced. Consider Silliman, for example, who refers to his entire body of work as *Ketjak*, which consists of *The Age of Huts* (1974-1980), *Tjanting* (1979-1981), *Alphabet* (1979-2004) and *Universe* (2005 – present), a projected 360 poem sequence of which only the first two have been published to date, *Revelator* (2013) and *Northern Soul* (2014). Or Andrews' *The Millennium Project*, an online companion piece to *Lip Service* (1997) consisting of almost one thousand pages of material generated between the mid-80s' and the early-90s.' *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography*," consisting of ten volumes written by ten authors published over a five year period and totalling over sixteen-hundred pages, perfectly captures the discrepancy between the theory and the practice of Language poetry. While it theoretically engages with important questions about the constitutive relationship between self and other, the notion of "community without community," the actual, material text places not just difficult but impossible demands on the reader's capacity to attend to it properly. These three examples typify the internal logic informing so much Language writing, the "open-ended algorithm of addition,"[30] that means "it demands neither articulation nor, precisely, attention."[31] Due to their scale, the preclusion of differentiating between one poem and another, and the complete removal of anything resembling a subject in terms of both matter and a speaker, the attitude of "indifference and inattention to the specifics of what is being said is not only a plausible response" but the only "response such writing demands."[32]

---

[28] Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Alabama University Press, 2004), 129.
[29] Ibid, 140.
[30] Ibid, 141.
[31] Ibid, 142.
[32] Ibid.

This discrepancy between the intentions and the actuality of Language poetry explains Palmer's repeated eforts to distance himself from this group. He sees this discrepancy as "one implication of the American model of Derrida. Not so much Derrida himself, but the appropriation of Derrida by the American academy."[33] The consequent willingness "to slide into a purely deconstructed space...of [the] purely echoic, polysemous," of pure discourse, absence and inauthentic repetition, has the "danger of a return to a hermetically sealed cultural space," it is the "sceptical other side of the mirror of New Criticism" when it has "returned poetry to a particularly sealed-off object of study," it is "*just* literature, again."[34] Palmer is not a Language poet because he retains a certain lyrical sensibility and his densely interwoven, derivative texts consisting of others' voices require frequent re-reading, thus emphasising the importance of attentive listening as a way of responding to otherness. Furthermore, the emphasis in Language poetry on de-authorisation and disembodiment by ascribing agency to language itself rather than the speaking subject makes it not only difficult but practically impossible to analyse their work in terms of the poet's *and* the reader's "response-ability." While they radically reconfigure the role of the reader as an active participant in the construction of meaning rather than a passive consumer of predetermined meanings, the almost complete abdication of authority by the poet similarly precludes responsibility, thus undermining the ethical connotations of this gesture in a way that Palmer wholly distances himself from.

(6.1) Erasure and Embodiment in *Without Music*

The constant re-readings that Palmer's poems necessitate, the sense of closer reading or attentive listening they each require, fundamentally distinguishes him from the Language poets. This emphasis on (self-)analysis is the result of his attempt to write the "analytic lyric," a "way to address the problematics of the purely private utterance" that he derives primarily from the examples of Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan. [35] In Jabès, Palmer identifies the possibility of a book filled with silences, where silence is the "place where you reply to the question, where you reply to the other."[36] Like the Language poets, Jabès provides "a structure of response to

---

[33] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 277.
[34] Ibid, 277-278, my emphasis.
[35] Palmer, "Counter Poetics and Current Practice," 254.
[36] Ibid, 255.

the appropriation of language in his time" motivated by the "hope of recovering the meaning of words in a time when words have lost their meaning."[37] However, rather than just creating a dispersal of different voices and competing discourses, he "allow[s] for silence,"[38] he provides the space for people not just to respond but to ask. In the silent text, he creates a "strategy of fragments, of unanswered questions, incompletions and fractures, in a structure of loss,"[39] thus preventing the poet from either appropriating the discourse or entering into an authoritarian role. In Celan, Palmer identifies with a feature that Language poets are similarly concerned with, the question of the self in language. However, for Palmer and Celan, this is always a question of the "lyric self in language," the "sense of the dispersal of the subject [or the speaker], but also the reaffirmation, the fact that it was nobody's voice and yet it was, also, something."[40] Celan addresses "the circumstance of the impossibility of reading the world."[41] In their absolute critique of voice-centred poetry, the Language poets display a complete distrust of the lyric but Celan reveals how the lyric can be renewed. The "analytic lyric" derived from Jabès and Celan emphasises the:

> investigatory aspects, the taking over of the lyric concentration on the code itself, on the texture of language, the taking over the condensation of lyric emotion and focusing it then on the mechanics of language...[to] critique discourses of power, to renew the social function of poetry.[42]

It provides a "between world," a way of ascribing to neither the postconfessional lyric nor the language-oriented poem but still managing to critique the conventions of the singular speaker, the autonomous writing subject and the notion of address while also retaining the sense of embodiment and "response-ability" so crucial to his "poethics of proximity."

WM is Palmer's most concerted effort at using silence to question the lyrical self. The collection is named after a group of essays by Steve Reich entitled *Words Without Music*, which he rephrases in the eponymous series as "Hieroglyphics of the wrist/without music."[43] Palmer explains his reasoning, "I thought, well, if I take out words, I'm left without music. So the hidden word there is 'words' which has been erased, and what's left is *Without Music*."[44]

---

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid, 256.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Michael Palmer, "Without Music 1," *WM*, 24.
[44] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gizzi," 177.

Through the silences, erasures and concealments of the "analytic lyric" he achieves what he terms a "composition with nothing at its centre,"[45] a way of investigating the various silences, erasures and concealments that occur when writing and reading "I" in lyric poetry. Palmer's "words without music" indicate how the lyric vitally retains elements from its original, classical format as poems that are sung with accompaniment from a lyre. As a result, it "provides an "I" to whoever reads or sings it," thereby revealing the "communal nature of the first-person pronoun" and problematising the fiction of the unitary, singular self as the source of the lyric utterance.[46] The opening poem, "For Voice," immediately reveals the purpose behind the "analytic lyric[s]" in the whole collection:

> We must not act and speak
>
> as if asleep
> Eye precedes ear[47]

Palmer's "analytic lyric[s]," therefore, seek to deny the implicit formalism that often attends lyric poems, the tendency to look at them as objects and to look for clues to interpret their meaning, the autobiographical correspondences or the experiences being re-presented. He challenges the presupposition that the written poem should be just read rather than performed:

>   Now letter and word
> have begun to disappear
> the *A* no longer drawn
>
> with three remembered strokes
> but shaping itself
> a little confused in the way
> people conceive the possibility
>
> as theoretical,[48]

This reconfiguration of the lyric is "difficult but not impossible," it remains only theoretical, it remains a written text, until it is actually performed, "Sung this is a song//if spoken."[49] "For

[45] Michael Palmer, "From the Notebooks," 343.
[46] Mark Jeffreys, "Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics," *PMLA* 110 (1995): 201.
[47] Michael Palmer, "For Voice," *WM*, 13.
[48] Ibid, 12.
[49] Michael Palmer, "Night of the Full Moon: the Etudes: a Woman Claps her Hands," *WM*, 117.

Voice" also foregrounds the dialectic of absence and presence in Palmer's lyrics through its own binary, its repeated references to "zeroes" and "ones."[50] "Analytic lyric[s]" fundamentally depend on this complicated dialectic, "plus a minus equal to one,"[51] as the figure "1" evokes the other vertical figure, "I," that features so often in lyric poems and combines presence (plus) and absence (minus). As he phrases it elsewhere, "Let one and letter be equal."[52] Approaching what Palmer identified with in Jabès and Celan, they engender a "void centre"[53] in which "erasure allows for writing of a poetry about nothing through a lexicon of absence and otherwise inexpressible referents"[54] or silences. The experience of writing and reading such poems involves a degree of "oscillation between one and another, between being and non-being, presence and absence."[55] In a similar way to the acts of self-displacement seen in Ashbery as he creates "anybody's autobiography" in *RM* and *DDS*, the silences, erasures and concealments in *WM* are intended to highlight how the "play of absence and presence" is not only "central to the lyric experience" but "part of the unsounded nature of all linguistic experience, part of that world of the destabilised and the relational we choose to cover over, to leave unheard."[56]

Concealment and erasure is nothing new in Palmer's poems, it can even be argued that they are simply the extension and application of the "poetics of derivation" seen in *BN* and *CG* into lyric poetry. This might initially seem a paradox since derivative poems provide a "constellation of voices" while his "analytic lyric[s]" consist of silences. However, when the question of who is actually speaking is kept in mind, the difference between them is not as immediately apparent because both address the various considerations and commitments involved in writing a subject into existence through poetry. As Ashbery phrased it in "Some Trees," the "silence [is] already filled with noises." According to the most literal interpretation of derivative poems, the poet does not disclose him/herself, s/he hides behind others' texts from which s/he has borrowed. But Palmer complicates this reductive idea of concealment when he argues that while the poem might:

---

[50] Palmer, "For Voice," *WM*, 11.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Michael Palmer, "Without Music 6," *WM*, 114.
[53] Brian Mc Hale, "Poetry Under Erasure," *Theory Into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, ed. Eva Müller-Zettlemann and Margarete Rubik (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 292.
[54] Ibid, 278.
[55] Ibid, 290.
[56] Palmer, "Poetic Obligations," 90.

in a literal sense be borrowed...what it stands for – what it becomes – is not borrowed at all, but is a singular act of aesthetic identity, an act of disclosure that speaks quite clearly of the intent of the speaker who is not speaking, or who is speaking only through the speech of others.[57]

For him, the more insistent the claim to disclosure is, as in "confessional expressionism," the more elaborate the concealedness becomes so that "the very claim itself...lends a suspect intentionality to the speaking 'I' and a teleological motive"[58] to the poem. This proposal reveals the "necessary difficulty" Palmer associates with writing and reading "I" in a poem, where "I" corresponds with an actual autobiographical or expressive subject that exists outside the text. Despite the sincerity of the poet regarding his/her act of complete disclosure in the poem, autobiographical and expressive writing inherently involves omissions due to the "complication...that while the story is being told the story is [still] going on...[so that] the story is manifestly other than the sequence of events that through selection and organisation go to make up the story."[59] "Confessional expressionism" depends on the "refusal of displacement from the first-person,"[60] on the apparent correspondence between the "I" of the poem and the "I" of the poet so a sense of presence is engendered. But the first-person pronoun is always already an absence, it replaces "myself" and, therefore, empties the subject of self. Palmer uses this inevitable omission to suggest that his derivative poems rather than "confessional expression" reveal more about the person writing:

> what is taken as a sign of openness...[i.e. the declared intention of disclosure, autobiographical correspondences, assumed symmetry between the speaking and the writing "I," etc] may stand for concealment, and what are understood generally as signs of withholding or evasion...[denial of autobiographical correspondences, use of others' voices, etc] may from another point of view stand for disclosure.[61]

He discredits the singular voice that is so prevalent in the workshop lyric and discovers a complex "diversity of selves within myself" by "reading myself and reading those things that have gone into the formation of myself."[62] Such poems are autobiographical because they are a "way of reconstituting all of those things that do build that self, which is not...a unitary self."[63]

---

[57] Michael Palmer, "Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment," *Active Boundaries*, 284.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid, 271.
[60] Ibid, 274.
[61] Ibid, 290.
[62] Palmer, "River City Interview."
[63] Ibid.

The "analytic lyric," therefore, does not simply disclose a subject but analyses that subject as it is written into existence in the poem. In this sense, the "writing [of] is also a kind of reading"[64] of the self. Silence, erasure and concealment are not intended to just convey absence but to allow for a different kind of presence, the presence of "(an)Other" that the insistence on symmetry between the speaking and the writing "I" in confessional expressionism actually silences, erases and conceals. Like Ashbery, the dialectic of presence and absence allows him to attend to "that other I,"[65] to disclose a subject that is not autotelic but heteronomic because his poems include all those others that constitute the self as he listens and responds to their voices.

Although the influence of Palmer's extended, collaborative relationship with Margaret Jenkins is more readily apparent in *FF*, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, his first explicit references to dance and the experimental choreographer appear in this collection of "analytic lyrics." Since Palmer believes that "we cannot understand the modern lyric without understanding Baudelaire,"[66] asserting that "To dance is to live"[67] in "Tomb of Baudelaire" reveals his interest in how the lyric is embodied and performed as a way of living, how the absence achieved by his own acts of autobiographical and expressive self-erasure allow for the presence of "(an)Other." The title of the collection confirms the importance of erasure but "The Circle Was the Secret," written "(*for Margaret Jenkins for dancing:/permutations <u>without music</u>/on some seventeenth century phrases*)"[68] indicates the equal importance of embodiment. Poetry and choreography are made almost synonymous by Palmer as the poem performs its meaning. For example, the first section consists solely of the words "circle," "secret," "earth," "fire," "face" and "empty" arranged in different orders in each stanza:

> The face is the fire
> The earth was the secret
> The circle is empty
>
> The earth is the circle
> The secret is the fire
>
> The earth is the face

[64] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 283.
[65] Ashbery, "The Skaters," *CP* 149.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Michael Palmer, "Tomb of Baudelaire," *WM*, 42.
[68] Michael Palmer, "For Margaret Jenkins For Dancing," *WM*, 18, my emphasis.

The secret is empty[69]

Analysing its semantic content is secondary to identifying its pattern, the movement of the words into different contexts and relationships with other words that change what they signify. "The Circle…" performs its meaning because it is about permutations and it must be read like a dance, that is, by focusing on the literal movements of its component parts. Written "for dancing," it is meant to be embodied and performed. The second and third sections include "X" in the permutated phrases, connotative of both erasure and the desire to mark a particular location. Like the other most recurrent capital letter in confessional expressionism, "I," "The X is nothing," "The X is empty"[70] for Palmer. Implying both erasure and embodiment, the "X" as it literally moves around "The Circle" provides an analogy allowing him to demonstrate how in any autobiographical or expressive writing "the 'I' functions as the most elaborate of shifters,"[71] although this complexity is not always used or even recognised. When discussing these pronominal shifters, Palmer quotes the French structural linguist Émile Benveniste, who claims that "I" only ever signifies the person who is uttering the present instance of discourse containing "I," "*I* cannot be defined except in terms of 'location.'"[72] However, his quote from *Problems in General Linguistics* changes the original "locution"[73] to "location." Whether intentional or not, interchanging "location" and "locution" means the "I" demarcates a particular place while also necessitating performance, the requirement for it to be uttered to have meaning, making the lyric "a song//if spoken."

The dialectic of presence and absence "makes explicit the otherness of the 'I'"[74] in Palmer's analytic lyrics. His "poetics of derivation" involves borrowing others' voices as a way of analysing himself as the subject of his lyrics but in reading them ourselves we become "borrowers of these voices [who] are no more distant from them than" he is, the "voices are in a sense as much ours" as they are his.[75] *WM* demonstrates Palmer's nuanced understanding of Rimbaud's infamous statement that "Je est un autre," that "I is an other." Firstly, as it relates to confessional expressionism, the "I" as speaker of the poem is always different or other to the "I" writing it. Secondly, and more importantly for how it relates to a "poethics of proximity," if "I" does not correspond to a particular person it indicates an instance of potential

---

[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid, 19.
[71] Palmer, "Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment," 281.
[72] Ibid, 289.
[73] Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 218.
[74] Palmer, "Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment," 284.
[75] Ibid.

performance, it remains empty, waiting to be inhabited by whoever reads and speaks it. "I," therefore, is "an other" to the poet because it is embodied by another person, by "(an)Other." "How They Locate" introduces the consequences of emphasising the otherness inherent in "I" as the poem no longer belongs to a singular consciousness, of opening the poem up to the potential presence of "(an)Other:"

> How they locate across bodies of water, where bodies cross.
> In the second-person nightmare is the third. You are is it.[76]

Palmer is not interested in addressing somebody in particular because if the "I" is nothing more than a "void centre," it stands to reason that the second-person pronoun is even more indeterminate. Instead, through his rewording of Heraclitus' dictum that "you can't step into the same river twice," "You can never step in the same cloud twice (in the same song twice),[77] he subtly implies that his songs, his lyrics, provide the "bodies of water, where bodies cross." The "X" symbolises two "I"s crossing, the "I" of the poet and that other "I," or the "I" of "(an)Other." Elaborating on the organic metaphor for his compositions, the poem as "A field has its centre, here/and there," it allows "A continuous field to appear to be grey."[78] The poem is not the product of a singular consciousness but a process, an event in language that is multi-centred because it corresponds with the "now here" of the poet's original composition and the "now here" of the reader's interpretation.

As Palmer's reference to choreography and dance indicates, he is interested in embodiment as much as erasure so the constellation of voices he creates is not a deconstructed space of pure discourse but the practice of arranging and interrelating different selves so that they listen and respond to each other . However, given the medium he is working in, it is "not choreography so much as collaboration."[79] Palmer believes it is:

> evident that everything I do seems a form of collaboration, across time, with the voices of poets and others that pass through me as I work. Suffice it to say that another, an other, becomes present in a way that is both like and unlike the dialogic work of the poem. My ideal of pure collaboration, never fully realised, produces a work that belongs neither to one maker nor to the other or others. It escapes or surpasses the kind of

---

[76] Michael Palmer, "How They Locate," *WM*, 100.
[77] Ibid, 101.
[78] Ibid, 100.
[79] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gizzi," 166.

intentionality we associate with the product of the individual. It is a work...'that is neither you nor I.'[80]

The silences, erasures and concealments in his analytic lyrics are consistent with what he considers the social and ethical purpose of poetry, the "sense that the poet, by the choice of vocation, gives up his place."[81] However, "ceding one's place...doesn't mean that I don't write my poems. Nor do I mean to say that I don't stand responsible for them."[82] The insistence on erasure and embodiment in *WM*, the dialectic of presence and absence, ensures that Palmer's questioning of the considerations and commitments involved in writing "I" is always answered by an other "I," by "(an)Other" who listens and responds to him but, most importantly, remains responsible for his/her response, that is, realises his/her "response-ability" as an embodied ethical subject acting in and interacting with the social world of others.

Palmer concludes "How They Locate" with a line that succinctly captures how the dialectic of presence and absence, the interrelation of erasure and embodiment, in his analytic lyrics is crucial to "response-ability," to how the poet *and* the reader write a subject into existence by listening and responding to others. "(I live in her letter)"[83] succinctly articulates how Palmer's reconfiguration of the lyric utterance allows for an analysis of the subject as engendered by the interaction between self and other. This line is an example of "lyric cryptography," a compositional method of erasure and concealment that necessitates "productive reading." [84] Cryptography in this instance proposes a way of listening and responding to the actual words on the page. Read literally, "I live in her letter" is a highly abstract, if not entirely impossible, state of existence but through "in her," the partial presence of "in here" and "inhere" can be detected. In other words, Palmer is absent as the speaking subject of his poems but is present in the trace that remains, in the sense that the "placement of words [is] the place meant,"[85] that the poem corresponds with his intentions at a particular time. As he explains elsewhere, it is the:

Same as the same thing
as difference

so that the choice of a letter

---

[80] Palmer, "On the Sustaining of Culture in Dark Times," 38.
[81] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 287.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Palmer, *WM*, 102.
[84] John Shoptaw, "Lyric Cryptography," *Poetics Today* 21 (2000): 221.
[85] Palmer, "Poetic Obligations, 88.

equals a (careful?) not choosing of (all?) the rest[86]

Using "lyric cryptography" also indicates how the reader engages with the absences in his "analytic lyric[s]" to engender a different kind of presence. A "productive reading" describes a "practice that involves taking the poem as neither an isolated object nor merely as a document for cultural study" [87] but as the "material result of innumerable interacting processes of production."[88] Consequently, the poem is a joint production of its poet and its generations of readers, and the forces – linguistic, personal, cultural, social, historical, and so on – at work on them both."[89] Similar to the status of the poet as both absent and present, the status of the reader is informed by the same dialectic in that s/he is literally absent from the poem but present in the sense that s/he inhabits the "void centre" as s/he reads and speaks it, contributing another, different interpretation to the constellation of other voices created by the "generations of readers." Palmer explains how:

> I for example have reintroduced the art of continuous
> revision of the scorecard until it resembles a palimpsest
> of possible games.[90]

Evoking an important feature of the serial poetics that continue in *WM* through the eponymous series, the sense of over-writing implied by the multiple variations on and continuous revisions of a theme that silence, erase and conceal each other, the image of the palimpsest visualises the dialectic of presence and absence. Like "lyric cryptography," one text is immediately apparent and present while others are absent though still perceptible. The productive reader "asks not (only) what the poem (a word, line, passage, etc) means but by what means was it produced,"[91] what other voices are being silenced, erased and concealed by the poet's careful not choosing of all the rest. The dialectic of disclosure and concealment in the palimpsest textually enacts the interplay of erasure and embodiment seen in Palmer's "analytic lyric[s]," thus further emphasising their function as occasions where the subject can be read and written about in terms of both presence and absence, that is, in the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other." However, this dialectic has connotations of either-or, whereas he is "hopeful that/a

---

[86] Michael Palmer, "Without Music 5," *WM*, 112.
[87] Shoptaw, "Lyric Cryptography," 221.
[88] Ibid, 223.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Michael Palmer, "Cloud Forms," *WM*, 126.
[91] Shoptaw, "Lyric Cryptography," 223.

third term might be invented to describe the process/of going on."[92] Palmer's "analytic lyric[s]" involve "entering thirdly worlds/and worlds of third"[93] where this new term is possible due to the simultaneity of presence and absence, and the attendant coinherence of self and other. He lives "in her letter" by silencing, erasing and concealing himself to allow others' voices to emerge, to allow "(an)Other" to speak, and listening to them attentively before responding. In reading and writing the subject as the coinherence of "I" and those other "I"s, Palmer's poems "describe the process/of going on" with the hope that his readers will identify them as examples of living in the social world of others as a responsive and, more importantly, responsible subject.

(6.2) The Performance of the Lyric

Silence, erasure and concealment are not just themes in *WM* but prerequisite acts by the poet so others' voices become apparent, so others can speak and perform the poem, "We have come to listen and watch/and talk and be talked."[94] For this reason, "There's less content here/but more activity,"[95] Palmer refuses "self" as something given, as something that can be disclosed, in favour of "self as nothing in itself, as only coming-to-be."[96] Erasure and embodiment are vital aspects of the "analytic lyric" but he uses the idea of performance to foreground an inherent but often overlooked capacity of the lyric, its ability to reconnect language to the body to create "a visceral sensation."[97] By heightening the acoustics of words through rhythmic and metrical structures, lyrics make us aware of the materiality of language while "enunciation constantly reminds us of the bodily components necessary to produce its sounds."[98] Reading the poem as Palmer intends, that is, enunciating and performing it, gives it a "bodily and visceral effect rather than a purely cerebral one"[99] and demonstrates how we "create reality and the bodies that inhabit it"[100] through such performances. "Without Music 2" prioritises activity over content:

---

[92] Palmer, "Cloud Forms," *WM*, 127.
[93] Palmer, "Without Music 1," *WM*, 21.
[94] Michael Palmer, "Classical Style," *WM*, 83.
[95] Michael Palmer, "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," *WM*, 118
[96] Palmer, "Poetic Obligations," 99-100.
[97] Michael Palmer, "Polysyndeton," *WM*, 63.
[98] Angelica Michelis, "Eat My Words: Poetry as Trangression," *Theory Into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, ed. Eva Müller-Zettlemann and Margarete Rubik (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 81.
[99] Ibid, 82.
[100] Ibid, 83.

     Reading aloud is for emphasis
     Reading aloud is to practice

     One of one of one word
     In places of here

     One. Of One of. One word
     One of one. Of. One word

     One of one. Of one word[101]

The semantic content of "One of one of one word" is secondary to the act of reading it aloud as Palmer alters the punctuation to change how it is enunciated. By changing the emphasis in each line through punctuation, he accentuates what is implicit in poetry, that the same line will be changed according to the reader's particular way of performing it. In "The Library is Burning," a poem suggestive of the destruction of the solely written word, Palmer explains that:

     The stirrings are the same and different

     The stirrings are the same and different
     and secretly the same[102]

The poet can create a certain musicality through rhythm, assonance, alliteration, meter, enjambment and other devices but every reader's performance of the poem will ultimately be different, s/he will make the poem sound different. By creating poems "with nothing at [their] centre," the reader is able to project him/herself into them, to embody them, through performance because "while speaking the words aloud a reader temporarily owns them and they then become words to which the reader lends a life,"[103] or another life. Just reading "One of one of one word" reveals nothing significant but when read aloud in its variations, its significance is extralinguistic as the "corporeality of voice can penetrate through the semantic

---

[101] Michael Palmer, "Without Music 2," *WM*, 32.
[102] Ibid, 77.
[103] Peter Middleton, "The Contemporary Poetry Reading," *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 268.

delivery in [its] performance." [104] Configuring the poem as something to be performed illustrates how "sounds make us/including mistakes," [105] thus revealing Palmer's understanding that not only is the "meaning [of the poem] fulfilled by the utterance," but also how "through textual performance, the lyric genre has the potential of turning contents into practice." [106] Therefore, "Reading aloud is to practice" what it means to be an embodied subject and how we articulate our subjectivity, how we write it into existence by performing certain actions.

As an event, the poem does not refer to a particular time or space but rather corresponds to the time and space of writing before "then pass[ing] over to the territory of reader as receiver." [107] The poem with "nothing at its centre" "re-presents nothing," [108] simply demarcates a "now here" that is inhabited by the poet during its composition and by the reader during its interpretation. Consequently, the "void centre" accommodates both the poet and the reader, and is characterised by an acute sense of otherness because the "I" spoken by the poet is radically different to the "I" pronounced by the reader. Palmer's self-erasure gives the reader permission to participate in the creative act but it necessitates an important responsibility. He terms it the "readerly obligation of allowing him-or herself to be equally implicated" [109] in the poem, which parallels the poetic obligation to distinguish "between an art of the given and an art of the actual," to refrain from "reflexive confession" and instead pursue, through writing, "the actual as it respires." [110] It is only within this agreement that the "conversation of the poem begins and its social nature is affirmed." [111]

Palmer concludes *WM* with "The Meadow," the eight part of a series situated earlier in the collection concerned with "Reassembling a meadow," [112] thus foregrounding the responsibility engendered when reading is reconfigured as writing and the reader is permitted to participate in the creative act. By highlighting the fact he is quoting from a specific text, in this case Duncan's "Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," "Resembling a meadow/'folded in all thought,'[113] it is apparent that he is using how he reads and writes poetry to demonstrate to his readers how permission and responsibility functions. Palmer seems to address the types of utterances J. L. Austin identified in his analysis of ordinary language. The

---

[104] Ibid, 289.
[105] Michael Palmer, "Without Music 4," *WM* 39.
[106] Eva Müller-Zettelmann, "'A Frenzied Oscillation:' Auto-Reflexivity in the Lyric," *Theory into Poetry*, 132.
[107] Palmer, "Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment," 285.
[108] Palmer, "Poetic Obligations," 90.
[109] Ibid, 89.
[110] Ibid, 88.
[111] Ibid, 89
[112] Michael Palmer, "The Meadow," *WM*, 96.
[113] Palmer, *WM*, 128.

first poem describes language according to its purpose in a constative utterance, a sentence that makes a statement that is either true or false:

> Categorically
> he would have us believe
>
> that this isn't language after all
> that's being decoded
>
> but something fixed
> in the purpose of its telling[114]

According to Austin, the statement is either categorically true or untrue but its purpose is always to describe something pre-existent or something that has already happened. The second poem, on the other hand, explains how in a performative utterance, the "message so to speak/[is] limited to its function"[115] because these declarative sentences are the performances of an act under the appropriate circumstances, i.e. "I now pronounce you husband and wife." Never one to quietly accept a conventional binary, Palmer's poems are neither constative nor performative utterances. Unlike the former, they do not re-present or reiterate a given reality, which produces something only "like a meadow." He uses the situation of "Each morning the daily paper/...be[ing] left at your door/free of charge"[116] to emphasise the lack of change. Yet they are also not performative utterances due to his admission of the limited potential to affect actual change in the given reality, "If we go on writing books/no one will notice."[117] Rather than simply describing or changing reality through language, his poems are events in language that create a new reality themselves, they are performative events:

> ...distinguished from a language precisely
> by the invariable correlation of [their] signs
> to the reality they signify[118]

As Palmer's series demonstrates, what matters is not the content that determines if it resembles a meadow or not but the activity of "Reassembling a meadow," the actions performed as he

---

[114] Ibid, 96.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid, 97-98.
[117] Ibid, 97.
[118] Ibid.

listens and responds to Duncan, as he creates a new social reality with him so that "if we stop [writing books]/two persons will notice."[119] One does not perform an act "without the knowledge that an 'other' will hear and respond" to it, therefore, "responsiveness, our ability and our desire to respond to the call of the 'other' is crucial to the ethic[al]" considerations and commitments involved in the performative event.[120] In the context of the creative act, Palmer's reading of Duncan is a reassembling or a rewriting as he responds to him and assumes responsibility for that response. "The Meadow" explains how Palmer wants his work to be engaged with and it makes the "poethics" informing it more apparent. The reader reassembles Palmer's poems by making them correspond with his/her spatial-temporal circumstances, by inhabiting the "void centre" and entering into conversation with another person.

(6.3) Poetry and Dialogism

Reconfiguring the lyric to accentuate its performative capacity and emphasise how it conceptualises the creative act as a conversation, an event in language, between multiple voices cannot be properly appreciated without referencing the principle of dialogism, especially since "poethics" emphasises the ethics in poetics, its capacity to enact ways of living in the social world of others. Unfortunately, the person credited with identifying polyphony, the presence of multiple, competing voices in continuous dialogue, as the natural state of language employed poetry as a counterexample to substantiate his polemic explaining how the dialogic principle manifests in literature. Bakhtin's dismissal of poetry is absolute but he considers the lyric in particular to be "the least dialogic literary form as it purports to be the univocal utterance of a single subject."[121] In complete contrast to novelistic discourse, where the author allows for the interplay of different voices, each corresponding to a different axiological system, to displace the singular, authorial voice at the centre of the text so it more accurately represents the heterogeneity of the socio-cultural circumstances that produced it in poetic discourse:

> The poet is a poet insofar as he accepts the idea of a unitary and singular language and a unitary, monologically sealed-off utterance...The poet must assume a complete, single-personed hegemony over his own language, he must assume equal responsibility

---

[119] Ibid.
[120] Belinda Morrissey, "The Ethical Foundation of Performativity," *Social Semiotics* 15 (2005): 180.
[121] Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 75.

for each one of its aspects and subordinate them to his own, and only his own, intentions.[122]

It is obvious that Bakhtin's view of poetry assumes that the conventions of the lyric are synonymous with poetry itself. Quite significantly, despite its reductive presuppositions, Bakhtin's understanding can be seen operating in the Language poets' insistence that to subvert the conventions associated with the "official verse culture," such as the traditional subject-object dichotomy, poets must write decidedly anti-lyrical poems. However, never one to acquiesce to such simplistic binaries, Palmer practices an "analytic lyric," reconfiguring the conventions of the lyric to dissociate it from modern malpractices and return the mode to its original, that is performative and social, function. Because the epistemological and hermeneutical issues that Bakhtin's principle raises has important political consequences that influence how and why one writes and reads particular literary genres, it is necessary to re-evaluate his dismissal of poetry due to its inherent monologism. This is particularly important since Palmer's politics would closely align him with dialogism, emphasising the centrifugal forces in language that decentralise authority, heighten plurality and acknowledge the presence of others' voices, instead of monologism, strengthening the centripetal forces in language that insist on rigid hierarchies, the exclusion of difference and the coalescence of meaning and value around a hegemonic centre of authority.

Bakhtin's significance should not be limited to the content of his arguments because of equal, if not greater, importance is the method of thinking that reading his texts encourages. Therefore, he should not be read monologically, that is, as providing stable, absolute categories to structure how we read the world and position ourselves within it. The important thing to be learned from Bakhtin derives from his ability to place two mutually exclusive, oppositional terms in a relation of simultaneous coexistence to emphasise their interdependence. Complete monologism is impossible because dialogism inheres in language itself, it "represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs, [and] between socio-ideological groups in the present,"[123] while complete dialogism is untenable because of the implicit necessity for a degree of control, convention and structure to facilitate mutual understanding and communication through language. For this reason, Bakhtin's conception of monologism and dialogism should be considered a question of

---

[122] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. trans. Carly Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 296.
[123] Bakhtin, *DI*, 291.

degrees dependent on the compositional and interpretive contexts of the particular text. The binary demarcates a spectrum, therefore, his dismissal of poetry is not so much based on an essentialist differentiation between it and prose but rather on an axiological distinction he makes regarding the intentions of the author and the role of the reader regarding poetry and prose. Monologism and dialogism are not "inherent characteristics of particular types of literary discourse," they do not refer to "different types of texts but different kinds of intertextual configuration,"[124] the extent to which authors and readers engage with the presence of other voices in the text. When Bakhtin discusses novelistic and poetic discourse, he is addressing "force[s] reaching beyond any actual examples" since he sees the "literary field as a space with a limited number of poles...where every pole marks the extreme but unreachable point of a given generic potential," i.e. the dramatic, the poetic, the novelistic, etc.[125] This explains his admission in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* that "even in poetic speech works are possible that do not reduce their entire verbal material to a single common denominator," [126] i.e. the singular speaking subject. While "in the nineteenth century such instances were rare," the "twentieth century [sees] a radical 'prosification of the lyric" as the genre utilises "one of the most fundamental characteristics of prose," the "possibility of employing on the plane of a single work discourses of various types, with all their expressive capacities intact, without reducing them to a common denominator."[127] When Bakhtin privileges the novel, therefore, "it is less a particular type of text...than it is an experimental space for testing dialogic limits."[128] He is concerned with novelness, "the orientation of the word amid the utterances and languages of others,"[129] because it provides a "strategy for thinking [and writing] difference"[130] that refuses to reduce and contain it within simplistic binaries by allowing a "diversity of voices and heteroglossia to enter the [text] and organise themselves within it into a structured artistic system."[131]

---

[124] David Shepherd, "Bakhtin and the Reader," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 94.

[125] Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist, "Introduction: A Novelness of Bakhtin?" *The Novelness of Bakhtin: Perspectives and Possibilities*, ed Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2001), 42.

[126] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 200.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Michael Holquist, "Why is God's Name a Pun? Bakhtin's Theory of the Novel in the Light of Theophilology," *The Novelness of Bakhtin*, 54.

[129] Bakhtin, *DI*, 300.

[130] Holqusit, "Why is God's Name a Pun?" 59.

[131] Bakhtin, *DI*, 300.

As more recent innovations in poetry demonstrate, such as pronounced intertextuality, the subversion of complete authorial intentionality, and the emphasis on hybridity to undermine generic boundaries, poetry no longer adheres to the criteria of monologism, that the "poet strips the words of others' intentions...[so] they lose their link with concrete intentional levels of language and their connection with specific contexts."[132] Poets no longer "immerse [their language] in Lethe" so it "forgets its previous life in any other context" and can "remember only its life in poetic contexts."[133] However, just as dialogism "cannot be reduced to an essence of novelistic language, so monologism cannot be explained away as a property of non-novelistic or 'poetic' texts."[134] In this sense, it is at the level of criticism rather than in texts themselves that the association of poetry and monologic unity"[135] and of prose and dialogic diversity is substantiated. The novel simply provided Bakhtin with a ready-made example of how dialogism, what he termed "the conventions governing ordinary linguistic practice," could "serve as [a] model for a desirable political and ethical community."[136] From the novel, Bakhtin "derive[s] norms for the conduct of social life more generally"[137] based on the theory of communication it embodies, the social, intersubjective event of creating meaning rather than the monological utterance of a solitary individual. The novel, therefore, represents the most accessible and easiest to achieve realisation of his principle of dialogism because it is founded on "meeting or encounter, on coexistence and interaction."[138] Discourse in the novel is an event that occurs during the dialogic meeting of two or more consciousnesses, an encounter between my word and an alien word, a perspective on and interpretation of the world that is different to mine. This sense of encounter is heightened in the novel because whenever "we encounter another word," we are "encounter[ing] another consciousness." [139] For Bakhtin, novels epitomise an "opening both to other languages and other consciousnesses," introducing a process of listening and responding that makes "discourse responsive to the discourse of the other," to others' voices.[140] Bakhtin's preference for the novel over poetry would remain a standard question of aesthetic value if it was not for the fact that he considers dialogism, and

---

[132] Ibid, 296.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Shepherd, 100.
[135] Lynne Pearce, *Reading Dialogics (Interrogating Texts)* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1994), 87.
[136] Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.
[137] Ibid.
[138] David Patterson, "Mikhail Bakhtin and the Dialogical Dimensions of the Novel," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1985): 132.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid, 133.

the associated characteristics of "polyglossia and heteroglossia" as "ethically superior to [monologism.]"[141]

Writing and reading a text according to the principle of dialogism "display[s] an intrinsic identification with difference and alterity"[142] because no text is "complete without the [interpretation of others] who fill in meaning according to their particular position in time and space." [143] Dialogism, therefore, has profound implications for "response-ability" in and responsibility for the text, thus revealing how the significance of the novel derives from it explicitly foregrounding a new method of reading that reconfigures the creative act as conversation, as listening and responding to others and being responsible for the decisions that determine who one listens to and how one responds. Most importantly perhaps, Bakhtin's conception of authorship in the novel is not a purely epistemological issue, i.e. concerned with "show[ing] the impossibility of the 'truth-speaking' authorial voice escaping the same deconstructive considerations which afflict all language," but rather a social and ethical question, in which "the objection to the monologic discursive hierarchy is that it represents a politically unacceptable arrogation of authority," while the alternative provided by the presence of others' voices requires "responsible engagement…with no attempt to arrogate the final word."[144] This is not a question of "reviving the old impression of the author as a unique point of origin, as the sole author of texts which are his[/hers] alone,"[145] s/he is dead as an isolated individual who creates autonomous expressions that confirm his/her immanent subjective core but is reborn as one speaker within a context of other speakers. Unlike the purely textual analyses of many poststructuralists, the author for Bakhtin is "not simply a construct of the a priori discourse, a position within its already structured frame, but a person within networks of communicative relationships"[146] who actively uses language to orient him/herself in his/her relationships and interactions. Bakhtin allows us to reintroduce the author not as the point of origin of the utterance but as one speaker "enmeshed in relations of communication with others,"[147] thus helping us retain a more practical and embodied understanding of language.

---

[141] Tony Crowley, "Bakhtin and the History of Language," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, 72.

[142] Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 21.

[143] Ibid, 9.

[144] Simon Dentith, "Bakhtin and Contemporary Criticism," *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 90-91.

[145] Ian Burkitt, "The Death and Rebirth of the Author: The Bakhtin Circle and Bourdieu on Individuality, Language and Revolution," *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words*, ed. Michael Mayerfield Bell and Michael Gardiner (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1998), 163-164.

[146] Ibid, 164-165.

[147] Ibid, 165.

Palmer also "hesitate[s] to say 'death of the author'…[because] it can lead to a picture of pure passivity on the part of the poet…to a kind of romantic negativity where the poet exists purely as a receiver" when it is vital that the receiver "be thought of as also this particular genetic matrix that interprets signals…a particular way."[148] His interest in a "certain kind of death of intentionality"[149] does not mean he doesn't "write [his] poems…[that he doesn't] stand responsible for them"[150] but rather that his interpretation exists as one amongst many other interpretations capable of changing the text by making it correspond to different spatial-temporal circumstances. Reconfiguring the creative act as a conversation demonstrates that poetry can be informed by the same principle of dialogism as the novel once the poet decides to decentralise the authority of the singular speaker by responsively and responsibly engaging with the voices of others. Furthermore, and similar to the social and ethical motivations Bakhtin identifies in novelistic discourse, the "listener [or reader] is just as active in the process of communication as the speaker" because the "utterance of one person is always in response to the utterance of another."[151]

Unfortunately, despite the potential for poetry to be understood according to the principle of dialogism, Bakhtin erroneously reads the speaking subject autobiographically, thus confirming his own pejorative assessment of poetry's inherent monologism. Unlike with the author of novelistic discourse, Bakhtin refuses to acknowledge how the speaking subject of the poem "cannot [always] be identified with the real biographical individual who wrote [the] text," that the "subject of [poetic] discourse is not [always] the speaking or writing individual in his own right."[152] As in the novel, "the biographical author [of the poem], the subject possessing authorial rights during the writing process, [can] constantly distance himself from the intratextual position of the utterance's subject" because the "subject of discourse is ultimately just one of the functions of the communicative event, [in this case] the creative function."[153] However, perhaps this refusal actually indicates more of a failure on Bakhtin's part in two regards. Firstly, dialogism "depends upon a readerly competence which recognises the political significance of the interaction of voices within the text and that is also able to make the transitions" from monologic to dialogical without indications provided by the author."[154]

---

[148] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 277.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid, 287.
[151] Burkitt, 166.
[152] Valerii Tiupa, "The Architectonics of Aesthetic Discourse," *The Contexts of Bakhtin: Philosophy, Authorship, Aesthetics*, ed. David Shepherd (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1998), 99.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Pearce, 85.

Realising dialogism in poetry involves a "necessary difficulty" because the poet "must permanently counteract [the] homogenising forces"[155] represented by conventions such as rhyme and meter, formal structures, and concrete metaphorical images which assert the poet's singular control over language and his/her exclusion of others' voices that might undermine his/her own intentions. By extension, because dialogic texts need "to be evaluated according to a different set of aesthetic and ideological criteria to those applied to typically monological texts,"[156] their distinct contribution can be appreciated; readers are involved in the similarly difficult task of implementing a new method of reading that is responsive toward otherness. Bakhtin's refusal to engage with the dialogic potential of poetry, therefore, can be seen as a failure to involve himself in a more difficult task. Since neither the novel nor the poem is either monologic or dialogic because of their essential characteristics, his preference for the former over the latter is more utilitarian than axiological.

Secondly, and more importantly for a "poethics of proximity," Bakhtin fails to identify how the creative act of writing and reading a poem can be approached as a communicative event that allows for an increased sense of "response-ability" in and responsibility for the text. Palmer's admission that he remains responsible for his "analytic lyric[s]" despite the silences, erasures and concealments therein reaffirms Bakhtin's "first philosophy," his ethical philosophy of the performed act. The central ethical and socio-political aspect of Bakhtin's thought is answerability, a singular person's assumption of his/her "non-alibi in being," his/her irreducible responsibility for the actions s/he has performed. Palmer's admission, therefore, means his poems enact his own "non-alibi in being," thereby suggesting that poetic rather than novelistic discourse is more ethically significant because "it turns a person's indelible…answerability for his/her acts (including speech acts) into one of its artistically constitutive moments."[157] Unlike the novelist, "who may devolve the answerability for his/her discourse…upon his/her characters," the poet has no such alibi because s/he "enacts not simply the diversity of speech and language [through a dialogic poetics] but an emphatically singular, answerable and invested position within this diversity."[158] Insofar as Palmer's "analytic lyric[s]" are in accordance with the principle of dialogism, they are ethically superior to the example of novelistic discourse Bakhtin uses because the writer and the reader are involved in an event that foregrounds the importance of both permission to realise "response-ability" and

---

[155] Ibid.
[156] Pearce, 84-85.
[157] Eskin, 388.
[158] Ibid.

obligation to assume responsibility as one listens and responds to the voices of others in the text, thereby demonstrating how his "poethics" functions as a way of acting in and interacting with the social world of others. Similar to the difficulty of achieving dialogism in poetry, the author-reader relationship enacted in the "analytic lyric" is characterised by a "necessary difficulty" because the communicative event of the poem is not concerned with reducing uncertainty but instead with encountering the absolute alterity of another person, of exposing oneself to the interpretations of others. The writer-reader relationship Bakhtin identifies in novelistic discourse is just another version of the I-Other relationship explained in his philosophy of the act. However, Bakhtin's choice of the novel over the poem confirms his desire to simplify his radical thinking about the correlation of ethics and aesthetics, whereas Palmer's "analytic lyric[s]" demonstrate that any attempt to write a responsive and responsible subject into existence by listening and responding to others must engage with the "necessary difficulty" attendant upon encountering the absolute alterity of another, embodied subject.

(6.4) The Dialogic Poetics of *Notes for Echo Lake*

It is too easy to argue that Palmer simply confirms the principle of dialogism in poetry through his "poetics of derivation" and the constellations of others' voices this creates, although such an analysis is entirely understandable, if not even encouraged, as he accentuates the polyphonic potential in his work, how it can be "for one to seventy-seven voices."[159] Dialogism in his poems, therefore, serves to affirm Bakhtin's insistence that speaking/writing and listening/reading is "a nexus of doing things with words with others or in the co-presence of others."[160] Palmer's appreciation for how Bakhtin might be revitalised by putting him in dialogue with poetry that deviates from the conservative, neo-Romantic and confessional-expressionist understanding of the genre largely goes unsaid but his actions are more telling. In his anthology of recent writings in poetics, *Code of Signals*, Palmer includes an essay by Michael Davidson, which insists on the need to reappraise and extend Bakhtin's critique of poetry in light of more recent innovations in poetic discourse that heighten what has "existed in poetry since the beginning, " how it can illustrate the "instability of unitary referential paradigms" and, instead of demonstrating "language's abilitiy to stabilise reality by means of

---

[159] Michael Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 8," *CA*, 45.
[160] Hwa Yol Jung, "Bakhtin's Dialogical Body Politics," *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences*, 102.

a single image or pattern of metaphore," how it can "free the actual discourses that occur in any given utterance."[161] Ultimately, by including Davidson's essay Palmer demonstrates that Bakhtin should not be read monologically, that is, either in terms of the absolute categories he posits, the essential distinctions he identifies between prose and poetry, or as the complete authority regarding the principle of dialogism. Instead, Bakhtin must be read dialogically, where readers change his argument by making it correspond to their particular circumstances so they can perform a "critique of poetry not based upon the authorial expressive subject but rather upon the propositions of ' subject' generated by specific ideological disocurses" that manifest in the socially heteroglossic poem through the ideological character of discursive frames.[162]

        In "NEL," the series from which the collection gets its title, Palmer is involved in a similar project to Bakhtin as he places literature in closer proximity to philosophy, thus changing the otherwise hermeneutical question "Who does the talking[?]"[163] into a profoundly ontological one. Both are also concerned with the dialectic of presence and absence but as a simultaneity rather than an either-or dichotomy. The metaphor of the echo evokes this dialectic as the speaking subject is literally absent but remains present because his/her utterance is repeated, thus conceptualising Bakhtin's insistence that "at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom,"[164] it consists of other speakers who are literally absent but remain present as their previous intentions and values continue to inflect it. While this dialectic might be characteristic of all language, a certain kind of poetry, Palmer seems to suggest, insists on it in its most concentrated form, "Such as words are. A tape for example a friend had assembled containing/readings by H.D., Stein, Williams, others."[165] If Bakhtin promotes dialogism as a new way of conceptualising how one acts in and interacts with the social world of others through language, Palmer uses it "to reconfigure a model of communication having to do with the figure of Narcissus and the figure of Echo,"[166] a model of lyric communication that makes it possible to "[talk] to self as well as other as well as self as other"[167] in the heuristic procedure of interpellation and response through which "(my)Self" is written into existence. However, this is more complex than simply self-othering, where the

---

[161] Michael Davidson, "Discourse in Poetry: Bakhtin and Extensions of the Dialogical," *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, ed. Michael Palmer (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1983), 148-149.
[162] Ibid, 149.
[163] Michael Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 4," *CA*, 21.
[164] Bakhtin, *DI*, 291.
[165] Michael Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 4.
[166] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gizzi," 162.
[167] Palmer, "Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment," 290.

self becomes other by identifying with what is different to it. Following the example of his fellow analytic lyricist Celan, Palmer constantly questions the poet's capacity to speak "*on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an *altogether other*."[168] "NEL" foregrounds the difficulty inherent in realising the principle of dialogism in lyric poetry, likening it to listening to "a voice [that] can be heard behind a door"[169] and to "Voices through a wall. They are there because we hear them what do we hear. The pitch rises toward the end to indicate a question."[170] Polyphony might be language's natural state but a certain competence is required if the reader is to listen and respond to these others, to make present what is otherwise absent. As he explains in "Notes for Echo Lake 2," understanding:

> …the fullness of the message she uttered would demand of her lis-
> tener an equivalent attention. The message was the world translated, and
> speaker and listener became one.[171]

This situation of listening and responding to others has already been addressed in *WM* and while it raises some undeniable difficulties, Palmer is concerned with an even more difficult but necessary task in "NEL."

Choosing Echo rather than Narcissus indicates Palmer's commitment to Olson's dictate to get "rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the subject,"[172] although he pursues it further and from a far more ethically informed perspective than the progenitor of "projective verse" ever envisaged. He is not interested in the narcissistic obsession of self with self, which could be said to characterise the autotelic "workshop lyric" of the period, but with an egoless lyric, a lyric that grants primacy to the other so that "I am you and you are me/…/I'll write you in where I should be."[173] The collection is a book of notes for Echo Lake, a private notebook made public, but Palmer does not "[intend] to be narcissistic," it is not "a privileged insight into the workings of the poet's mind but a feature of practice that highlights…the importance of opening the self to others."[174] "NEL" is about exposing oneself to others, its "form...was generated by this letter Charles Bernstein sent when he was editing

---

[168] Paul Celan, "The Meridian," 48, author's emphasis.
[169] Michael Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 5," *CA*, 27.
[170] Michael Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 2," *CA*, 10.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Olson, "Projective Verse," 274.
[173] Michael Palmer, "Song of the Round Man," *CA*, 29-30.
[174] David Arnold, *Poetry and Language Writing: Objective and Surreal* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 108.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine: 'Would you be willing to tell us a little something about yourself?"[175] Palmer is responding to the interpellation of another person. Exposing himself to the question posed by "(an)Other" is the constitutive act of subjectivity, of writing "(my)Self" into existence. As he explains, the request for self-articulation is not an instance of permission but an obligation to respond:

> ...I don't think I have the right to leave your letter unanswered. I would like to keep working. I think I see a new way out. The following are matters concerning me and the roof of my mouth. The letters com-bined into the word for silence. The song came in stanzas as is the man ner of such songs.[176]

This need to expose "(my)Self" to "(an)Other" is reflected in "NEL"'s form, as Palmer oscillates between the conventional free-verse stanzas of the majority of poems and prose for the eponymous series. In his "Notes for Echo Lake," his attempt at egoless self-articulation, he is writing poetry's other, i.e. prose, and trying to write the lyric's other, "the word for silence." A further way Palmer attempts to grant primacy to the other is suggested by the cover illustration of the collection (Fig. 12), a sketch by the painter Irving Petlin, whose work often converses with analytic lyricists, chiefly Celan and Jabès.
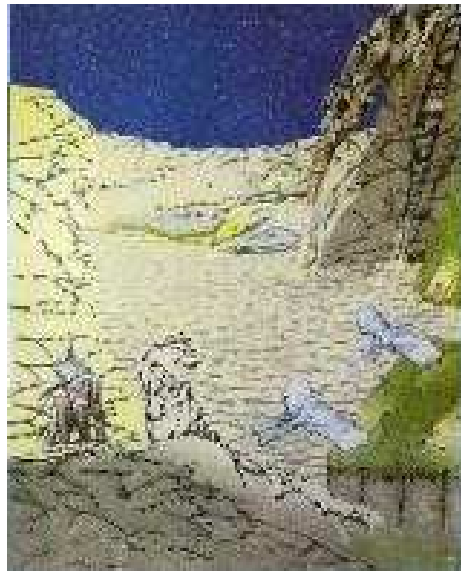
(Fig. 12) Irving Petlin, *Notes for Echo Lake*
(cover illustration)

---

[175] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 275.
[176] Michael Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 11," *CA*, 62.

In Petlin, Palmer finds "a language of the unsayable,"[177] a way of sounding and resounding the self through "constant invention,…iteration and reiteration, and the testing of meaning."[178] Significantly, his response to Bernstein assumes the form of notes, suggesting something preliminary as he refuses to even attempt a final word, thus "[emphasising] the open and endlessly exfoliating character of [self-]signification, and the play of identity and difference at work in the act of [self-]representation."[179] Palmer's response exposes him to the interpretation of "(an)Other," "As A's voice tells me B where B would read it differently."[180] Writing "(my)Self" into existence involves the endless process of exposing oneself to the question posed by "(an)Other" and responding, before having that response interpreted and answering for it. Palmer acknowledges this by illustrating how:

> …I began again and again, and each beginning identical with the next,
> meaning each one accurate, each a projection, each a head bending over
> the motionless form.[181]

His act of self-representation is always "Beginning and ending. As a work begins and ends itself or begins and re-/begins or starts and stops"[182] because he is constantly being interrupted by "(an)Other."

Palmer identifies the potential for exposing "(my)Self" to "(an)Other" by writing "a poetry that 'asks to be questioned,' a poetry whose means remain in question,"[183] which might then allow for "a possible other voice…that can talk back" and express "a counter-logic in the poem."[184] Because the poems have nothing at their centre, they encourage:

> A questioning of the relations and identities between the first, second and third person,
> between the *I* and the *you* and the *it*…but also in the plural between the *they* and the
> *we*, and all the things out there. What are the interrelations? It's always a question. Who
> are we in relation? Who am I? Am I doing the speaking? Are you doing the listening?[185]

---

[177] Michael Palmer, "A Language of the Unsayable," I56.
[178] Ibid, 167.
[179] Ibid, 164.
[180] Michael Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 10," *CA*, 58.
[181] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 6.
[182] Ibid, 5.
[183] Palmer, "Active Boundaries," 214.
[184] Ibid, 215.
[185] Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practice," 246.

The act of self-representation can never be completed because "(an)Other" engenders these questions in "(my)Self," "(an)Other" who is both present and absent, and cannot be properly represented without betraying its significance, its irreducible alterity, perhaps explaining why Palmer only manages "~~Bernstein~~ would read it differently." However, one way of "[acknowledging], or perhaps [inscribing], unrepresentability," of presenting "the unutterable…[is to leave] the text, in any conventional sense, incomplete."[186] By allowing for a dialogue between different voices, Palmer realises a "dialogics of difference" that is "open-ended [because it] fosters the idea that a multiplicity of differences finds no ending."[187] In doing so, he demonstrates how the principle of dialogism is more than just a model for writing and reading poetry because of its ethical overtones, its capacity to realise a "poethics of proximity:"

> The letters of the words of our legs and arms. What he had seen or
> thought he'd seen within the eye, voices overheard rising and falling.
> And if each conversation has no end, then composition is a placing beside
> or with and is endless,[188]

Creating an egoless lyric to grant primacy to "(an)Other" is "To be at a loss for words" but Palmer asks "How does the mind move there?"[189] The answer, by ensuring "the subject disappears"[190] in terms of both intending speaker and intentional matter. As with Bakhtin, Palmer's significance is not limited to the content of his texts but the new way of thinking that reading them elicits because, as the quote from Bruno Schulz in the first line of *NEL* insists, "'An outlook based upon philosophy became obligatory.'"[191] This new outlook involves looking out, orienting oneself outward toward the social world of others, so that the poem becomes a way of welcoming "(an)Other." The poem's "rhythm [is] an arm, rhythm as the arm extended"[192] in a handshake perhaps, "arms extended to signify welcome"[193] such that the poem enacts a way of living, "The life would be a life of lines, the straightened arm held out from the/body."[194] "NEL" is a response to a question posed by another person but Palmer

---

[186] Ibid, 213.
[187] Jung, 99.
[188] Michael Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 3," *CA*, 15.
[189] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 2," *CA*, 10.
[190] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1, *CA*, 4.
[191] Michael Palmer, "The Comet," *CA*, 3.
[192] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 2," *CA*, 10.
[193] Michael Palmer, "So with his daughter Antigone," *CA*, 25.
[194] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 10," *CA*, 57.

heightens this sense of being exposed to the interpretation of "(an)Other" inherent in any act of self-representation by only providing preliminary notes, "Dear Charles, I began again and again to work, always with no confidence."[195] This engenders the "terrifying experience" that occurs when the "structural rigidity of a closed form begins to tremble and we begin to feel the anxiety of losing structure,"[196] when the poem and the self it articulates is open toward "(an)Other." To resolve it, this poetry "calls for a dwelling in the poem" by "[insisting] the reader is part of the meaning, that the reader completes the circuit."[197] The "difficulty [Palmer] was having with writing, that is, inventing, an autobiographical note for [his] first book,"[198] with "[imposing] order and offer[ing] an outline of the 'real' facts"[199] continues into "NEL" due to the question posed by Bernstein. However, instead of disclosing himself as pre-existent and given, Palmer prefers the "necessary difficulty" of exposing "(my)Self" to "(an)Other," where self is nothing in itself until it experiences the proximity of another person, an experience made possible by welcoming "(an)Other," that is, allowing the reader to dwell in the poem and interrupt him with his/her interpretation, with his/her questions.

The acts of self-erasure that create poems "with nothing at their centre" in *WM* are intended to allow the reader to project him/herself into the poem and realise his/her "response-ability" but in "NEL" Palmer demonstrates the only way of writing this unknown and unknowable other into the poem. The poem "only occurs, is only there, in the event of the poem, which is in its engagement with the reader,"[200] that is, when "(my)Self" encounters "(an)Other." The poem occurs when it is correlated to the poet and the reader as embodied subjects, when it is made to correspond to their spatio-temporal circumstances as they dwell in it by uttering "I", such that "I exist because I is if I exists."[201] Palmer explains that the poem is empty and silent without the poet or reader inhabiting it, when it is no longer correlated with the occasion of its composition and yet to be correlated with the occasion of its interpretation:

> Those who have lived here since before
> time are gone while the ones who must
> replace them have not yet arrived.[202]

---

[195] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 4.
[196] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Lee Bartlett," 127.
[197] Ibid, 128.
[198] Palmer, "Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment," 267.
[199] Ibid, 269.
[200] Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practices," 246.
[201] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 8," *CA*, 46.
[202] Michael Palmer, "False Portrait of D.B. as Niccolò Paganini," *CA*, 17.

In this state it is open to being inhabited by others, "so many of us/here, so many missing/who might have been here,"[203] which means it must contain multiple temporalities, "Many gathered many friends maybe everyone/Many now and then have entered."[204] Palmer terms this sense of multiple temporalities "the *other* time" [205] and the "space...of poetry:"

> an "elsew(here) that includes the word "here," as well as a "no-where" which can be read "now here." Such is the power of juncture, or silence. Here and elsewhere, here as elsewhere, elsewhere too as here: a space...of paradox, contradiction and polyphony...where the words we here are both the same and different...constructed in fact like language itself on the play of identity and difference.[206]

He asks "if you write it has it happened twice"[207] to accentuate how:

> in writing we confront various manifestations of time. There is the 'real time' of writing itself, the slippery succession of nows during which we compose. There's the phenomenological duration of the text, the time of its silent reading or oral delivery...[and the] labyrinth of tenses designating past, present, and projected future action, a metaphoric representation of being in time.[208]

Multiple temporalities exist in a single poem so that "Was was and is"[209] but it constitutes a present by oscillating in the future-past, "He she will or did,"[210] a feature heightened by his "use of syntax to set up [different] temporal regions [in the] poem:"[211]

> Everyone said never again
> /.../
> And throughout the winter each said one sentence
> /.../
> A thing said as if spoken as if
> /.../
> A chain I dragged along in quotes

---

[203] Michael Palmer, "November Talks," *CA*, 12.
[204] Michael Palmer, "A Dream Called 'The House of Jews,'" *CA*, 13.
[205] Michael Palmer, "Octavio Paz," 111.
[206] Palmer, "Active Boundaries," 208-209.
[207] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 6.
[208] Michael Palmer, "Figures in Space," *Places* 2 (1984): 55.
[209] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1, *CA*, 4.
[210] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 8," *CA* 45.
[211] George Lakoff, "Continuous Reframing," *A Guide to Poetics Journal: Writing in the Expanded Field 1982-1998*, ed. Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 116.

> In Cairo there had been a fire
>
> Then he read to her displeasure
> [...]
> They know it may seem so[212]

Palmer's references to different people, i.e. everyone, each, I, he and they, introduce different temporal regions but the "main focus is experiencing [these], moment-by-moment, always in the present"[213] of writing and reading the text. He overcomes the problem of representing the unrepresentable, of voicing the unutterable, by positing the poem as a confluence of the multiple temporalities of "(my)Self" and "(an)Other," an event whose "temporality [is thus] multidimensional"[214] because different "times [are] inhering within other times."[215] Echo, therefore, provides a structural metaphor for the entire collection as it suggests not only presence and absence but also multiple temporalities. The collection suggests both a "present and a presence and an absence and an elsewhere," a spatio-temporal confluence as the poet and reader encounter and re-encounter each other as "(an)Other:"

> The city
> is full of ones called us
> who endlessly greet each other by a name
> that changes each time.[216]

Using the analogy of a city, the collection is a space where figures encounter each other, where "1's" or "I's" welcome each other in a play of identity and difference. As Palmer explains in the opening line of "NEL," these "eyes [are] a literal self among selves,"[217] inverting Zukofsky's "I's (pronounced eyes)" since "eyes" is pronounced "I's" here. Uttering "I," making it correspond with one's perspective, is to dwell in the poem "among [other] selves." He further emphasises how "I" and "1" are interchangeable, "And I as it is, *I as the one* but less than one in it."[218] Figures and pronouns here suggest not just the presence but the primacy of others, since the "I" of the poet is less than the "I" of "(an)Other," the less determinate "it," ultimately implying the unknown and unknowable.

---

[212] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 8," *CA*, 47-48.
[213] Lakoff, 117.
[214] Palmer, "A Language of the Unsayable," 169.
[215] Ibid, 156.
[216] Michael Palmer, "To Robert E. Symmes 1933 for a gift of resemblances," *CA*, 20.
[217] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 4.
[218] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 3," *CA*, 14, my emphasis.

As Petlin's paintings ask for "another way of seeing," of using one's eyes, "NEL" "elicits [another] kind of reading," of using the "I's."[219] While Palmer has always insisted that writing and reading are inseparable, in "NEL" these activities become crucial to realising a "poethics of proximity" because the creative act is a conversation. By taking "the space of the page...as a site in itself"[220] that demarcates simply a "now here," the poem becomes a confluence of different spatio-temporalities: the "now here" of writing and the "now here" of reading. As a conversation, the creative act involves "(my)Self" encountering "(an)Other" and the resulting poem manages to write the other without compromising its alterity because s/he remains undisclosed, a potentiality or absence that is only realised and becomes present when the poem is read by "(an)Other." Informed by a dialogics of differences, the conversation is open-ended because:

> the poem converses first with its first reader, the poet him- or herself, as Other, then others in the world, the present world, and the world of the future...The conversation...is also with figures from the past, such as poets who may be said by their works to read and modify and make place for the poem, even as the poem reconfigures the space of reception for their work and our temporality.[221]

While this "notion of the lyric [is] abstract,"[222] Palmer makes it more "immediate"[223] through a conceit that has become synonymous for his body of work since he named his selected poems *The Lion Bridge*:

> That is A, that is Anna speaking. That is A, that is no one speaking and it's
> winter. That is a bridge and a bridge of winter pure as talk.[224]

The poem as a communicative event is a bridge, a site of potential encounter that emphasises proximity. Rather than contact a distance persists. A bridge helps us visualise how Palmer conceptualises the poem as a play between identity and difference:

> Then he misremembers the name of the bridge

---

[219] Palmer, "A Language of the Unsayable," 156-157.
[220] Palmer, "Active Boundaries," 218.
[221] Palmer, "Octavio Paz," 110.
[222] Palmer, "Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment," 286.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Michael Palmer, "Portrait Now Before Then," *CA*, 7.

/.../
There is writing like a wooden fence

There is writing now and when
/.../
There's a word at each end of it

There is exactly what is said

There is this and what resemble it

There is a certain distance[225]

This succinctly explains Palmer's poems, his "line bridge," how the confluence of different temporalities, the "now" of the present and the "when" of the past and future, occurs through the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" in the poem but encounter involves only proximity because a difference and distance must remain. "(an)Other" cannot be identified with because it is unrepresentable, it must remain a potentiality, unknown and unknowable, since to write "(an)Other" as someone specific is to reduce its alterity and appropriate it into categories of the same. This experience of proximity is characterised by a "necessary difficulty" because "(my)Self" is at the very limits of the known and the knowable, what Palmer identifies as the "terror...of almost knowing,"[226] the "terror of partly knowing."[227] The "bridge" can be added to the echo as a structural metaphor for *NEL* since "things in metaphor cross, are thrown across, a path he calls the path of names."[228] Just like the echo signifies both difference and distance, the "line bridge" allows for a contrapuntal relation that ensures both remain so that "(my)Self" might encounter "(an)Other" as a different and distant subject in the communicative event that constitutes ethical subjectivity.

Conclusion: The Book as World

In the epigraph to *NEL*, Palmer, rather tellingly, quotes from Augustine's *Confessions*, "'Place there is none; we go backward and forward and there is no place.'"[229] Through his various

---

[225] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 8," *CA*, 48.
[226] Michael Palmer, "Seven Lines of Equal Length," *CA*, 40.
[227] Ibid, 41.
[228] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 3," *CA*, 15.
[229] Palmer, *CA*, 1.

strategies of self-erasure, Palmer makes space for "(an)Other," for the reader to project him/herself into the poem and complete the circuit. While the reader is "A part [of the text, s/he will always be] apart,"[230] will always be different to and distant from the poet because the ethical potential in poetry is based on proximity rather than contact, that is complete identification and comprehension. However, it is this "other, recurring/difference [and distance that] holds us in place,"[231] that engenders both the permission and the obligation to encounter one another, to listen and respond to each other *as* other. Reconfiguring the creative act as a conversation reliant on incomprehension means the poet and the reader approach the limits of the known and knowable, the space of encounter where "(my)Self" ends and "(an)Other" begins. Palmer is not simply advancing a new method of composition but encouraging the reader to participate in a performative event with real world applications, to enact a "poethics of proximity" that constitutes a way of living in the social world of others as an ethical subject. His suggestion that "the word con-/tained a silent *l*"[232] explains why he encourages us to "think of a larger syntax, e.g. the-word-as-book proposing always the book-as-word."[233] Palmer's poems, therefore, allow readers to enact a way of living in the social world of others. The manner in which Palmer is listened and responded to by the reader constitutes a way of being a responsive and responsible subject when "(my)Self" encounters "(an)Other." In this sense, "one lives in it."[234] Due to his commitment to poetry as a vocation, life becomes "a life of lines" since "In the poem he learns to turn and turn,"[235] to orient "(my)Self" outward toward the call of "(an)Other." Palmer's poems attest to his attempt to give primacy to "(an)Other" by creating a "now here" where "At least one did feel welcome, wherever it was."[236] This gesture of welcome also implies his understanding of the limits of poetry, or more particularly the lyric utterance, because it is something that cannot be said in language. As both *WM* and *NEL* demonstrate, as one erases the self to make space for the other and in doing so approaches the limits of the known and knowable, silence should be foregrounded. For Palmer, there is "no boundary or edge to the field in question. As there is everywhere/no language,"[237] gesturing toward what precedes language, both spoken and written, the act of listening that makes "response-ability" possible.

---

[230] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 2," *CA*, 10.
[231] Palmer, "Seven Lines of Equal Length," *CA*, 42.
[232] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 11," *CA*, 62.
[233] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 5.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 3," *CA*, 16.
[236] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 4.
[237] Ibid, 5.

Chapter 7: Saying the Unsayable in *First Figure* and *Sun*

In attempting to grant primacy to the other in his poetry, Palmer gives the impression that he is at the very limits of his medium, a sense heightened by his frequent recourse to surrealist constructions. As is so frequently the case when Palmer engages with a particular poetic standard or practice, his engagement with this convention is atypical:

> This road ends in a field of grain
> and drunken cows are filling the air
> or how do we know what we know
>
> He spoke holding his severed ear[238]

A relatively straightforward surreal image is equated with an epistemological question here, revealing the poet's ability to adapt almost any aesthetic practice to his own personal and political motivations, and in the process reveal an often overlooked or intentionally ignored aspect of that particular practice. Surrealism is brought into accordance with Palmer's belief that "what poetry knows is a certain not-knowing," not in the sense of negative capability but as a "specific area that challenges the discourses of reason in its authoritative rationales for things and its authoritative claims to knowledge."[239] Accordingly, he is "not interested in that aspect of making sense, sense not as something prior to the poem, but something that is an occasion for making sense, of finding out what sense is and making sense anew, changing what sense is."[240] While I would never classify Palmer as a committed surrealist, his frequent recourse to surrealist images helps explain a characteristic feature of *NEL* that informs these subsequent collections: the poet's changed attitude to language. Throughout *NEL*, the reader is intentionally given the impression of a poet working at the very limits of what can be said, what can be made sense of, in poetry:

> They had agreed that the sign was particular precisely because arbitrary
> and that it included the potential for (carried the sign of) its own dis-
> solution,[241]

---

[238] Michael Palmer, "Documentation," *CA*, 35.
[239] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gizzi," 169.
[240] Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practice," 245-246.
[241] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 5.

Consequently, language is no longer a tool for enhancing comprehension. Instead, language is a "Sign that empties itself at each instance of meaning," which Palmer sees as the only way "to rein-/vent attention."[242] The resultant poems, therefore, are occasions to question what comprehension actually means and "[bring] something possibly to the attention of the world...so that it is not quite as it was before."[243] The limits of language demarcate the limits of the known and knowable, where "(my)Self" encounters "(an)Other" who cannot be written about. In *NEL*, Palmer proposes that the poem could be seen as a gesture, a "straightened arm held out from the/body."[244] In both *FF* and *S*, Palmer addresses origins, the initiating actions that precede self-articulation, what happens prior to language in the moment of silence before speech. Prior to the poem as a speech act is this originating action, this gesture, that precedes language but without which language would be impossible. It occurs at that point where "(my)Self" ends and "(an)Other" begins and requires a language of the unsayable to articulate it, a language whose content is superseded by its inscribing a gesture toward what cannot be said without precluding a "poethics of proximity."

(7.1) Gestures of Possibility

Collaboration is crucial to appreciating Palmer's method of composition because it testifies to his absolute refusal of containment and consensus. Additionally, however, his collaborative projects with painters and choreographers gesture toward his "ideal of pure collaboration,"[245] a "poethically" charged notion that the work belongs to "neither you nor I" but is instead a communicative event within which different subjects encounter one another. While actual collaborative projects are a recurrent feature in Palmer's oeuvre, equally important is the:

> imaginary community in which poets tend to dwell with others. Not to say that it's outside the real, but it's constructed through the imagination and sometimes in opposition to the principles of reality that are laid on us, all of which say "you should not be doing this."[246]

---

[242] Ibid.
[243] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gizzi," 169.
[244] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 10," *CA*, 57.
[245] Palmer, "On the Sustaining of Culture in Dark Times," 38.
[246]Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gizzi," 162.

He makes this imagined community, this space of permission, by developing relations of reciprocality with other innovative artists to test the potential for a "possible writing,"[247] to find "models of possibility"[248] for the difficult but necessary task of attempting the impossible in poetry. Two such models are found in painting and dance, both of which foreground the importance of gesture in self-expression. Firstly, Palmer finds in "abstract painting, gestural abstraction, action painting"[249] a way of testing the potential for "gesture and gesturality in the physical, vocalic utterance." [250] Referring specifically to a Pollock retrospective he attended, he identifies the "extraordinary moment in abstract painting…where we have the trace of the gesture in the air, actually present, and we have physical paint, and we have the thing standing for itself."[251] This moment explains his "tremendous envy of painters, being able to bypass some of the circuitry and physically work with the body of this *thing*."[252] Nevertheless, it encouraged a particular approach to poiesis, where "you have the text with the voice itself absent [so] there's an ambiguity just as there's an ambiguity about the spatiality of the page in relation to the space of the physical room."[253] Palmer's insistence, following the example of gestural abstraction, that the "space of the page is taken as a site in itself, a syntactical and visual space to be expressively exploited" might seem to correspond with "composition by field" but for him there is "no boundary or edge to the field in question."[254] Palmer notes that the "*first* thing" to hit him when he faced a Pollock painting "was this overwhelming, wonderful smell of oil."[255] Pollock's actions are not confined to his field of composition as the painting interacts with its surroundings, with the physical space of the world outside it. The physiological sensation Palmer experiences and the response it elicits is pre-linguistic, providing a useful analogy to explain how the initiating act in self-articulation cannot be expressed in language.

Secondly, Palmer finds in innovative choreography the possibility to examine "those elements common to poetry and dance, such as rhythm, duration, concepts of measure and space (space of the page, space of the stage), and the performative."[256] As the typographical arrangement of his poems illustrate, "when [he is] using language…[he is] working with the

---

[247] Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practice," 262.
[248] Ibid, 266.
[249] Ibid, 260.
[250] Ibid, 261.
[251] Ibid, 261-262.
[252] Ibid, 262.
[253] Ibid, 261.
[254] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 5.
[255] Palmer, "Counter-Poetics and Current Practice," 262, my emphasis.
[256] Palmer, "On the Sustaining of Culture in Dark Times," 39.

idea of actual space,"[257] "initially the page standing for the silence within which writing is enfolded," then the space that "designates the interior silences of a text, the junctures between stanzas, lines, words, even letters" and finally "the undisclosed space in which one works as affecting the character of things."[258] Perhaps following Duncan's identification of "another dimension in...poetry" since "surely, everywhere, from whatever poem, choreographies extend into actual space,"[259] Palmer relates to how "In dance, movement articulates space even as it is in turn being fashioned by it...[how] the dancers make a dance in a rehearsal space but...[then] project it into a variety of possible performance spaces."[260] The choreographic process also epitomises his "ideal of pure collaboration" because "all are collaborators: dancers, lighting and set designers, costume designer, composers, choreographer all engage in a dance to make a dance."[261] Dance, therefore, provides Palmer with another way of enlarging the field of composition into a community of differences, a paradigm for poiesis in which "all elements of the whole work to modify all others" so that it is "difficult to completely separate one contribution from another."[262] Each of the contributors act in and interact with each other to create the poem, "each shape[s] and [modifies] the other" so that "in effect, [each] emerge[s] from the other,"[263] from the encounter with "(an)Other." Collaboration in this case "take[s] you out of yourself, your accumulated habits of making, into a place that is not your own...opening a space for making that is neither that of one nor the other."[264] Most importantly, dance encouraged Palmer to think "about certain crossings, where language becomes gesture and gesture language."[265] Dance serves to "constantly [remind him] of body and voice in actual space, and therefore of the body in poetry and the world, circulating among other bodies."[266] As he explains in *FF*, "This was not [just an aesthetic] experience/but life itself."[267] Because dance is an "embodied corporeal act, one which is embedded in the conditions of its articulation,"[268] dancers not only express themselves through their movements but live what they express through their bodily acts.

---

[257] Palmer, "Jubilat Interview," 119.
[258] Palmer, "Figures in Space," 55.
[259] Robert Duncan, "Introduction," *Bending the Bow*, vi.
[260] Palmer, "Figures in Space," 55.
[261] Palmer, "On the Sustaining of Culture in Dark Times," 40.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Palmer, "Figures in Space," 56.
[264] Palmer, "On the Sustaining of Culture in Dark Times," 41.
[265] Ibid, 39.
[266] Ibid, 40.
[267] Michael Palmer, "The Painted Cup," *CA*, 118.
[268] Philipa Rothfield, "Differentiating Phenomenology and Dance," *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 310.

While dance, in a general sense, undeniably influences Palmer's attempt to "vitalise the present, to strip it of the habitual, the given, and replace that with the actual…[with] the poem as act,"[269] his numerous collaborations with the choreographer Margaret Jenkins provide actual instances of "poethical" praxis. Prior to the publication of *FF*, Palmer participated in numerous dance scenarios with Jenkins, such as *Interferences* (1975), *Equal Time* (1976), *Straight Words* (1980) and *Versions by Turns* (1980). With the dance *First Figure* (1984), however, "fragments of texts from the [poet's] manuscript" were "use[d] as 'instructions' for the dancers to proceed by."[270] His involvement in the choreography meant that he witnessed his language become gesture as the "Trained dancers…function in this process as 'untrained' speakers moving through space," with the result that "Words or verbal signs acquire a gestural character in this space, even as gestures (the raising of an arm) acquire often mysterious semiotic weight."[271] Notice his reference to an "arm extended" here, suggesting that as "language becomes movement and movement language"[272] he identifies how the poem can be regarded as a gesture toward "(an)Other" which cannot be expressed in language. The opening two poems in *FF* heighten this sense of something inexpressible in, or that occurs prior to, language. As the first poem, "Dearest Reader" implies the epistolary mode, suggesting the collection itself is addressed to the unnamed first figure in the title. It immediately proposes that the poems to follow should not be read as the transcription of a previous experience by undercutting the highly poeticised description of a "wren-/like bird plucking berries from the fire" and "broad entryways/beneath balconies beneath spires" in the last lines, suggesting it could equally be just a "photograph of nothing but pigeons/and grackles by the shadow of a fountain."[273] He later observes how the "Experience cannot be described/except by us,"[274] inferring that the poem is not intended to re-present a previous experience but to actually enact a lived experience between the poet and the first figure he addresses. "Prelude," the following poem, suggests that:

> The limit of the song is this
> prelude to a journey to
> the outer islands,[275]

---

[269] Palmer, "Octavio Paz," 107.
[270] Palmer, "Figures in Space," 56.
[271] Ibid, 55.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Michael Palmer, "Dearest Reader," *CA*, 81.
[274] Michael Palmer, "Sign," *CA*, 121.
[275] Michael Palmer, "Prelude," *CA*, 82.

What he identifies as the "generative sentence" engenders continuous circularity and deferral, "an inside-outside then/an outside-inside"[276] since language comes after what concerns Palmer in *FF* and only moves further and further away from it, "Now say the words you had meant to/Now say the words such words mean."[277] "Prelude" necessitates:

> ...reading
> in a way natural to theatre
> a set of instructions
> that alters itself automatically
> as you proceed west
> from death to friendliness,[278]

If he has any particular plays in mind they would undoubtedly be Samuel Beckett's, written in a language of silence to articulate the unsayable. Beckett uses silence not just to signify the incapacities of language but to allow the body to speak as his silent figures function as figures of speech. As he explains in *The Unnameable*, a prose work that pre-empts many of the issues in his drama:

> I want it to go silent, it wants to go silent, it can't, it can't, it does for a second, then it starts again, that's not the real silence, it says that's not the real silence, what can be said of the real silence, I don't know, that I don't know what it is, that there is no such thing, that perhaps there is such a thing, yes, that perhaps there is, somewhere, I'll never know.[279]

Throughout his work, language is a gesture toward a silence it cannot ultimately reach as his figures have never "said the thing that had to be said, that gives [them] the right to be done with speech, done with listening,"[280] that is, despite their silences, their bodies speak. Just as extracts from *FF* were used as instructions for the dancers, whose bodily movements are an extralinguistic composition, "Prelude" provides instructions for how the collection can be read as articulating what is beyond the "limit of the song," the limits of the poem. When the body speaks, it does so in a language of silence, the language of gesture. Dance "is a kinaesthetic act of corporeal performance" and "what is always speaking silently is the body," whose meanings

---

[276] Ibid.
[277] Michael Palmer, "The Theory of the Flower," *CA*, 100.
[278] Palmer, *CA*, 82.
[279] Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2009), 408.
[280] Ibid, 393.

are unspoken because its gestures are "both mute speech and corporeal writing."[281] For Palmer, dance confirms that the aesthetic is "pre-eminently a carnal affair, it *is* kinaesthetic" and the:

> body as a (kin)aesthetic phenomenon 'speaks' many languages: it speaks the language of both silence and gesture. In the first place, from the standpoint of embodiment, the opposite of speech is not writing but silence...[and] the embodiment of silence is action...[it is] the body's language.[282]

Palmer's collaborations with Jenkins confirm for him the possibility of language as gesture, an embodied language of silence, and emphasise how self-articulation occurs in a lived space of sociality as the subject orients him/herself from the most singular experience to living amongst others, "from death to friendship," ensuring what Ashbery termed the "end of friendship/With self alone." Silence is the prelude to the poem that indicates a language of gesture, articulating what cannot be spoken in the "generative sentence," the unsayable because "Language paralyses the tongue."[283] By addressing the "possibility of the figural, of generative, initiatory figures, *figurae*, figures of language and knowing disclosing themselves,"[284] *FF* shows Palmer foregrounding the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" that not only precedes but is the required condition for the poem as a communicative event. In doing so, he accentuates the etymological definition of "conversation," "con-versare: to turn together," thus revealing the primary importance of the bodily gesture that precedes anything spoken, "What might be said before the sentences enter."[285]

(7.2) Language as Gesture in *First Figure*

No universal or objective correlation between meaning and movement is possible, therefore discussing Palmer's *FF* and Jenkins' *First Figure* to establish one is ill-advised. From an admittedly reductive perspective, poetry is almost dematerialised whether written as words or spoken as sounds, whereas dance is an inescapably material art of the body. Despite his admission that "Poetry is poetry, dance is dance, and convoluted attempts to pair them in a

---

[281] Jung, 97.
[282] Ibid, 96.
[283] Palmer, "Sign," *CA*, 121.
[284] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 281, author's emphasis.
[285] Michael Palmer, "First Figure," *CA*, 140.

conceptual [reciprocity] can lead commentators to invent strained likenesses,"[286] the poet and dance critic Jack Anderson does exactly that to explain why poets ranging from Eliot, Auden and Yeats to Stein, Moore, Lorca, O'Hara and Rexroth were so consistently drawn to dance. Despite the important differences in their compositional methods and in the experiential aspects of interpreting poetry and dance, he establishes a correlation between the movement of the poet's thoughts and the movements of dancers, insisting that both are:

> arts of motion through space and time. Dance, of course, is quite literally such an art. But poetry inhabits its own space and time. Whereas dance involves bodies moving on a stage…, poetry is an art of words moving on a page or in the cadences of a speaking voice. Words thereby become the equivalent of bodies, and the way they are arranged in print could be called verbal choreography.[287]

This highly "strained likeness" between poetry and dance fails to account for the fact that the "essential structure of dance is to be discerned within…the immediacy of lived experience,"[288] whereas the experiential structure of poetry is, by its very nature, mediated through language. Furthermore, his suggestion that poems "embody movement" through their "verbal choreography"[289] ignores the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of reducing the realities of motion to verbal formulae, of arresting an ephemeral, non-repeatable event in a medium based on the permanence of the written word.

Nowhere in *FF* does Palmer attempt to arrest the ephemeral, dynamic movements of dancers in enduring, static forms. His only reference to "actual dancers" sees them "traced against the ceiling" like "echoes/as of such voices/which had once claimed to be real."[290] Rather than purporting to re-present them mimetically, Palmer uses his dancers to help readers conceptualise the complex interplay of presence and absence more vividly, the present and absent figures that inhabit his work to give voice to something that has hitherto remained unspoken:

> …we mounted the scaffold
> at his unspoken invitation;
> a liquid darkness there;
> figures lost among bands of light

---

[286] Jack Anderson, "On the Move: Poetry and Dance," *Dance Chronicle* 33 (2010): 252.
[287] Ibid.
[288] Rothfield, 308.
[289] Anderson, 252.
[290] Michael Palmer, "Echo: A Commentary," *CA*, 133.

> came slowly forward; a duplicate
> of herself encountered in passing
> nodded and disappeared; it remains
> visible above the narrow shore;
> they are visible against the shore;
> the forgotten word for waves;[291]

His emphasis on "scaffold," "liquid darkness" and figures slowly appearing and disappearing could be read as describing the intended visual appearance of "First Figure," with its "extraordinarily evocative set consisting of four very tall green fabric columns which tapered toward the base" that "would both frame the movement and allow the dancers to disappear and reappear within the dance space itself" by creating "a spatial field that lent architectural definition to the piece."[292] "First Figure" was a "polysemous field susceptible of multiple interpretations" because "on different occasions various 'figures' might unexpectedly appear to modify the experience for audience and performers alike."[293] Given equal emphasis, however, is the inherent sociality of the scene, as Palmer evokes a liminal space of encounter between the present and absent figures at the shore, and the suggestion of a pre-linguistic gesture of welcome in the "unspoken invitation" and "the forgotten word for waves." "Actual dancers" are not the subject of Palmer's poem, instead they signal a movement from the aesthetic into the ethical by embodying the body-to-body relations, or face-to-face encounters, that occur in the creative act of self-articulation. Because the experiential aspect of dance is as an "embodied corporeal act" that is "embedded in the conditions of its articulation," it allows for a kind of somatic attention, the corporeal means by which a knowing subject apprehends the specificity of others as one attends to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others.[294] Palmer's inclusion of the pre-linguistic alongside his only reference to "actual dancers" in *FF* confirms that dance is important because it demonstrates how embodied subjectivity is not constituted through discursive or representational practices but through a gestural language that precedes these. The "lived experience of dance is immediate," therefore, it precludes reflection, criticism and evaluation that would differentiate it from other lived experiences.[295]

---

291 Ibid.
292 Palmer, "Figures in Space," 58.
293 Ibid.
294 Rothfield, 310.
295 Ibid, 307.

Palmer's poem helps us conceptualise a pre-linguistic gesture through the figures of "actual dancers" encountering one another in a performative space of other embodied subjects, thus revealing a further reason for his interest in dance: how it actualises the fundamental ways in which a human being exists in the world. What makes this most significant is that a non-verbal communicative medium provides an example for poiesis as the making possible of language as gesture. If individuals resort to gesturing when the meanings they wish to convey cannot be articulated in words, then gesture is the first figure of speech, an initiatory figuration of meaning prior to, or beyond the limits of, language. However, as language users, a formal vocabulary of gestures develops according to which bodily movements are "systematically interpreted in ways variously related to the articulate speech that may or may not accompany"[296] them, thus creating body language. On the other hand, an art form is categorised as dance if its "principal medium is the unspeaking human body,"[297] therefore, dance "cannot be completely reduced to a notational system"[298] because bodily movements have meanings that exceed any formally articulated system. For Palmer, the unspeaking or silent body of the dancer gives voice to something in its gestures that cannot be articulated in words, thus confirming that "verbal language cannot be the primary modelling system, capable of translating all expressible content"[299] because bodily movements exist that cover portions of the general semantic space of communication which verbal language cannot. The non-notational nature of dance explains how his collaborations with Jenkins encourage him to use poetry as a space for the impossible, for articulating something pre-linguistic by approaching language as gesture, or what he terms the "physicality of word as gesture."[300] Palmer refers to a period when "All those words we once used for things...have now [been] discarded in order/to come to know things."[301] "The last tree/or the letter A" is discovered here, which tells us:

> ...If you crush one of these herbs between your fin-
> gers the scent will cling to your hand but its particles will be quite invisi-
> ble. This is a language you cannot understand.'[302]

---

[296] Francis Sparshott, "The Philosophy of Dance: Bodies in Motion, Bodies at Rest," *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 279.

[297] Ibid, 278.

[298] Ibid, 281.

[299] Janet Adshead-Landale, "Creative Ambiguity: Dancing Intertexts," *Dancing Texts: Intertextuality and Interpretation*, ed. Janet Adshead-Landale (London: Dance Books Ltd., 1999), 9.

[300] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Bartlett," 129.

[301] Michael Palmer, "Untitled," *CA*, 98.

[302] Ibid.

The poet is referring to a language that cannot be grasped in terms of comprehension but can be grasped in terms of its physicality, "Dismantling the beams of/the letter tree."[303] Semantic content is secondary to the physicality of the word because Palmer is suggesting an immediate, lived experience with language through the emphasis on somatic attention, which "signals lived corporeality as the manner by which one person engages with another."[304] By making dance into "a kind of embodied poetry,"[305] where bodily movements are understood as a physical mode of poetic expression that emanates from the embodied subject, the dancers in the collaboration "First Figure" also suggest the possibility of "gestural poetry,"[306] whose meaning is immediately apparent as a way of living in the social world of others. Dancers confirm that the "body lives its ethics" because the "world in which the bodily self is rooted is…from the start a thoroughly *human* world saturated with intersubjective significance and affective valence."[307] In doing so, they enact how the "[ethical] self emerges from an irreducible and originary contact with human otherness" experienced through the body, which "saturates every form of our encounter with the world" and those others who inhabit it.[308] Accordingly, language as gesture implies an inherent sociality, as he explains in "The Village of Reason:"

> You are in this play
> You are its landscape
>
> This is an assumption
> the length of an arm[309]

Again, Palmer evokes the notion of an arm extended but this time it indicates the presence of "(an)Other," the assumption of sociality as a first figure is present during this initiatory encounter prior to language as a vehicle of comprehension. This gesture is perhaps an "unspoken invitation" to the unknown and unknowable "you," the reader to whom the collection is addressed, to participate in the play of figures within the "sequence of imaginary landscapes"[310] that constitute "First Figure," a "non-hierarchical [field] composition" that requires the "viewer [to] become an active participant in the work, scanning a range of events

---

[303] Ibid.
[304] Rothfield, 311.
[305] Suzanne F. Braswell, "An Aesthetics of Movement: Baudelaire, Poetic Renewal, and the Invitation of Dance," *French Forum* 3 (2006): 24.
[306] Ibid, 30.
[307] Krueger, 607.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Michael Palmer, "The Village of Reason," *CA*, 116.
[310] Palmer, "Figures in Space," 57.

and making numerous decisions about points of focus."[311] By evoking dance, Palmer is gesturing toward the possibility of embodied, or more precisely bodily, conversation between the poet and the reader as they turn together toward each other *as* other. Considering gesture as a figure of speech ensures it is not simply a teleological act whose intention is uncertainty reduction or "meaning" because it "extracts out of meaning the presence of the gesture, portrayed as body performance, and defines not only speaking but writing as a performance text."[312] Rather than simply articulating its semantic content, a poem informed by the possibility of language as gesture does not eliminate the presence of the performing body but foregrounds it because it is reliant on the performance of the gesture, the turn toward "(an)Other" prior to language. In the eponymous poem, Palmer makes this possibility explicit, referring to "words altered then crossed out. Returning that is into the body,"[313] to the unspeakable language of the body. He introduces what he terms "here the false figure of speech playing with a ring," circumscribed by language's "habits of afterwards and opposite," which reduces conversation to the endless exchange of opposing perspectives for the purposes of comprehension, "Now your turn while the/numbers last. Now ours not theirs."[314]

Instead, "the first figure" allows for "What might be said *before* the sentences enter," without a "focal point" and with "no idea [of] what the future will bring."[315] Consequently, conversation assumes "the/form of a question to be answered by another in the form of a question/and so on."[316] Palmer's interest in the "physicality of the word as gesture" is confirmed when he privileges the somatic aspect rather than the semantic content of language due to the attendant ability to immediately sense the significance of the gesture because it is unmediated by language, "The name is spelled without letters how can this be./…/The name is felt without letters how can this be."[317] Palmer's poems might preclude comprehension but they can be grasped as a gesture of welcome, an arm extended in "silent invitation" toward "(an)Other," with "the five random/letters for the fingers of the hand"[318] suggesting the digits or figures of the poet's hand as he writes the poem. By emphasising the "physicality of the word as gesture," of language as the performed act of exposing "(my)Self" to "(an)Other" by

---

[311] Ibid, 58.
[312] Zali Gurevitch, "The Tongue's Break Dance: Theory, Poetry, and the Critical Body," *The Sociological Quarterly* 40 (1999): 534.
[313] Palmer, "First Figure," *CA*, 140.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Ibid, my emphasis.
[316] Ibid.
[317] Ibid.
[318] Ibid.

extending a gesture of welcome, he conceptualises poiesis as work of the hands. In doing so, Palmer reiterates Celan's proposal that poetic:

> Craft means handiwork, a matter of hands. And these hands must belong to *one* person, i.e. a unique, mortal soul searching for its way with its voice…Only truthful hands write true poems. I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem.[319]

Celan's reference to "hands" does not necessarily mean the singular hands of the poet, it equally denotes the hands of two different people engaged in a handshake, in the pressing of hands, a bodily encounter that is felt "without letters." Correlating the poem with this particular gesture affirms Palmer's interest in the unspeakable language of the body and articulating what cannot be spoken in language.

The eponymous "First Figure" demonstrates Palmer attempting the impossible poem, one that engenders a bodily experience of encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other." Quite significantly, the fact that *FF* is explicitly addressed to *a* reader ensures his proposal of language as gesture does not become metapoetic commentary, a poem about all poetry, but instead retains its specificity as an occasion that constitutes the poet's act of self-articulation. As Palmer explains, "It's not addressing...[in the conventional sense of imagining] one's reader or who to imagine as the ideal reader. There's no ideal reader. One projects a possible reader or set of readers who have no outline" and "you [the poet] become, in *turn*, imagined by that reader. I don't mean imagined as a personality...but imagined into being by that other," this is the "power that affirms the impossible." [320] In "Echo: Text Antiparallèle pour Pascal Quignard," he explains how the "The letter he had lost reap-/peared in his palm. Identity was the cause."[321] Given the epistolary address at the beginning of the collection, *FF* can be read in its entirety as this letter in the palm, a gesture of the hand that articulates something inexpressible in language alone. William Waters dismantles Celan's idea of handshake or "Händedruck" into "hands" (die Hände) and "pressure" (der Druck) to foreground the possibility of bodily encounter in the poem. He refers to the "other meaning of *Druck*, 'printing,'" so that the "extent to which a handshake (*Händedruck*) is an impressing (*Eindruck*), or an expression (*Ausdruck*) by hand, may undergrid the sense in which a poem is not just printing (*Druck*) of something handwritten but also an impression of the writing hand, and the

---

[319] Celan, "Letter to Hans Bender," 25, author's emphasis.
[320] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gizzi," 162, my emphasis.
[321] Michael Palmer, "Echo: Text Antiparallèle pour Pascal Quignard," *CA*, 124.

hand's expressive pressure."[322] This is somatic communication, a bodily encounter between two individuals conversing, turning together toward each other. It is the experience of proximity to "(an)Other," to exactly what one does not and cannot know, what is, by extension, inexpressible in language. In the same argument about poetry being a "matter of hands," Celan states that "poems are also gifts – gifts to the attentive,"[323] which raises interesting questions about the present(s) of the poem and presence in the poem. "Identity [is] the cause" because it is about self-articulation as a heteronomic process, the need for "someone to be present to the poem" and "someone wanting to be present to it," about "(my)Self" reaching out to "(an)Other" who will, by questioning and paying attention to him, help the poet find his voice.[324] This is communication as proximity, "a matter of *presence*," the lived experience of "two human beings sharing…the same ontological space" through body-to-body, or face-to-face, encounter" as incalculably different and distant individuals are immediately present. [325] Because a physical handshake is literally impossible, contact and complete identification between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" is precluded in favour of the sense of proximity facilitated by the text at hand, a sense heightened by the poet's reflection on the closeness of his hand to the poem during its composition and his constant references to the page the reader holds open during its interpretation.

(7.3) The Language of the Unsayable

In "Echo: Texte Antiparallèle…," language itself is understood as an echo, that "which resounds. Re-sounds" and "which sounds (sounded) different."[326] It occurs after the gesture extended toward an unknown and unknowable other, the "Who (previous to speaking)."[327] As Palmer explains, if language is considered a gesture, the "word spoken…[cannot be] heard," the "word spoken…[cannot be] seen, even/partially, traced against the screen."[328] This is not a failure of language's capacity to communicate and improve comprehension between people but a radical reconfiguration of what communication itself signifies for Palmer, an opportunity

---

[322] William Waters, "Poetic Address and Intimate Reading: The Offered Hand," *Poetry and Dialogism: Hearing Over*, ed. Mara Scanlon and Chad Engbers (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 114, author's emphasis.
[323] Celan, "Letter to Hans Bender," 26.
[324] Waters, 106.
[325] Ibid, 114.
[326] Palmer, *CA*, 124.
[327] Ibid, 125.
[328] Ibid, 124.

to "Be recognised in his own/misunderstanding,"[329] to be questioned by someone else's interpretation. The initiating experience of proximity to "(an)Other" who embodies what "(my)Self" cannot know is "equivocal and precedes its beginning,"[330] it necessitates the realisation of "response-ability," of self-articulation as an ethical subject. "The subject is this," for Palmer, the "rustling at the moment of enunciation" as of an "ar-/ticle of clothing such as a dress or green dress. An even greyness as of a page,/recording events."[331] Just as he encourages us to read the poem as a pre-linguistic gesture, he is encouraging us to listen to what is not said, to what exceeds articulation in language, the sounds at the very beginning of the conversation. This counters what he sees as our tendency to pay "attention to each mark" only "After the talking is done,"[332] to focus on the semantic content of language rather than focusing on the initiating act of conversing with another person, the gesture of turning toward one another together, that precedes anything spoken in language. Again:

> …   The subject is this, disregarded,
> story of cloth and wind or the space be-
> tween events.
>
> misunderstood as a measure of distance. It
> takes no time in that sense, repeats nothing,
> figures the shape of the flames. Gesticulate.
>
> a failure in translation.[333]

The subject is the overlooked experience of communication "as if preceding, preceded by, itself,"[334] of communication as proximity between two different and distant subjects encountering one another, emerging as the respective first figures to each other who manifest through the initiating gesture that cannot be transcribed in language, "(an)Other" who obligates "(my)Self" to respond. Palmer identifies this occasion as "neither followed nor following" and again uses the idea of a handshake to suggest how it might be possible in poetry:

> Left arm and right and the figures like the
> fire. There must be a different metric, a ges-

---

[329] Ibid.
[330] Ibid, 127.
[331] Ibid, 124.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid, 125.
[334] Ibid.

ture and that's all, this this and so on, con-
comitance, like writing but it's not a writ-
ing, the pieces actually are.[335]

Poetry becomes a space of the impossible for Palmer because its pieces don't have to mean, they just "actually are" proof that the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" has always already happened, that it is the precedent of anything spoken or written. Gestures "pre-figure speech by providing a configuration and a direction toward which speech will tend, which is always a tendency in the direction of meaning."[336] They are an "intention and also a motion...a bodily intention...[or] the intention of the body" that "provides a direction toward which its existence will tend insistently."[337] This direction is always toward an other to whom it calls as if in response to a question. The gesture, therefore, has no meaning in itself but is part of the whole process that engenders meaning, it can only be understood as part of the conversation in which it occurs. Similarly, the meaning to be discerned from *FF* is "not locatable within any of the [poems'] parts, but...emerges from the many parts working all at once and has...crucially to do with your...investment of an attention that you experience as yours."[338]

The importance Palmer ascribes to the initiating gesture that enables a conversation between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other," what is "of interest because unspoken" [339] and unspeakable, helps explain his attitude toward language throughout *FF*. As discussed above in "Echo:…," words "re-sound" the initiating encounter that cannot be articulated in language. Palmer is even more critical, however, since he understands that in attempting to articulate the experience of proximity with "(an)Other," language writes over him/her such that there is "erasure in the/naming."[340] He aspires to "Forgetting the name as it sounds,"[341] a way of speaking about "(an)Other" in "words/the opposite of names,"[342] a language that does not reduce his/her alterity or appropriate him/her into categories of the same. This language is spoken in "empty sentence[s]"[343] because, as Palmer explains in "French for April Fool's:"

---

[335] Ibid.
[336] Kristine S. Santilli, *Poetic Gesture: Myth, Wallace Stevens, and the Desirous Motions of Poetic Language* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 88.
[337] Ibid, 87.
[338] Waters, 110.
[339] Palmer, "Echo: Text Antiparallèle...," *CA*, 127.
[340] Ibid.
[341] Ibid, 126.
[342] Palmer, "Sign," *CA*, 120.
[343] Michael Palmer, "Voice and Address," *CA*, 85.

>   Once I could not speak of it
>   Now I am unable to
>   /…/
>   Once I could not tell of it
>   and now I cannot speak at all[344]

Words become "gestures…erected,"[345] or arrested, in writing as "(my)Self" turns toward "(an)Other" prior to speaking, creating "A statement…as if to be said,"[346] a way of articulating what cannot be spoken in language. Because "the sentence is impossible,"[347] the poem becomes a space of impossibility, of "necessary difficulty," where the initiating first figure is encountered and the incapacities of language are exposed in the bodily experience of proximity, the lived experience of reaching the limits of the known and knowable. As he explains in "Voice and Address," "You would like to live somewhere else/…/but this is not permitted"[348] because this is the reality of living in a social world of others as an ethical subject, the reality that his "poethics of proximity" enacts. The experience of proximity, as the originating moment of ethical subjectivity, cannot be articulated in language, "You may not even think of it//lest the thinking appear as words//and the words as things."[349] For Palmer, "the word for 'cannot' inscribes itself"[350] in response to the question "how could you describe this to a listener? How can I describe/this to our listeners"[351] when language occurs subsequent to this initiating event, "[erasing] the story,/by repeating it exactly as it was told,"[352] writing over it by naming and erasing "(an)Other?" By concentrating solely on the semantic content of language, paying attention to the marks after the talking is done, "Talk[ing] is a naming//Talk[ing] is a naming or a being named,"[353] a reduction of otherness into words describing it to improve comprehension, to reduce uncertainty. Consequently, we "will remember nothing from before"[354] as language takes us further and further from the initiating experience of proximity between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other," "what the words now said//again and again,/seemed entirely different."[355] To remedy this, Palmer suggests "return[ing] to where it began/amid the

---

[344] Michael Palmer, "French for April Fool's," *CA*, 92.
[345] Ibid, 91.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Palmer, *CA*, 86.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Michael Palmer, "Lens," *CA*, 87.
[351] Michael Palmer, "Idem 1," *CA*, 103.
[352] Palmer, "Echo: Texte Antiparallèle…," *CA*, 128.
[353] Palmer, "Idem 1," *CA*, 107.
[354] Palmer, "French for April Fool's," *CA*, 93.
[355] Michael Palmer, "Echo: Alternate Text," *CA*, 131.

errors and incomprehension/of conversation,"[356] to the initiating experience of proximity to "(an)Other" who is irreducibly different to and distant from "(my)Self." Performing the gesture of turning toward "(an)Other" is to speak the language of the unsayable, to "return to where it began," when we "never used words, never/knew any."[357]

The most important question posed by *FF* is "Do you remember all the listening?,"[358] "Do you remember this" moment prior to language, before speaking, when "(my)Self" is turned toward "(an)Other" and "do you admit to it."[359] As the epigraph to the collection from Celan ("Niemandes Stimme, wieder") attests, Palmer orients himself toward "(an)Other" who speaks "nobody's voice, always," which in turn allows "(my)Self" to listen to the language of the unsayable. This voice the poet listens to belongs to nobody, thus making any attempt to assign a name to it impossible. "Nothing can be said" about it, only that:

> First there's sameness then difference
> then the letter X across a face
>
> then a line through a name
> which is the wrong name in any case[360]

Palmer uses the idea of erasure here but instead of erasing "(an)Other" by naming him/her he instead erases the name. For this reason, he does not address his poems to an ideal reader who just follows unquestioningly, "An ant is an ideal reader/and there are so many of them,"[361] or try to "please the audience/who have remained patiently in their seats since/last year's performance, refusing to become speakers themselves." [362] He demonstrates in "Left Unfinished Sixteen Times" a way of writing "(an)Other" without reducing him/her to categories of the same, "And I is the reader's 'not yet' within the letter,"[363] within the collection addressed to *a* reader. The condition of possibility for the "poethical" poem is what Maurice Blanchot terms a "relation without relation,"[364] a conversation in which speaking is not a dialectical act intended to facilitate uncertainty reduction but rather indicates the experience of

---

[356] Michael Palmer, "No Page (Unturned)," *CA*, 95.
[357] Palmer, "A Souvenir of Japan," *CA*, 150.
[358] Palmer, "Idem 1," *CA*, 107.
[359] Palmer, "A Souvenir of Japan," *CA*, 150.
[360] Michael Palmer, "Music Rewritten," *CA*, 114.
[361] Michael Palmer, "Sign," *CA*, 120.
[362] Palmer, "No Page (Unturned)," *CA*, 95.
[363] Palmer, *CA*, 122.
[364] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 73.

a difference and distance between two speakers who "maintain a relation not with what they might establish in 'common' but instead with what they mutually acknowledge in the other as foreign [and] inassimilable."[365] "I" names the reader but only as a potentiality, a host of innumerable identities that cannot be specifically named, hence why "From the speaker's place of speech there's nothing"[366] but the "void centre." Palmer does not reduce the reader's otherness by comprehending it, by identifying who s/he might be; the reader as "(an)Other" "could be said not to be written."[367]

Developing on his notion of the poem as a handshake, Celan explains how the "poem intends another," how it "needs this other" and goes "toward it, bespeaks it."[368] Consequently, "everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading."[369] In writing "I," the first gesture of self-articulation, the poet is seeking "(an)Other" "not as a mere aspect of the same, but by precisely refusing to render the other as an image or extension of the self,"[370] thus refusing any attempt at comprehension that would reduce "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" to opposites. Writing "I" as the "reader's not yet" enacts a gesture that turns the poet toward the reader as "(an)Other," demonstrating Palmer using the language of the unsayable to name "(an)Other" without reducing his/her alterity. In doing so, he draws our attention to the initiating ethical encounter that precedes anything said in the poem, insisting that "Forgetfulness must be remembered when you/insist 'I cannot remember.'"[371] Rather than "omitting, perhaps deliberately, the question of the head and neck, posi-/tion of the hands"[372] and forgetting "who they are and who the others are who watch.//...[forgetting] the words for this and not-this, for first and for again,"[373] for Palmer, "There is nothing meaningful about the text//There is nothing meaningful about a text" because he "translate[s] logos as logos."[374] The text is not full of meaning because its meaning derives precisely from what cannot be articulated in language, the originating source of all activity that cannot be named as just another word. Palmer's impossible poem "is Paradise, an unpunctuated book,"[375] a poem that does not just repeat what happened by adhering to the standards of spoken and written language

---

[365] Zawacki, 119.
[366] Palmer, "No Page (Unturned)," *CA*, 95.
[367] Palmer, "Left Unfinished Sixteen Times," *CA*, 122.
[368] Celan, "The Meridian," 49.
[369] Ibid.
[370] Zawacki, 119.
[371] Palmer, "Left Unfinished Sixteen Times," *CA*, 123.
[372] Ibid, 122.
[373] Ibid, 123.
[374] Palmer, "The Theory of the Flower," *CA*, 100.
[375] Ibid, 100.

but "which exenterates itself" so that "You may use the paper with my name on it/to say whatever you want."[376] Writing "I" as a "void centre" and the "reader's 'not yet'" is not just an act of self-erasure but a way of un-naming "(an)Other," of speaking the language of the unsayable as the poet establishes a "relation without relation" between himself and *a* reader yet to come. This "form[s] a paradise//(pronounced otherwise),"[377] a way for the poet to grant primacy to the reader as "(an)Other" over "(my)Self" that enacts a "poethics of proximity." As he explains in "(Overheard at the) Mayakovsky Station," "'I am not that one who once spoke with you/clockwise from the pages of a voice."[378] We as readers are not encountering Palmer as the speaking subject but listening to "nobody's voice" and responding to the first figure of "(an)Other" as we articulate ourselves as ethical subjects. Because Palmer can never be known to the reader:

> words...[are] mistakes for things
>
> where things are the mistake
> that is trying to be made
> by one who never resembled me."[379]

Palmer provides "one who never resembled" him, an "I" or first figure that the reader encounters as "(an)Other," who s/he overhears by listening to the language of the unsayable and responding through a gesture that welcomes him/her into "relation without relation" with "(my)Self" as someone who is unknown and unknowable. This is what conversation signifies, a turning toward "(an)Other" rather than comprehension. Palmer wants the reader to mistake him, to miscomprehend and misunderstand him in order to not only engender but also prolong the experience of proximity to "(an)Other" who is not and cannot be known.

---

[376] Ibid, 101.
[377] Ibid, 102.
[378] Ibid.
[379] Ibid.

(7.4) The Saying of the Said

FF conveys Palmer's desire to provide a space "Where I goes unmentioned [so that] there exists an alternate version,"[380] to exceed the limits of language he identified in *NEL* when he attempted to grant primacy to "(an)Other." Unlike Ashbery, who used the face-to-face encounter of aesthetic experience to examine how ethical subjectivity is constituted by "(my)Self" realising its "response-ability," Palmer gestures toward an idea of "response-ability" that precedes any response that might be articulated in language. Palmer's "poethics of proximity" is an "unpunctuated book" that "form[s] a paradise//(pronounced otherwise)," it is as "strange as speech/mistaken for a book," as his poems challenge us to see our ordinary, everyday life differently and identify the limits of expressibility by saying what cannot be said.[381] While his attitude toward language helps differentiate the ethical commitments and considerations informing his work from those seen functioning in Ashbery, it also aligns him with a similar development in Levinas' ethical theories as the philosopher addresses the "methodological problem" in *TI* which he seeks to "reduce" in *OTB*.[382] Quite significantly, *OTB* was written, at least in part, in response to Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics," in which he respectfully critiques this "methodological problem," that by "making the origin of language, meaning and difference the relation to the infinitely other, Levinas is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse."[383] Derrida pertinently identifies the paradox of trying to "present the Other as such, in a philosophical discourse that, by its very inherited nature, enshrines the language of the Same."[384] He demonstrates that Levinas presupposes the very things he seeks to transgress due to misreadings that confirm what he intended to reject. However, Derrida accepts these misreadings not merely as errors that undermine his project but rather as integral to the "necessary difficulty" of his philosophical endeavour, of thinking, and by extension writing and reading, otherwise, to "discuss a realm beyond being in a language which can be used to describe being only."[385] Ultimately, he appreciates that Levinas' work must engender miscomprehension for it to succeed because in completely clarifying the significance of "(an)Other," philosophy incorporates it into its

---

[380] Palmr, "Left Unfinished Sixteen Times," *CA*, 122.
[381] Palmer, "The Theory of the Flower," *CA*, 102.
[382] Levinas, *OTB*, 7.
[383] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 151.
[384] Sean Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 46.
[385] Theodorus de Boer, *The Rationality of Transcendence: Studies in the Philosophy of Emmauel Levinas* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 1997), 68.

structures and categories, thereby reducing its alterity by expressing the inexpressible and saying the unsayable. Levinas' response in *OTB*, therefore, employs fundamental, necessary difficulties in his writing practice to elude comprehension, a decision that is immediately apparent in the text's language. The terms he uses to describe "(an)Other," i.e. face, enigma, accusation, interpellation, etc., and "(my)Self's" relation to it, i.e. obsession, hostage, trauma, etc., are not those normally used by philosophers to describe the object of experience. By using them, Levinas is "attempting to cultivate interest and reverence…[rather than] classifying, informing, or describing and conveying information," to "direct [our] attention to an aspect of everyday social interaction regularly ignored" and consequently make us think otherwise, at a more "basic, determinative level."[386] There is a performative quality to Levinas' writing as the difficulties of reading *OTB* are inseparable from its meaning because the experience of reading it is intended to encourage the reader to think otherwise about language, to make him/her self-conscious about how s/he uses language in communication.

There are significant methodological differences between *TI* and *OTB* that have important philosophical implications for each text. *OTB* develops one of the primary theses of *TI*, the "radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of others."[387] In *TI*, Levinas focuses on "the approach of the other in the face[-to-face encounter]" that disrupts the same and interrupts the autotelic self in the present by calling it to realise its "response-ability, whereas in *OTB* he focuses on "my approach to the other out of a pre-original responsibility" as the self has always already realised his/her "response-ability" prior to anything said.[388] *TI* and *OTB* document a progressive deepening of Levinas' ethics as he moves from the idea that "response-ability" is realised when "(my)Self" responds to the question posed by "(an)Other" by speaking to the idea that "response-ability" is always already realised prior to anything that can be articulated by speaking. This deepening also serves to explain the difference between Ashbery's and Palmer's ethical commitments, how the former conceptualises the face-to-face encounter using aesthetic experience in a way where "everything is surface," whereas the latter seeks to go deeper by returning to an initiating, pre-linguistic experience of proximity that precedes any act of self-representation. Like Levinas in *OTB*, Palmer intends to "return to where it began" by exploring communication as "in-formed by an essential, in fact a pre-essential, responsiveness" involving "response-

---

[386] Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 303.
[387] Levinas, *TI*, 53/24.
[388] Jeffrey Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics: A Reading of the Idea of Discourse in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2001), 171.

ability" "prior to hermeneutic disclosure and other than information transference."[389] Both acknowledge that "language is founded on a relationship anterior to comprehension"[390] and are interested in the experience of an encounter that is prior and irreducible to anything spoken, the fact that:

> When I hear another speak, I turn to this other from more than a need to know who speaks or what is said or what I am to do in response. I turn to this other from a pure responsiveness…[and] I am created in that prior turning toward the Other simultaneously with my turning attention toward the Other.[391]

The act or gesture of turning toward "(an)Other" in conversation is to encounter someone who cannot be named, "another otherness, an Other encountered in the other but not reducible to my interpretation of the encountered other's otherness."[392] As can be seen, trying to describe the pre-linguistic experience of proximity in language is almost impossible because we approach the limits of what can be said intelligibly. To remedy this, Levinas examines the act of speaking itself to expose the first move or gesture in conversation that occurs before anything is spoken, thus providing a useful way of acknowledging "traces of a conversation possibly."[393]

The achievement of *OTB* derives from Levinas' commitment to the "necessary difficulty" of performing the thesis outlined in the opening pages with the intention of engendering a similar praxis in his readers, how "the otherwise than being is stated in a saying that must also be unsaid in order to thus extract the otherwise than being from the said in which it already comes to signify but a being otherwise." [394] Even in this relatively concise explanation, Levinas' tortuous language confirms he is strategically trying to disorient his readers so they will begin to think otherwise about language and communication, and prioritise the ethical gesture of what he terms the saying over the semantic content of the said. He uses the saying to discuss proximity in terms of an "original language,"[395] a "communication without phrases or words" [396] that precedes the said, "the language that communicates propositions and messages."[397] Prior to any words spoken by either "(my)Self" or "(an)Other"

---

[389] Avram, 269.
[390] Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 7.
[391] Ibid, 268.
[392] Ibid, 273.
[393] Michael Palmer, "Book of the Yellow Castle," *CA*, 135.
[394] Levinas, *OTB*, 7.
[395] Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 119.
[396] Ibid, 120.
[397] Ibid, 121.

being meaningful, the interpersonal situation in which communication occurs has a pre-linguistic significance in terms of the *sense* of proximity experienced there. Saying is "communication prior to words and speech,"[398] a way of acknowledging "(an)Other" and appreciating his/her significance without reducing his/her alterity, it is:

> not a speech act, nor a type of speech act; it is not the conversational situation nor the act of speaking. Saying is not what we do with words...Or, to be more precise, it is not one among a variety of such acts. Rather saying is the encounter of utterly unique persons, indeed between every two utterly unique persons.[399]

Saying should not be analysed according to Speech Act Theory, which would "suggest that the speaking subject performs an *act* of saying and therefore takes the discursive initiative," thus making "the speaking subject the origin of its Saying."[400] As Levinas explains:

> the beginning of language is in the face [of another person]. In a certain way, in its silence, it calls you. Your reaction to the face is a response…Language does not begin with the signs that one gives, with words. Language is above all the fact of being addressed…which means the saying much more than the said.[401]

For Levinas, "saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure."[402] The "intention of making signs, and even the signifyingness of signs, presuppose[s]"[403] this exposure to "(an)Other" but it writes over the initiating experience of proximity, thus subordinating the gesture of the saying to the semantic content of the said. Proximity, in this sense, "is the impossibility to move away" from the "precisely *other*," it is to be obligated or "ordered from the outside," from an otherwise than being that is sensed but cannot be represented in language.[404] Focusing on the saying involves subordinating "the contents that are inscribed in the said and transmitted to the interpretation and decoding by the other" to the "ethical sense of such an exposure to another," to the "risky uncovering of

---

[398] Morgan, 131.
[399] Morgan, 131.
[400] Paul Ricoeur, "Otherwise: A Reading of Emmanuel Levinas's 'Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence," *Yale French Studies* 104 (2004): 86.
[401] Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes and Alison Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 2002), 169.
[402] Ibid.
[403] Ibid.
[404] Ibid, 87.

oneself…[and] the breaking up of inwardness." [405] In theory, the saying solves the "methodological problem" of *TI*, the "erasure in the naming,"[406] because it is the:

> antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and sematic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification.[407]

In order for "(an)Other" to manifest, the "subordination of the saying [the gesture of response toward "(an)Other" that precedes articulation in words] to the said [the semantic content of the utterance]"[408] occurs; the initiating ethical encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" that is the precondition of all communication is overwritten by what is actually said in communication. Before it "coagulates a verbal sign,"[409] the saying is already an ethical gesture of "response-ability" toward "(an)Other" but in order that it not be subordinated to the semantic content of the said the "saying must also be an unsaid,"[410] which requires a "certain impossible undoing of language"[411] so that my expression of "response-ability" does not effectively suppress "(an)Other." The saying is a "verb understood as a noun designating an event,"[412] such that the said is always already preceded by "hearsay, an already said," the "hither side of the said…that reveal[s] another meaning," the significance of "(an)Other" to "(my)Self" as the otherwise than being that precedes language but initiates communication as an ethical encounter.[413]

Instead of naming "(an)Other," Levinas creates richly descriptive, provocative metaphors and similes to describe the experience of proximity as the feeling of responsibility toward him/her before anything is said. As he suggests, it is:

> prior to all reflection, prior to every positing, an indebtedness before any loan, not assumed, anarchical, subjectivity of a bottomless passivity, made out of assignation, like the echo of a sound that would precede the resonance of this sound…a deafening trauma…the passivity of being persecuted…[where] the persecuted one is liable to

---

[405] Ibid, 48.
[406] Palmer, "Echo: Text Antiparallèle...," *CA*, 127.
[407] Ibid, 5.
[408] Ibid, 6.
[409] Hand, 52.
[410] Levinas, *OTB*, 7.
[411] Hand, 52.
[412] Levinas, *OTB*, 34.
[413] Ibid, 35.

answer for the persecutor. To tend the cheek to the smiter and to be filled with shame, to demand suffering in the suffering undergone.[414]

It is immediately apparent from even this short extract that Levinas is not concerned "with how language works, semantically, how thoughts and words have the meaning they do and play their roles in communication and other speech activities."[415] What concerns him is the possibility of an ethical language, a way "of speaking with [and about] another as already...an ethical act,"[416] of somehow articulating what cannot be explicitly disclosed in conventional, that is, coherent, informative and persuasive language. When he describes the experience of proximity as the "passivity of passivity;"[417] the "pre-original reason of difference;"[418] as "anarchic, older than every beginning;"[419] the "antecedence of responsibility to freedom;"[420] and as "being called into question prior to questioning,"[421] it is obvious that he is at the very limit of what can be said in philosophical discourse as he pushes language and conceptuality to the point of collapse. His proposed remedy relies on the reconfiguration of language as gesture:

> Not the communication of a said, which would immediately cover over and extinguish or absorb the said, but saying holding open its openness...delivering itself without saying anything said...Saying is thus to make signs of this very signifyingness of the exposure...[it is] to make signs by making oneself a sign...This is the pre-reflexive iteration of the saying of this very saying, a statement of the 'here I am' which is identified with nothing but the very voice that states and delivers itself, the voice that signifies.[422]

In theory, this remedies the "methodological problem" that naming always involves erasing "(an)Other," thus providing a way of saying that is not solely reducible to the said. It is a prerequisite that Levinas fail because what he envisions as the the ideal text written about "(an)Other" would be one that "unsays itself,"[423] a "saying without the said...speaking so as to

[414] Levinas, *OTB*, 111.
[415] Morgan, 142.
[416] Ibid.
[417] Levinas, *OTB*, 143.
[418] Ibid, 167.
[419] Ibid, 145.
[420] Ibid, 122.
[421] Ibid, 102.
[422] Ibid, 143.
[423] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," trans. Simon Critchley, *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 6.

say nothing, a sign I make to another of this giving of signs."[424] If he manages to speak about "(an)Other" in the language of the unsayable, in a way that does not reveal anything about him/her which might reduce his/her ultimate alterity, he compromises philosophy's ability to disclose that which it wants us to understand. Whereas if he successfully signifies "(an)Other" in philosophical discourse he compromises its character as other, as something unknown and unknowable. Despite, or perhaps even because of this, Levinas' greatest success is his commitment to the difficult but necessary task he set himself, a project "whose accomplishment is always impossible and which is always deferred,"[425] to articulate the "saying saying saying itself."[426] As a result, *OTB* has an almost "literary effect,"[427] a kind of disruptive expressivity, as concepts are endlessly redefined and revoiced until the text becomes a gesture of saying and unsaying. Levinas' argument is continuously interrupted by repetitions and reiterations of previous points with variations so that "a saying that is simultaneously an un-saying is enacted,"[428] a "saying that unsays itself within the said"[429] in order to ensure what Levinas discusses is not named and consequently erased in language. Because "saying opens me to the other…before saying what is said, before the said uttered…forms a screen between me and the other,"[430] *OTB* repeatedly perforates the screen separating "my(Self)" from "an(Other" as reading it almost engenders an experience of proximity, of being at the very limits of the known and unknowable where communication as an ethical encounter is possible.

While failure is important to Levinas, he succeeds in making the reader think otherwise about language and communication, and the role these play in an ethics of everyday living to make him/her appreciate the difficulties, if not the impossibility, of speaking to another person *as* other, not for the purposes of improved comprehension but due to the potential for an ethical encounter with someone who is irreducibly different to and distant from "(my)Self." *OTB* might enact the "necessary difficulty" of articulating what, by its very nature, exceeds language, but Levinas concludes with a gesture himself, pointing beyond the limits of his own text toward a potential for discussing the otherwise than being he identifies elsewhere, what he terms the "poetic said."[431] It allows for "an impossible simultaneousness of meaning" because its:

---

[424] Levinas, *OTB*, 143.
[425] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," 4.
[426] Levinas, *OTB*, 143.
[427] Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," 4.
[428] Hand, 51.
[429] Ibid, 61.
[430] Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 145.
[431] Levinas, *OTB*, 170.

language would exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts.[432]

The "poetic said and the interpretation it calls for ad infinitum"[433] represents the possibility of the impossible for Levinas in a way that philosophical discourse does not, even cannot. Poetry, through its discontinuities, disruptions, and, in the case of Palmer, derivations, permits "an interlocutor [to] permanently break through the text," "(an)Other" who is otherwise than "(my)Self" and whose voice echoes in the work to signify a presence through his/her absence. It is capable of enacting the "subjectivity of a subject" as the "response-ability" of:

> being-in-question in the form of the total exposure….prior to dialogue, to the exchange of questions and answers, to the thematisation of the said, which is superimposed on my being put into question by the other in proximity.[434]

In the writing of the poem, "the saying does indeed become a pure said, a simultaneousness of the saying and of its conditions"[435] but the text is constantly interrupted by others' voices because they:

> belong to a world they do not include, but recognise by being written and printed, and by being prefaced and getting themselves preceded with forewords…call[ing] for other books.[436]

Poems that reconfigure reading as a rewriting, or another's writing, heighten this sense of interruption and can be "interpreted in a saying distinct from the said"[437] because they are always exposed to "(an)Other," they are open toward rather than closed-off from the questions of another person. Levinas' admission helps explain why *OTB* has a somewhat "literary effect," with its complex metaphors and imagistic prose as he attempts the difficult but necessary task of representing what is unpresentable in philosophical discourse.

---

[432] Ibid, 169-170.
[433] Ibid, 170.
[434] Ibid, 111.
[435] Ibid, 171.
[436] Ibid.
[437] Ibid.

Quite significantly for appreciating Levinas' relevance to Palmer's "poethics of proximity," the philosopher identifies the "essence of art" in an essay specifically about poetry's ability to "signify only between the lines – in the intervals of time, between times – like a footprint that would precede the step, or an echo preceding the sound of a voice."[438] This notion of "between times" parallels the "now here" of Palmer's poems, the *other* time of poetry, that future-past where it oscillates,"[439] allowing for the alterity of the past (the intentions and voices of others which exceed personal memory and conceptual assimilation) and the alterity of the future (the radically unpredictable and not to be anticipated interpretations that readers will provide) to interrupt him as he writes. Poetry prioritises the saying over the said because it "signifies…not in its theme," its semantic content, but "signifies…as song…[it] signifies poetically…not in the fable it sings, but in its very singing," in the performance of the gesture in response to "(an)Other."[440] It is important to note, however, that poetic language is not an "aesthetic epiphenomenon" for Levinas but rather "a constitutive element of language's ethicity,"[441] a way to "elucidate the ethical dimension of language"[442] itself. The "poetic said" allows welcoming the otherwise than being as a way of writing that undermines the primacy of expression, disclosure and exposition for purposes of uncertainty reduction. In a footnote to *OTB*, Levinas suggests that as a "sign given of [the] signification of signs, proximity...delineates the possibility of poetry"[443] as gesture, of saying what cannot be said through "a sign made to another, a sign of this giving of signs, that is, of this non-indifference, a sign of this impossibility of slipping away and being replaced, of this identity, this uniqueness: here I am."[444] Poetry as the saying prior to anything actually said is a gesture that confirms the realisation of my "response-ability." From his poetics of derivation through to his dialogic poetics, Palmer acknowledges the "pre-involvement of the other-in-the-same,"[445] how "(an)Other" interrupts any attempt at expression, disclosure or exposition by "(my)Self," thus necessitating an otherwise than writing and reading if the ethical dimension of poetic discourse is to be appreciated. In *OTB*, Levinas "redefines language radically...[in]

---

[438] Emmanuel Levinas, "Poetry and Resurrection: Notes on Agnon," *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 7.
[439] Palmer, "Octavio Paz," 111.
[440] Ibid, 12.
[441] Gabriel Riera, "'The Possibility of the Poetic Said' in *Otherwise than Being* (Allusion, or Blanchot in Levinas)," *Diacritics* 34 (2004): 16.
[442] Ibid, 14.
[443] Levinas, *OTB*, 199.
[444] Ibid, 145.
[445] Riera, 27.

proximity to poetic language"[446] because he aspires to the "impossible simultaneousness of meaning" he identifies in poetry, the capacity for questions posed by other voices and other possible interpretations to interrupt the text such that the meaning of the work is the experience of reading it. As seen already with Palmer, the metaphor of the echo conveys a sense of presence and absence, and Levinas uses it to highlight the ethicity of language, how every utterance retains a trace of the initiating experience of proximity. It is incorrect to "simply conceive [of] the saying as a *non*said, as a part of the said that remains silent or unspoken."[447] Because the said contains the echo of the saying, it gives voice to the otherwise than being which in turn, as demonstrated throughout *OTB*, requires a way of writing and reading otherwise.

Levinas' interest in the possibility of the "poetic said" confirms that while he is normally quite dismissive of art because its "function is expression" and it "rests on cognition," on "telling the ineffable" or containing, closing-off the saying in the said and reducing the unknown and unknowable to the known, poetry is the exception.[448] However, in his early philosophical writings, poetry is dismissed on moral grounds because:

> the world to be rebuilt is replaced by the essential completion of its shadow. This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility. The poet exiles himself from the city.[449]

Palmer's critique of "the audience/who have remained patiently in their seats since/last year's performance, refusing to become speakers themselves" corresponds with Levinas' initial dismissal of poetry for its inherent irresponsibility. A radical shift in his thinking occurs when he begins to consider how the otherwise than being, the initiating experience of proximity with "(an)Other," is "not the thought, but the language, of the poem,"[450] not the content but the act of writing, and reading, it. Prior to *OTB*, and perhaps the reason for his admission regarding the poetic said, Levinas asks "is it possible to get out of this circle otherwise than by expressing the impossibility of getting out of it, by speaking the inexpressible. Is not poetry, of itself, the Exit?"[451] Levinas seems to be suggesting that poetry is a space of impossibility, a way of

---

[446] Ibid, 14.
[447] Riera, 30.
[448] Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 1.
[449] Ibid, 12.
[450] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Poet's Vision," *Proper Names*, 130.
[451] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Servant and her Master," *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1989), 152.

articulating the inexpressible, what "exists outside and beneath thought and language," so that "poetry, of itself, is now an *otherwise*."[452] Like Palmer, it is Celan who confirms the possibility of the impossible for Levinas by providing the appropriate means of communication for ethical relations based on the experience of proximity. In "Paul Celan: From Being to the Other," an essay published two years before *OTB*, Levinas even reveals that Celan's poetry already is the always impossible attempt at articulating a "saying without a said" through gesture:

> With one stroke of the pen, the poem, the height of language, is reduced to the level of an interjection, a form of expression as inarticulate as a wink...a sign to one's neighbour...a sign of nothing, or of complicity for nothing: a saying without a said. Or a sign that is its own signified: the subject gives a sign of the giving of sign to the point of becoming a sign through and through. [453]

For Levinas, Celan's poems are a kind of "elementary communication"[454] that are "situated precisely at this pre-syntactic and pre-logical level," written in a "language of proximity...the first of all languages, the response preceding the question, responsibility for one's neighbour."[455] Celan enacts the experience of proximity as corporeal sensation by offering the poem as a handshake, the "moment of pure touching, pure contact, grasping, squeezing – which is a way of giving, right up to and including the hand that gives,"[456] a gesture extended by "(my)Self" toward "(an)Other." Levinas' change in attitude and orientation regarding the ethical capacity of poetry is a precise example. *OTB* is informed by Celan's ideal of the "text, constantly interrupting itself to let through, in [the] interruptions, [another] voice, as if two or more discourses were on top of one another, with a strange coherence, not that of a dialogue"[457] but an echo. The semantic content of the poem is secondary to its status as a gesture, the performance prior to anything spoken or written is the constitutive act of self-articulation as an ethical subject. Levinas includes a quote from Celan ("Ich bin du, wenn/ich ich bin") as an epigraph to a chapter in *OTB*. "I am you, if/I am I" reveals how poetry, as a way of writing "(my)Self" into existence, is always already ethical because it necessitates attention to "(an)Other" by providing a "place in which the person, in grasping himself as a stranger to himself, emerges."[458] As the quote from Celan demonstrates:

---

[452] Hand, 74.
[453] Emmanuel Levinas, "Paul Celan: From Being to the Other," *Proper Names*, 40.
[454] Ibid.
[455] Ibid, 41.
[456] Ibid.
[457] Ibid, 41.
[458] Ibid, 43.

it might be me, who am writing here, or speaking, it might be me – yet it would not be me, insofar as I could be anyone…insofar as anyone might be me, me as other than me, myself as an unnamed, nameless substitute for myself, me as another.[459]

Writing and reading a poem otherwise than for expression, disclosure or exposition of "(my)Self" requires listening for the "nobody's voice" of "(an)Other," paying attention to and articulating the saying on the hither side of the said, the initiating experience of proximity that precedes the semantic content, thereby committing oneself to the "necessary difficulty" of this impossible task.

(7.5) Writing and Reading Otherwise in *Sun*

Palmer's consistent use of the serial form and his poetics of derivation suggests he sees no absolute differences between his own collections or between his and others' work, as he explains in "Dear Lexicon," "Book, You were never a book/…You are nothing but a page/torn from a book."[460] Palmer contributes one poem to what Duncan termed "a symposium of the whole,"[461] the "grand collage."[462] For this reason, his entire body of work can be seen to contribute one voice or image expressing his poetic vision, that of an enlarged and extended "composition by field" where the text exists only as part of a larger (con)text. His poetry is a "high energy construct where energy is transferred from one source to another (derivations)." With *S*, we witness P examining where this energy originates in the first place but the collection is also about origins in a profoundly "poethical" sense, a "reading project" examining "the constellation of voice that have come to constitute whatever I am as a poet."[463] He explores the initiating events that constitute him as a poet writing in the latter-half of the twentieth century with the intention of engendering similar attention in his readers to what constitutes them as subjects. For a poet writing "analytic lyrics" and who writes out of a genealogy that can be traced back to Anglophone Modernism of the early twentieth century, *S* is appropriately structured around two poems, "Baudelaire Series" and "Sun," the latter consisting of the same

[459] Leslie Hill, "'Distrust of Poetry:' Levinas, Blanchot, Celan," *MLN* 120 (2005): 993.
[460] Michael Palmer, "Dear Lexicon," *CA*, 166.
[461] Duncan, "Rites of Participation," 98.
[462] Duncan, *Bending the Bow*, vii.
[463] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 283.

number of lines as Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Palmer's choices are almost synonymous with modernism itself but they represent two very different, often competing, faces of its personal, political and poetic values.

While Baudelaire represents a beginning, it is best conceived as an opening up because his originality stems from the attempt to give voice to what had hitherto been unspeakable and his concomitant "will to otherness."[464] For the poet to be a poet at all, to be a problematic "figure within patriarchal systems of thought, he "must remain *open* to all sensations…yet it is this very state of openness that most threatens to dissolve his (masculine) subjectivity."[465] Palmer positions Baudelaire at the "founding [moment] of what we think of as prototypically the modernist vision…how we look at the world and…how we conceive of contemporaneity."[466] This vision features "trauma as a structure of feeling under the material conditions of…[capitalist, urban] modernity which [inaugurates] a 'crisis in representation.'"[467] Trauma refers to an experience that often cannot be assigned meaning, an event that constantly eludes representation. Baudelaire's "vexed relationship to reference [and] disarticulation of self,"[468] therefore, indicate language's inability to represent or express what is beyond comprehension and articulation. His poems "[enact] the trauma of a self emerging differentially in language,"[469] suggesting parallels with Palmer's interest in the initiating experience of proximity that constitutes "(my)Self" but nevertheless cannot be comprehended or articulated in language. In response to this tendency toward naming, of erasing difference and writing over otherness, Baudelaire opens himself up toward what cannot be quantified or measured, to what exceeds comprehension and articulation in language yet is constitutive of subjectivity and initiates self-articulation.

On the other hand, the beginning offered by Eliot is more a closing-off, perhaps due to his cyclical view of history, such that "In the beginning is my end."[470] While Eliot's anti-Semitic sentiments, "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable,"[471] and his "confess[ion] to a preference for fascism in practice"[472] need to be contextualised in the socio-cultural atmosphere of the period, they are symptomatic

---

[464] Jonathan Kemp, *The Penetrated Male* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2013), 79.
[465] Ibid, 81.
[466] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 283.
[467] Deberati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 1.
[468] Ibid.
[469] Ibid, 20.
[470] T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 177.
[471] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1934), 19.
[472] T. S. Eliot, "Mr Barnes and Mr. Rowse," *The Criterion* 8 (1928): 690.

of a more general attitude toward alterity and difference as threats to the established traditions and conservative orthodoxies he privileged. Quite significantly, *The Waste Land* is constituted by erasure in two respects. Firstly, the text itself is constantly under erasure since it was subjected to the creative revisions, or more precisely omissions, of Ezra Pound, who erased whole sections. Secondly, it provides a vision of modernity as "creative destruction," not an original discourse but a repetition that erases what it overrides. Despite the fact that Eliot's assertion of "impersonality as an operating procedure" and his "collaborative version" of creativity both place the authorial self under erasure to undermine its primacy and suggest submission to an external authority,[473] erasure has irrefutable negative connotations as those who deviate from a white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian and male-centred view are systematically erased from his text by being denied any sense of individual identity or socio-cultural specificity that would make them a source of alterity, potentially providing a different perspective on the situation they share with the poet. Eliot protects "(my)Self" by erasing the alterity of "(an)Other," naming him/her, for example, "woman," "Jew," "working-class," etc, whose question might interrupt his autotelic subjectivity. Palmer is acutely attuned to the various erasures of difference that Eliot commits and he responds in "Sun" with "a kind of erasure of *The Waste Land*" as a "brazen gesture," a "typing over the text, erasing this vision of [tradition as consisting of the habitual actions of the "same people living in the same place"[474]] that was such a primary model for the modernist vision and along with it a particular Eliotic bigotry" [475] that insisted "population[s] should be homogenous."[476]

"Sun" is "written entirely inside/the body of another"[477] as Palmer stays within the formal parameters of Eliot's text with the intention of writing over the original, making it "unreadable, even invisible."[478] His reading of *The Waste Land* is also a kind of writing, or in this case a writing over, so that Palmer's "I is the I who speaks."[479] As a result, "Sun" correlates naming, the act of writing and reading names, with violent erasure:

Name you this: a region,
a language...
/.../

---

[473] Richard Badenhausen, *T. S. Eliot and the Art of Collaboration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 219.
[474] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, 20.
[475] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 282.
[476] Eliot, *After Strange Gods,* 20.
[477] Palmer, *CA*, 215.
[478] Ibid, 216.
[479] Ibid, 224.

Name you this, painter
of only shadows, paramorph

figure walking
in ice, erased figure falling

whose liquid we will drink
as it coats our skins

Story of hands abandoning their fingers,
of an organ emerging from the throat

A man with dynamite strapped to his waist[480]

These images evoke the broadcasts that were by this period synonymous with America's activities in regions named "foreign," in places where "foreign" languages are spoken. Naming is the "attempt to categorise and control difference" as "names produce an Other [and] establish binaries,"[481] so while Eliot incorporates a variety of voices in *The Waste Land* he names his sources, thus reducing their otherness and making the text an "intertextual phenomenon, conspicuously a process of allusive appropriation[s]"[482] from other, and thus othered, cultures, "stolen genres and formats."[483] Palmer recognises "a certain level of violence in all areas of address,"[484] that is, "an appropriative aspect to naming"[485] that reduces the alterity of others' voices by subordinating them to the poet's purpose, thus "[collaborating] in a mode of representation in which naming and power are uncomfortably allied." [486] Readers are implicated in this collaboration if they consider texts like *The Waste Land* "a mechanism for preserving the dead,"[487] a way of understanding others "now dead to you, reader."[488] Eliot himself is not the subject of Palmer's critique:

…Now a filament of light

penetrates the image-base

---

[480] Ibid, 222.

[481] James Dawes, *The Language of War: Literature and Cukture in the U.S. from the Civil War Through World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 192.

[482] Gregory S. Jay, "Discovering the Corpus," *T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007), 84.

[483] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 226.

[484] Michael Palmer, "'Dear Lexicon:' An Interview by Benjamin Hollander and David Levi Strauss," *Acts* 5 (1986): 12.

[485] Selinger, para. 8.

[486] Ibid, para. 60.

[487] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 219.

[488] Ibid,224.

where first glyphs are stored,
Lucy and Ethel, the Kingfish,
Beaver and Pinky Lee

are spoken, die and undie
for you

like a war viewed from poolside
by philosophers and sheiks,

senators and dialectician-priests[489]

The violence inherent in the act of naming and in reading names is shown to originate in the archaic archetypes of the collective unconscious and continue into the present. A propensity for reverting to myths is also critiqued, the belief that "All these stories are the same/There is only one story –,"[490] because it fails to recognise the difference and distance between individuals, reducing unknown and unknowable others of the past to the categories of the same through which we make sense of our lived experiences in the present. In "Sun," therefore, Eliot is never named and it becomes apparent that Palmer is trying to write over his erasures, to unsay the names, "I sang the trace then//without a sound/then erased it," or at least find a different way of naming, "the anagram for *names*."[491] Instead of erasing Eliot by appropriating *The Waste Land* into "Sun," "swallow[ing] your [Eliot's] words,"[492] he demonstrates how even "The lines through these words/form other, still longer lines,"[493] how "(an)Other" still inheres in these lines whose "life of lines" cannot be completely written over. In this sense, Palmer writes and reads otherwise in "Sun" to preclude the complete erasure of Eliot as "(an)Other." His reference to "the Kingfish" indicates a way of thinking otherwise about naming, of undermining the inherent violence committed against "(an)Other" in the act of naming, as he allows Eliot's voice to interrupt him. The Fisher King appears in *The Waste Land* as "the man with three staves,"[494] and Eliot can be heard again in the "man hangs from rope"[495] ("The Hanged Man"[496]). In addition, "Five Figures in a Room/or a Triadic Ballet"[497] suggests the structure of *The Waste Land* as each of the five sections is dominated by a particular figure and

---

[489] Ibid.
[490] Ibid, 215.
[491] Ibid, 217, author's emphasis.
[492] Ibid, 220.
[493] Ibid, 227.
[494] T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," *The Complete Poems and Plays*, 62.
[495] Palmer, *CA*, 225.
[496] Eliot, "The Waste Land, 62.
[497] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 225.

this style of dance provided Eliot with "the model for a potential new form of poetic drama that [was] simultaneously primitive and avant-garde."[498] These interruptions "[intimate] a heteronymous relation"[499] between Palmer and Eliot and have "a special ethical significance… [as they] indicate a point of exposure"[500] during the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" as the poem is being written. "Sun" is about origins, about Palmer exploring where his poetics and the self they articulate originate; his critique of naming is aligned with Levinas' privileging of the saying over the said as constitutive of the ethical force of poetry, of its "poethic" capacity as a site for ethical practice.

Palmer's text, his writing over of *The Waste Land*, is an example of the said but the interruptions by Eliot's voice attest to the trace of the saying that is always perceptible in it, proof of the encounter between Palmer and Eliot that initiates "Sun" that is the origin of Palmer's self-articulation. The former exists as neither a presence nor an absence but leaves an "unrepresentable imprint upon the discourse of the said"[501] by interrupting Palmer's text. Interruptions, therefore, signal when otherness is most acutely felt, when "(my)Self" is resolutely opened toward "(an)Other" who intervenes in "(my)Self's" self-articulation. This encounter, this experience of proximity, however, cannot be articulated in language because it is antecedent to anything written or spoken. "Sun," therefore, is the manifestation of Palmer's "response-ability" toward "(an)Other" but within it can be glimpsed the encounter with Eliot, the initiating experience of proximity with someone different to and distant from him. The poem demonstrates how language, before it is a vehicle for the exchange of information to facilitate mutual comprehension and ensure uncertainty reduction, is the expression of a relation with someone unknown and unknowable to "(my)Self." By not suppressing these interruptions," the reader can "Suppose there's a portrait//on this paper I'm holding,"[502] that someone is speaking to him/her once s/he implements a way of writing and reading otherwise. This has the effect of compelling the reader to listen for "(an)Other's" voice throughout "Sun," an intention confirmed by Palmer having the text "signed Bakhtin's Names."[503] The reader consequently pays attention to the hither side of Palmer's text, listening for the voice of Eliot and in doing so writing "(an)Other" in a language of the unsayable, a "poetic said" whose "impossible simultaneousness of meaning" does not name him but senses his presence.

---

[498] David E. Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 120.
[499] Pinchevski, 232.
[500] Ibid, 212.
[501] Ibid, 222.
[502] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 223.
[503] Ibid, 227.

Reading in this way rewrites "Sun" to grant primacy to "(an)Other" over "(my)Self," by listening to Eliot's voice interrupting Palmer's. To provide just a few, for example, "A headless man walks…/…/The hood is black with two holes for my mouths"[504] echoes with Eliot's observation of "always another one walking beside you/Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded/I do not know whether a man or a woman;"[505] Palmer's vulnerable "long saplings with paper blossoms"[506] affirm how "April is the cruellest month;"[507] "The blind are hideous, the city laughs/and you tread on corpses in your mask"[508] evokes Eliot's personae of "I, Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives"[509] who has "walked among the lowest of the dead;"[510] Palmer's "flat land" with "living pillars of flesh"[511] suggest Eliot's "hooded hordes swarming/Over endless plains…/Ringed by the flat horizon only;"[512] while the image of a "silver//coin under the tongue, bread and money/for the ferryman"[513] resonates with the figure of Charon in *The Waste Land*. Palmer's "Sun," therefore, encourages the reader to listen for the voice of "(an)Other" as a way of remembering the originating event of ethical encounter that constitutes "(my)Self" but is the antecedent of anything written or spoken. In doing so, he confirms Levinas' insistence that we cannot and should not forget the initiating experience of proximity to someone unknown and unknowable to us that not only precedes self-articulation but makes it possible in the first place. However, Palmer's choice of Eliot to explore his origins makes this personal and poetical matter profoundly political, asking "…because the words disgusted me why write?"[514] Regardless of how adverse we might be toward our origins, how different and distant they seem to how we currently interpret the world and our position in and relation to it, Palmer insists they should never be intentionally forgotten or over-written. The way Palmer reads and rewrites *The Waste Land* also demonstrates how despite the personal and political position of the poet in question, the poem can still be an opportunity for "performative doing"[515] as the reader encounters his/her textual other. "Sun" enacts Palmer's "poethics of proximity," demonstrating that when realising our "response-ability" as readers,

---

[504] Ibid, 211.
[505] Eliot, "The Waste Land," 73.
[506] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 226.
[507] Eliot, "The Waste Land," 61.
[508] Palmer, "Sun," *CA* 213
[509] Eliot, "The Waste Land," 68.
[510] Ibid, 69.
[511] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 214.
[512] Eliot, "The Waste Land,"
[513] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 215.
[514] Ibid, 227.
[515] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1992), 7.

those occasions when reading is also a kind of writing and we articulate ourselves through how we read, we must ensure not to erase "(an)Other," to not name or completely identify with the poet, which would appropriate him into the categories of the same through which we comprehend the world. Palmer suggests that instead of over writing him through our interpretations, we should let his voice interrupt us, to question us as "(an)Other" and make the autotelic into a heteronomic subject.

"Baudelaire Series" similarly explores Palmer's origins but posits listening as an ethical gesture performed by "(my)Self" toward "(an)Other" that precedes anything spoken or written, thus providing the initiating act of self-articulation as an ethical subject. The correlation of naming and violence also features in this poem but rather than just accept that language has failed on a personal and political level, he redeems it poetically by refocusing his, and by extension our, attention on the unsayable, what not just cannot but should not be articulated in language. While there is an ethical imperative behind turning our attention toward others, Palmer is always careful not to misappropriate their experiences, a further instance of the violence committed in the act of naming:

> there on the screen, where everything is named difference, and is always
> the same for that reason, since you've watched it many times before and
> counted the limbs?[516]

Palmer's is not a poetry of witness because he appreciates how identifying with the experiences of "(an)Other" appropriates him/her, ultimately reducing his/her alterity as s/he can be grasped, in both senses of the word. Naming is equally culpable, it seems, for the violence of this scene and incriminates passive observers alongside those more immediately responsible. Despite, or perhaps even to protect, our best intentions, Palmer insists "They [must] refuse you their stories," or else there is "Barely anything to say, everything [is] said."[517] To further emphasise this, he privileges the saying over the said throughout "Baudelaire Series," the gesture of turning one's attention toward "(an)Other" over the semantic content of anything that might be said. The collection is full of figures saying, "You say,"[518] "She says,"[519] "At the table we

---

[516] Palmer, "Baudelaire Series," *CA*, 188.
[517] Ibid.
[518] Ibid, 176.
[519] Ibid, 177.

say"[520] and "He says."[521] Most importantly, "Words say, Misspell and misspell your name,"[522] so that language itself is a saying, a gesture toward rather than a means of identifying and comprehending "(an)Other," of naming and, therefore, reducing difference. The miscomprehension implied by misspelling is a way of un-naming and Palmer makes reference to his proper name, "George, So long [ago],"[523] reminding us elsewhere that "(He's forgotten his name)/Don't say his name for him."[524] He is encouraging the reader not to identify or identify with him but to instead un-name him, to misspell his name "Michael" and miscomprehend him as an "(an)Other." "Baudelaire Series" encourages the reader to "examine not what language *names*…but what it *says*," to "acknowledge…[our] inability to name"[525] and instead listen to what "words say." Palmer warns against the tendency to try to understand things from another person's perspective and appropriate his/her experiences as one's own, "Don't look through an eye/…/Take nothing as yours,"[526] and the poem repeatedly insists on our inabilities, our personal and political failures even, regarding how we use language, "Don't see things –/…don't listen//She says," "Don't say things/(You can't say things)," "Don't listen to things/(You can't listen to things)."[527] "Baudelaire Series" is about returning to one's origins, about remembering what has been intentionally forgotten or erased, but it also serves to remind us of "what is lost [when] language [is] used in a straightforward sense,"[528] for the teleological purpose of comprehension, for naming things so they can be grasped. Palmer reminds us how language as saying rather than just said can "keep[s] us listening for other[s'] 'voices,'"[529] writing and reading otherwise as we listen for the unsayable, for what exceeds our understanding and confronts us with the unknown and unknowable.

Palmer's poems enact listening as the fundamental component of his "poethics of proximity," his way of living in the social world of others as an ethical subject which he, by example, encourages in his readers:

> I'm writing your letters back to you
> which is a sound at least
> to mirror another sound

---

[520] Ibid, 182.
[521] Ibid, 190.
[522] Ibid, 164.
[523] Ibid, 166.
[524] Ibid, 178.
[525] Michael Gardner, *Regions of Unlikeness*, 258-259.
[526] Palmer, "Baudelaire Series," *CA*, 178.
[527] Ibid, 177-178.
[528] Gardner, 271.
[529] Ibid.

where no painting can be found[530]

Implicit in listening to the sound of what is said is the notion of "response-ability," of "writing…back" to "(an)Other" in a language of the unsayable that does not name him/her. The gesture of turning one's attention toward another person expresses the originating experience of proximity for Palmer without words. Perhaps playing with the title of his previous collection, "~~words~~ without music," without words there is music:

> Let's say a particular music, in profile.
> /…/
> And that other music, sort of gasped out now by the synthetron, the in-
> struments slightly more than real, if ontically problematic at best.[531]

These instruments refer to the beginning of "Baudelaire Series," where Palmer explains how he:

> *…made a book*
> *and in that book I left a spot*
> *and on that spot I placed a seme*
>
> *with the mechanism of the larynx*
> *around an inky centre*
> *leading backward and forward*[532]

The smallest but most fundamental unit of meaning is another's voice, which confirms that someone is speaking in the text, is real in the fact that s/he inheres in the text, but who is "ontically problematic" because s/he is present and absent. Palmer explicitly names those others who gave him permission but also obligated him to realise his "response-ability" but one always remains unnamed because unnameable:

> You Paul Celan, César
> Vallejo, Robert C[reeley]
>
> and Robert D[uncan], why five[533]

---

[530] Palmer, "Baudelaire Series," *CA*, 167.
[531] Ibid, 188.
[532] Ibid, 163, author's emphasis.
[533] Ibid, 180.

Intertextuality is a pronounced feature of Palmer's "poethics" so its function is not limited to citation and the type of reading this normally necessitates, i.e. the scholarly sourcing of the poet's quotes. Rather than encouraging the reader to simply name the others' voices in his poems, Palmer's use of intertextuality shows him trying to remember his origins, the initiating experience of proximity engendered by his encounters with other poets. Just as the said erases the saying, speaking writes over what remains unsaid and unsayable in language, the gesture of listening, "to give one's attention to a sound."[534] Listening is an enactment of "response-ability" made "manifest through a posture of receptivity, a passivity of receiving the other into oneself without assimilation or appropriation."[535] Listening, therefore, is constitutive and prior to speaking, it is the "invisible and inaudible enactment of the ethical relation itself"[536] in which "(my)Self" answers "[its] vocation, [its] calling" to respond in a language of the unsayable that does not name "(an)Other" through semantic content but instead expresses the initiating ethical encounter with the unknown and unknowable. Writing and reading otherwise involves listening not only to what is said but to the saying also, the significance conveyed without words but rather through the body's language, the language of the unsayable that expresses as gesture. Palmer laments that the "lines/have neither eyes nor ears"[537] but listening allows for "an aural eye – an eye [or I] that listens"[538] not only to the semantic content of what is said but to the initiating experience of proximity that lends it "poethical" significance as a gesture of welcome toward "(an)Other."

In what he calls "the Adorno poem,"[539] Palmer addresses the infamous proposal that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,"[540] demonstrating, like Levinas and Celan, his understanding that to say the unsayable is to be complicit in the act of barbarism one is trying to comprehend in the first place by perpetuating the violence of naming, of reducing the alterity of "(an)Other:"

> A man undergoes pain sitting at a piano
> knowing thousands will die while he is playing
>
> He has two thoughts about this

[534] OED Definition
[535] Lisbeth Lipari, "Rhetoric's Other: Levinas, Listening, and the Ethical Response," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 45 (2012): 237.
[536] Ibid, 242.
[537] Palmer, "Sun," *CA*, 213.
[538] Ibid, 234.
[539] Palmer, "Dear Lexicon," 31.
[540] Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 28.

>   If he should stop they would be free of pain
>
>   If he could get the notes right he would be free of pain
>   In the second case the first thought would be erased
>
>   causing pain[541]

Palmer's poetry confronts us with the same impasse but because he considers reading to be coterminous with living, showing how he can be read also suggests a way of living in this social world of others while informed by a "poethics of proximity." Music, or poetry, is either impossible in the first case or irrelevant in the second due to our "dumb words mangled by use."[542] However, he suggests that "Such thoughts destroy music/and this at least is good."[543] Questioning the possibility of expression is to involve oneself in the impossibility that Palmer's poetry allows for, to become a figure with "the inability really to play in ease…sitting at but no longer able to play the piano, or alternatively…who now plays seriously by being unable to play, unable to 'play along.'"[544] Refusing to "play along," to continue adhering to the same conventions as before:

>   …is this instance of playing
>
>   he would say to himself
>   my eyes have grown hollow like yours
>
>   my head is enlarged
>   though empty of thought[545]

Listening requires a certain self-abnegating, a hollowing out of the "I's" to give primacy to others. The "instance of playing" is the pause before anything is played. Similar to the saying before the said, it is a silence in which a gesture of welcome is extended toward "(an)Other" that "listen[s] others to speech" and "open[s] new pathways for both ethics and understanding."[546] Listening to the question posed by "(an)Other" regarding the possibility of self-articulation signals the autotelic subjectivity of "(my)Self" being interrupted, the moment when I am not only permitted but obligated to realise my "response-ability" by turning my

---

[541] Palmer, "Baudelaire Series," *CA*, 172.
[542] Ibid, 190.
[543] Ibid, 172.
[544] Kaufman, 213.
[545] Palmer, "Baudelaire Series," *CA*, 172.
[546] Lipari, 241.

attention to the impossibility of speaking in a language of the unsayable, of encountering rather than just naming "(an)Other." Rather than trying to comprehend Palmer, to name him and grasp the "things" said in his poems, the reader should instead listen to what he says, that "You cannot not hear this,"[547] that there is an ethical imperative to listen to the voice of "(an)Other" to redeem the personal and political failings of language. By endlessly deferring, even ultimately preventing, comprehension, the difficulty of Palmer's work is necessary because it prolongs the initiating experience of proximity with "(an)Other" that permits and obligates my self-articulation as a reader. Reading and writing otherwise, therefore, is to adhere to his "poethics" and in doing so enact a way of living in the social world of others as an ethical subject.

Conclusion: Poem of the End

Arguing that a poet who is so attentive to others' voices, whose work even gives priority to what others say, can somehow be reduced to a single idea might seem incongruous, even if that idea is what makes poetry possible in the first place. Nevertheless, Palmer's intention is to call our attention to what he considers the permission and the responsibility engendered by the impossible poem, the gesture extended by the poet to the reader to which the reader responds in kind, that is, the poem written and read otherwise. His "poem[s call] for the utmost attention,"[548] such that the closer they are read the more illegible they become, or to use Ashbery's image, they can "only happen here, on this page held/Too close to be legible, sprouting erasures." By responding, by paying such close attention, the reader becomes aware of the silences, of the empty spaces between and within words, and what must be done in this space of impossibility. In the two "C" series in *S*, entitled "Called Poem of the End" and "Paper Universe of Primes," Palmer "address[es] some point of silence more absolutely than [in] any previous work"[549] and what is permitted and obligated by this silence. Both series consist of four seven-line poems, with the first calling our attention to this, suggesting it is "nothing but the printed lines,"[550] that it is "(Just a line.)/.../...typed."[551] However, Palmer is not encouraging a formalist identification of or with the poem as an object. Instead, he explains how he "came

---

[547] Palmer, "Baudelaire Series," *CA*, 181.
[548] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Gardner," 288.
[549] Ibid, 282.
[550] Michael Palmer "C ('called Poem of the End')," *CA*, 199.
[551] Ibid, 200.

upon by chance" a poem "called Poem of the End."[552] This poem, he suggests, is the initiating moment of his self-articulation since he "recalled writing from it//in broken seven lines like this,"[553] thus signalling his return to what is normally forgotten about poetry: that it depends on the experience of proximity to another person, on being addressed by and responding to "(an)Other." Quite appropriately, "Poem of the End" was "found...in a letter" with its "name...crossed out."[554] Palmer's rewriting, therefore, is an act of naming without erasure, where "You can't make a mistake because you understand nothing."[555] Letter simultaneously means "both the components of an alphabet, out of which we make words, and written communications sent from an author to a reader…[a text] mailed off from the present to some unknown future recipient, telling of what we have become, explaining why this 'future' may be the same as the present, why it is always already here."[556] The beginnining of speech then, formulating the first word, is to orient oneself toward someone else, it is a response to "(an)Other" that is also an admission of what one does not and cannot know, of "something else I wanted to say,"[557] something otherwise. In the second series, he discusses the "Paper universe of primes,"[558] calling attention to the poem as the site of first importance, where there are:

> reticular figures
>
> both speaking /
>
> not speaking[559]

What is of first importance is this notion of complexly interconnected figures who are speaking but not speaking, who are speaking the unsayable language of gesture by listening to what "the speaking says,"[560] to the experience of proximity to another person as the initiating act of self-

---

[552] Ibid, 199.
[553] Ibid, 202.
[554] Ibid.
[555] Ibid, 200.
[556] Norman Finkelstein, *On Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 162.
[557] Ibid, 201.
[558] Michael Palmer, "C ('Paper universe of primes')," *CA*, 205.
[559] Ibid.
[560] Ibid, 208.

articulation. These are "Unutterable//pages"[561] and "'Now you cannot speak/and now...'"[562] you are permitted and obligated to listen. The most absolute silence in Palmer occurs in a collection concerned with returning to origins, to initiating actions. In order to articulate "(my)Self," to "Write this"[563] and "Say this"[564] in response to "(an)Other," to "become the things we speak"[565] and "give a direct answer//with the eyes or the breath,"[566] I must listen to the other "I's" in the silence Palmer provides, a "silence already filled with noises"[567] that is the space of impossibility, where "The ink makes a sound."[568]

[561] Ibid, 207.
[562] Ibid, 206.
[563] Palmer, "Sun," *CA* 233.
[564] Ibid, 234.
[565] Ibid.
[566] Palmer, "C ('called Poem of the End')," *CA*, 201.
[567] Ashbery, "Some Trees," *CP*, 26.
[568] Michael Palmer, "τροπή," *CA*, 146.

Conclusion: A Rejection of Closure

It seems wrong to impose a conclusion on Ashbery's and Palmer's "poethics of proximity," to imply that their work somehow comes to an end once the ethical encounter between the poet and the reader is realised. But this ending, this realisation, is only another beginning, or an other's beginning, since it signals where "(my)Self" ends and "(an)Other" begins. It is the permission and the obligation to, as Ashbery rather explicitly suggests in "The Task," "begin again."[1] Their absence from the existing surveys of the ethical turn in innovative American poetry requires our attention because their work seeks to return us to the beginning, to the originating ethical encounter that precedes what Peter Quartermain identifies as a "moral imperative" informing disjunctive (read: difficult) poetics from Stein and the Objectivists through to the Language poets, a commitment to reassess our sense of the textual object by "revealing its characteristics as verb, as meaningful act."[2] Their attention to the immediacy of the ethical encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" calls the reader's attention to the permission and the obligation they extend to realise his/her "response-ability," to respond and be responsible during the interpretation as composition of the poem.

Ashbery and Palmer are part of a far greater opening up of American poetry that occurred in the second-half of the twentieth century, a committed departure from the pedagogical practices of New Criticism and the personal and political consequences arising from such an approach to the composition and interpretation of poetry. That New Criticism continues to be the dominant method for the analysis of poetry only seeks to confirm the necessity *and* the difficulty of the task these poets set themselves: to call attention to how circumscribed the poem had become in terms of its involvement in extratextual, social issues and to write a subject into existence that is not only open to but constituted by what remains beyond containment in the known and knowable, what is irreducibly other and different to "(my)Self." As both Ashbery and Palmer illustrate, opening poetry in this manner required a corresponding exposure of this medium to innovations in non-verbal art forms, an attempt to make readers extend their acceptance of these innovations to their verbal medium and in doing so determine why poetry needs to be written and read, and how it should be done, to ensure its continued involvement in the personal and political issues of the social world. The difficulty of these issues only serves to further emphasise the necessity that they are engaged with in a

---

[1] Ashbery, *CP*, 181.
[2] Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* Cambridge: Cabridge University Press, 1992), 20.

responsive and responsible manner. Engaging with these issues in a way informed by a "poethics of proximity" ensures that the voices of others are listened to and acknowledged for the different perspectives they provide. Open and closed poetry, therefore, is not just a question of form but of intention, of deciding to make poetry open to or closed off from those others who have not had the opportunity to speak and be listened to previously. Perhaps this is the truly ethical aspect of poetics, of which the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other" is only ever the first initiating moment. Accordingly, representing or articulating oneself in poetry should not be done at the expense of others but always in response to the presence of that which cannot and should not be known because it ensures the self is open to the possibility of a different way of being, one that is heteronomic rather than autotelic. For this reason, writing and reading poetry with the aim of realising a "poethics of proximity" as opposed to self-expression or self-disclosure makes both the poet and the reader responsive to and responsible in the social world of others. Ashbery's and Palmer's work can be read as gesturing toward possibilities that other poets explore for different personal and political reasons, not in terms of a linear chronology but in the "now here" of poetry, in the space of permission and obligation that innovative poetry insists upon. Two examples are Lyn Hejinian and Susan Howe, who engage with the "poethic" potential of poetry that concerns Ashbery and Palmer through their own poetical praxis but without explicitly indicating they are doing so, perhaps because they are more concerned with enacting the particular considerations and commitments engendered by their lived experiences as women in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Firstly, Hejinian's various literary experiments explore what it means to be "at beginning,"[3] testing the possibility of "construct[ing] a text that dwells in a state of perpetual beginning."[4] In her most famous text, *My Life*, "disarticulations of plot unsettle the sequences of beginnings, middles, and endings upon which literary form itself is predicated"[5] and since this form is the autobiography, it has important consequences for the act of self-representation, for how one represents the self in poetry. In *The Fatalist*, she asks the reader to "think/of the future anterior: think of what will have been. It begins/(is beginning) right now."[6] For Hejinian, the poem is a space of the impossible, where perpetual beginning is possible, because:

---

[3] Lyn Hejinian, *The Beginner* (Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2002), 15.
[4] Srikanth Reddy, *Changing Subjects: Digressions in Modern American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 68.
[5] Ibid, 67.
[6] Lyn Hejinian, *The Fatalist* (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn Publishing, 2003), 59.

poetic language is also a language of improvisation and intention. The intention provides the field of inquiry and improvisation is the means of inquiring. Or, to phrase it another way, the act of writing is a process of improvisation within a framework (form) of intention.[7]

In *My Life*, Hejinian's intention is to construct an autobiographical representation of the self, a project that is open-ended as demonstrated by her rewriting of it. First published in 1978 when she was thirty-seven, it consisted of thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences, only to be updated in 1986 with an additional eight sections and eight lines added to each original section. Her act of rewriting, therefore, highlights the considerations and commitments involved in the act of representing a self in poetry. This refers to both the actual sense of writing an autobiographical poem but also the performative sense of subjecting oneself to the interpretation of others, a particularly charged issue given her concern for the authoriality of the feminist subject and her intention to question the various socio-cultural structures that de/legitimise *écriture féminine*.

Hejinian's work explores two important impossibilities, the desire "to remember more than more than that, more or less as it really happened" because it "seems that we hardly begin before we are already there,"[8] and the possibility of "find[ing] a language which will meet its object with perfect identity…[achieving] at-oneness with the universe…that is the condition of…complete and perfect knowing."[9] Similarly to Ashbery, the perfect identity of word and thing is never achieved, they miss each other and this implied sense of longing extends to Hejinian's attempt to encounter "that other 'I' with which [she] began" and the other "I's" that will, like her, rewrite her own self-representation. A difference and a distance always remain between word and thing, in the same way that "(my)Self" cannot properly grasp "(an)Other," cannot comprehend him/her by containing him/her in the categories of the same. "Perfect knowing," therefore, is not only impossible but ultimately undesirable. Language both permits and obligates more than just uncertainty reduction, it is "a medium for experiencing [the] experience…of encounter…of *becoming another*" with only "the implicit understanding that *this is happening*"[10] in the "now here" of "perpetual beginning" where writing and reading are always rewriting. The only possibility of knowing Hejinian allows for is "to know *that* without *what*," which is an "acknowledgement as a preservation of otherness."[11] As a result, she

---

[7] Lyn Hejinian, "Introduction," *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 3.
[8] Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*, Revised Edition (Los Angeles, CA: Sun and Moon, 1987), 69.
[9] Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," *The Language of Inquiry*, 53.
[10] Hejinian, "Introduction," 3, author's emphasis.
[11] Ibid, 2.

advance what she terms the "open text," a text that "invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural hierarchies."[12] The "open text" foregrounds both the "process of the original composition [by the poet and]…of subsequent compositions by readers"[13] so that both are implicated in writing a feminine textual body, which "is recognised by the act that it is always endless, without ending…there's no closure, it doesn't stop." [14] For Hejinian, the "epistemological value of writing" an "open text" derives from the fact that "each act of knowing-in-writing is contextual…is unique…cannot be replicated or even repeated."[15] This has significant consequences for the "response-ability" of the reader as s/he is solely answerable for the "act of knowing-in-writing" s/he performs when interpreting, or rewriting, Hejinian's self-representation. In order to prevent reading becoming simply an act of naming, of reducing the otherness that Hejinian presents to the reader, she enlarges the "gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable)" to provide for both "a collaboration and a desertion," a sense of encounter that is never complete identification.[16] The difference and distance that ensures words do not properly correspond to things and, more importantly, that "(my)Self" does not identify with "(an)Other" makes "the (unimaginable) complete text" impossible, the "text that contains everything" and is in fact a "closed text."[17]

Secondly, in Howe's historical materialist poetics, she interrogates the constitution of the self from an explicitly female and feminist perspective, although the latter must be disengaged from institutionalised feminist critical practices that have made a space for women's writing within the Anglo-American academic tradition but without properly critiquing the gendered assumptions of that tradition. Howe repeatedly foregrounds the considerations and commitments necessitated by the poet's decision to self-articulate in a way that does not silence others, in a manner that repudiates complicity in the practices that have already engendered so many silenced others. To this end, she explores historical silences in the form of silenced witnesses, and erasures from and omissions in official records, as well as textual silences, what Palmer identifies in her work as "the space between the words into which…meaning erupts, the pause-boundaries between larger units of utterance (the

---

[12] Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," 43.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitations?" *Signs* 7 (1981): 53.
[15] Megan Simpson, *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 14.
[16] Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," 56.
[17] Ibid.

interruptions of sound by silence), perhaps even the phonemic markers of difference."[18] Her project is a complex process of citation, erasure and over-writing as she "treads borders, boundaries, dividing lines, edges, invisible meeting points"[19] in an attempt "not to explain…not to translate…but to meet the [other] with writing…to meet in time, not just from place to place but from writer to writer, mind to mind, friend to friend, from words to words."[20] Like the American author she has most "thorow[ly]" worked with, Henry David Thoreau, Howe explores the notion of "nearness" but reconfigures it to encounter history's others, demarcating a margin that is at once "quite literally a textual margin as well as a conceptual space on the edges of the dominant culture," since it is in the "marginalia, what is written in the blank spaces of a text, that she finds traces of the voices that have been exiled from the privileged, centralised content."[21] In contrast to her "critical" works on women, for example, Emily Dickinson in *My Emily Dickinson* and Mary Rowlandson and Anne Hutchinson in *The Birth-mark*, Howe's "creative" works focus on a literary and philosophical tradition dominated by men, for example, *Pythagorean Silence* (1982), *Singularities* (1990) and *The Non-Conformist's Memorial* (1993), to "track the 'hidden feminine'…veiled behind history's erasures,"[22] to discover the feminine in the words of others, which "has to do with the presence of absence."[23]

Howe's engagement with the words of others allows her to listen to others' words in a way that transcends gender. She is not simply delineating an essentialist, "feminised" counter-history but exposing the machinations of power itself, the violence written into history in both a literal and figurative sense through enclosing, marginalising, suppressing, excluding, denying and aggrandising. Unlike conventional historiographical texts, which differentiate themselves from the "real" they purport to represent objectively and with determinative certainty, Howe "restores ambiguity between all the oppositions that serve to enforce the perceived opposition between the 'textual' and the 'real.'"[24] Historical knowing in her work is distinct from knowledge of or about the past as she continuously ventures into the unknown and unknowable, into a "textual" and "real" space of encounter with others, where "You are of me & I of you, I

---

[18] Palmer, "Active Boundaries," 220-221.
[19] Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 186
[20] Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (Hanover: NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 158.
[21] Simpson, 194.
[22] Stephen Collis, *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* (Victoria, BC: English Literary Studies, 2006), 118.
[23] Howe, *The Birth-mark*, 180.
[24] Simpson, 195.

cannot tell/Where you leave off and I begin."[25] Similar to Palmer's hermeneutics of scepticism, Howe's feminist epistemology is "joined to an emotionally charged lyricism"[26] that lends personal urgency to an otherwise political and poetic project. How she writes both in and about the silences in which others' voices can be listened to, how "she maintains a near-complete silence" by "allowing others to speak for her" has a profound effect on the reader's "response-ability,"[27] who is permitted and obligated to respond to the hierarchies and machinations of authority that are inherent in the linguistic processes s/he is reading. By making the "textual" more "real," by calling attention to the operations of, in this case, gender in the constitution of meaning and the articulation of self, Howe provides "not simply a literary technique for reading but an epistemological theory that offers a method for analysing the processes by which meanings are made"[28] and self-articulation is realised. It is not so much what Howe says, whose voices she actually lets speak through her texts, but the gesture she performs by opening both herself and her text to others, and by extension involving the reader in the enactment of a profoundly ethical, heteronomic act of self-articulation.

While Ashbery and Palmer attempt to provide the first word on ethics in poetry, to articulate what can only be experienced in the encounter between "(my)Self" and "(an)Other," the lived experience of absence and presence evoked by the "poet(h)ic," a word that cannot be spoken but can be listened out for, they in no way provide the last word. As Hejinian and Howe help demonstrate, investigating the acts of self-representation and self-articulation is vital to so many of the creative and critical debates surrounding the reconfiguration of the self-other binary that features throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. This analysis of Ashbery and Palmer is not intended to close-off their work and the self they write into existence from the urgent socio-political issues of the period but rather to demonstrate how the urgency of their writing originates otherwise, in a concern for representing and articulating a responsive and responsible subject as the initiating act of ethical praxis. To end as we began, then, with Olson. If we are to subscribe to his concept of the poem as a "high energy construct where energy is transferred from one source to another" then the "reader completes the circuit,"[29] what matters is not the subject of Ashbery's and Palmer's poetry but the occasion they provide readers to realise their "response-ability" and in doing so extend the activities they perform while reading into how they act in and interact with the social world of others. In this sense,

---

[25] Susan Howe, *Singularities* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 58.
[26] Palmer, "Active Boundaries," 221.
[27] Mc Hale, *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole*, 241.
[28] Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 8-9.
[29] Palmer, "Interview: Conducted by Lee Bartlett," 127.

there is "no boundary or edge to the field in question. As there is everywhere/no language,"[30] no "everyday" or "poetic" language only language acts, what "(my)Self" does with(in) language as s/he encounters "(an)Other" during the lived experience of proximity.

---

[30] Palmer, "Notes for Echo Lake 1," *CA*, 4.

Bibliography

Abrams, M.H.. "The Transformation of English Studies: 1930-1995." *American Academic Culture in Transformation*, edited by Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske, 123-150. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Adorno, Theodor. *Prisms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981.

Adshead-Lansdale, Janet. "Creative Ambiguity: Dancing Intertexts." *Dancing Texts: Intertextuality and Interpretation*, edited by Janet Adshead-Lansdale, 1-25. *London: Dance Books Ltd*, 1999.

Altieri, Charles. *The Art of Twentieth Century American Poetry: Modernism and After*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006.

-----, "On Difficulty in Contemporary American Poetry," *Daedalus* 133 (2004): 113-118.

Andersen, Wayne. "Joseph Cornell's "Healthier Possibilities."" *Common Knowledge* 12 (2006): 420-442.

Anderson, Douglas. "Peirce and Pragmatism: American Connections," *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, edited by Cheryl Misak, 38-59. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Anderson, Jack. "On the Move: Poetry and Dance." *Dance Chronicle* 33 (2010): 251-267.

Andrews, Bruce. "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 23-43. Berkeley, CA: Roof Books, 1990.

Arnold, David. *Poetry and Language Writing: Objective and Surreal*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007.

Ashbery, John. "American Sanctuary in Paris." *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1956-1987*, edited by David Bergman, 87-97. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989.

-----, "The Art of Poetry No. 33." Interviewed by Peter A. Stitt. *The Paris Review* 90 (1989) http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3014/the-art-of-poetry-no-33-john-ashbery> Accessed 13th September 2013.

-----, "Ashbery: Interviewed by Sue Gangel." *American Poetry Observed: Poets and Their Work*, edited by Joe David Bellamy 9-20. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

-----, *Collected Poems 1956-1987*, edited by Mark Ford. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2008.

-----, "Craft Interview with John Ashbery." Interviewed by Janet Bloom and Robert Losada. *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly*, edited by William Packard, 111-132. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1974.

-----, "The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery." Interviewed by A. Poulin Jr. *Michigan Quarterly Review* 20 (1981): 242-255.

-----, "Gertrude Stein," *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1956-1987*, edited by David Bergman, 106-111. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989.

-----, "The Impossible: Gertrude Stein." *Selected Prose*, edited by Eugene Richie, 11-15. Manchester: Carcanet, 2004.

-----, "In Conversation with John Tranter." *Jacket* 2 (1988) Accessed 7th April 2015. <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1985.html>

-----, "Interview: Conducted by David Remnick." *Bennington Review* 8 (1980):14-21.

-----, "Interview: Conducted by Guy Bennett," *Charting the Here of There: French and American Poetry in Translation in Literary Magazines, 1850-2002*, edited by Guy Bennett and Béatrice Mousli. New York, NY: Granary Books, 2002.

-----, "An Interview in Warsaw with Piotr Sommer." *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in American Poetry*, edited by Michael Palmer, 294-314. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1983.

-----, "An Interview with John Ashbery." Interviewed by John Koethe. *Substance* 9-10 (1983): 178-186.

-----, "Interview with a Writer," Interviewed by JP O'Malley. *The Spectator*, <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/books/2013/02/interview-with-a-writer-john-ashbery/> Accessed: 24th February 2015.

-----, "Introduction to a Reading by Michael Palmer and James Tate." *Selected Prose*, edited by Eugene Richie, 216-219. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004.

-----, "The Invisible Avant-Garde." *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1956-1987*, edited by David Bergman, 389-395. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989.

-----, "Jerboas, Pelicans, and Peewee Reese: Marianne Moore," *Selected Prose*, edited by Eugene Richie, 83-88. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004.

-----, "A Kind of Musical Space: An Interview with John Ashbery." Interviewed by Craig Burnett. *Frieze* 85. (2004) <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/a_kind_of _musical_space/. Accessed 20th September 2013.

-----, "The New York School of Poets." *Selected Prose*, edited by Eugene Richie, 113-116. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004.

-----, *Other Traditions: The Charles Eliot Norton Lecture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

-----, "Robert Frost Medal Address." *Selected Prose*, edited by Eugene Richie, 243-252. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004.

-----, "Writers and Issues: Frank O'Hara's Question." *Selected Prose*, edited by Eugene Richie, 80-83. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004.

Attridge, Derek. "Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J. M. Coetze's Early Fiction." *Poetics Today* 25 (2004): 653-671.

Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*, Second Edition, edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Avram, Wes. "On the Priority of 'Ethics' in the Work of Levinas." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996): 261-284.

Badenhausen, Richard. *T. S. Eliot and the Art of Collaboration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, translated by Vadim Liapunov, edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990.

-----, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, edited by Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981.

-----, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, translated and edited by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

-----, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, translated by Vadim Liapunov, edited by Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993.

Barnhisel, Greg. "Perspectives USA and the Cultural Cold War: Modernism in Service of the State." *Modernism/modernity* 14 (2007): 729-754.

Bartlett, Lee. *The Sun is But a Morning Star: Studies in West Coast Poetry and Poetics*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.

Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 2009.

Benveniste, Émile. *Problems in General Linguistics*. Miami, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971.

Berman, Art. *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Bernstein, Charles. "The Academy in Peril." *Content's Dream: 1975-1984*, 244-251. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001.

-----, "Writing and Method." *Contents Dream: Essays 1975-1984*, 217-236. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001.

Bertholf, Robert J. "Decision at the Apogee: Robert Duncan's Anarchist Critique of Denise Levertov." *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, The Politics of*

Poetry, edited by Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf, 1-17. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Bittenbender, J. C. "Silence, Censorship, and the Voices of *Skaz* in the Fiction of James Kelman." *Bakhtin and the Nation*, edited by Barry A. Brown, et al, 150-165. Cranbury, NJ: Associated Universities Presses: 2000.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

Blake, William. "Letter: To M' Butts, Gr' Marlborough Street," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008.

Blaser, Robin. "The Fire." *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*, edited by Miriam Nichols, 3-12. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006.

-----, "The Practice of Outside." *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*, edited by Miriam Nichols, 113-163. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006.

Bolewski, Christin. "'Shan Shui Hua' – Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting Reinterpreted as Moving Digital Visualisation." *Electronic Visualisation and the Arts (EVA) Conference*. (2008): 27-34. <http://www.bcs.org/upload/pdf/ewic_ eva08_paper4.pdf> Accessed 18th September 2013.

Braswell, Suzanne F. "An Aesthetics of Movement: Baudelaire, Poetic Renewal, and the Invitation of Dance." *French Forum* 31 (2006): 23-43.

Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York, NY: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947.

-----, and Warren, Robert Penn. *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1938.

Bruhn, Jørgen and Lundquist, Jan. "Introduction: A Novelness of Bakhtin?" *The Novelness of Bakhtin: Perspective and Possibilities*, edited by Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist, 11-50. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanam Press, 2001.

Bruns, Gerald L. "The Remembrance of Language: An Introduction to Gadamer's Poetics." *Gadamer on Clean: "Who am I and Who Are You?" and Other Essays*, translated and edited Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski, 1-52. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Bryson, J. Scott. *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space and Ecopoetry*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2005.

Burkitt, Ian. "The Death and Rebirth of the Author: The Bakhtin Circle and Bourdieu on Individuality, Language and Revolution." *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words*, edited by Michael Gardner and Michael Mayerfield Bell, 163-180. London: Sage Publications, 1998.

Cage, John. "Lecture on Nothing." *Silence: Lectures and Writing*, 109-127. London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2011.

-----, "Lecture on Something." *Silence: Lectures and Writing*, 128-145. London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2011.

Cain, William E. "The Institutionalisation of the New Criticism." *MLN* 97 (1982): 1100-1120.

Case, Kristen. *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011.

Celan, Paul. "Letter to Hans Bender." *Collected Prose*. Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop, 25-26. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999.

-----, "The Meridian. *Collected Prose*. Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop, 37-55. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999.

Chinitz, David E. *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Christie, William. "A Recent History of Poetic Difficulty." *ELH* 67 (2000): 539-564.

Cixous, Hélène. "Castration or Decapitations?" *Signs* 7 (1981): 41-55.

Clark, Katerina and Holquist, Michael. *Mikhail Bakhtin* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Clark, Timothy J. "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction." *Reconstructing Modernism*, edited by Serge Guilbaut, 172-243. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

Collis, Stephen. *Through Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism*. Victoria, BC: English Literary Studies, 2006.

Conte, Joseph M. *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Costello, Bonnie. *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Creeley, Robert. "A Note." *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley*, 58. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989.

Critchley, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1992.

Crowley, Tony. "Bakhtin and the History of Language." *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, Second Edition, edited by Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, 177-200. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.

Damon, Maria. "Ethnopoetics," *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Fourth Edition, edited by Roland Greene, et al, 463-464. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Davidson, Michael. "Discourse in Poetry: Bakhtin and Extensions of the Dialogical." *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, edited by Michael Palmer, 143-150. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1983.

-----, *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*. Chicago IL: Chicago University Press, 2004.

Dawes, James. *The Language of War: Literature and Cukture in the U.S. from the Civil War Through World War II*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

De Boer, Theodorus. *The Rationality of Transcendence: Studies in the Philosophy of Emmauel Levinas*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 1997.

De Waal, Cornelis. "A Pragmatist World View: George Herbert Mead's Philosophy of the Act." *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, edited by Cheryl Misak, 144-168. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Delville, Michel. *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998.

Deming, Richard. *Listening On All Sides: Toward an Emersonian Ethics of Reading*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Denham, Robert D. *Poets on Paintings: A Bibliography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc, 2010.

Dentith, Simon. "Bakhtin and Contemporary Criticism," *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*, 88-102. London: Routledge, 1995.

Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics." *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, 97-192. London: Routledge, 2001.

Devisch, Ignaas. *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

Dewey, Anne. "Poetic Authority and the Public Sphere of Politics in the Activist 1960s: The Duncan-Levertov Debate." *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, The Politics of Poetry*, edited by Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf, 109-125. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Dewey, John. "The Bearings of Pragmatism upon Education," *The Middle Works, 1899-1924: Volume 4, 1907-1909*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, 178-191. Carbondale: IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

-----, "Logic: The Theory of Inquiry," *The Later Works, 1925-1953: Volume 12, 1938*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, 1-528. Carbondale: IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

-----, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy." *The Middle Works, 1899-1924: Volume 10, 1916-1917*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, 3-48. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

-----, *The Problems of Men*. New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1946

Diepeveen, Leonard. *The Difficulties of Modernism*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.

Dudiak, Jeffrey. *The Intrigue of Ethics: A Reading of the Idea of Discourse in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas*. Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2001.

Duncan, Robert. *Bending the Bow*. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1968.

-----, *The Collected Early Poems and Plays,* edited by Peter Quartermain. .Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012.

-----, "The Homosexual in Society." *A Selected Prose*, edited by Robert J. Bertholf, 38-50. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1995.

-----, *The Opening of the Field*. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1960.

-----, "Rites of Participation." *A Selected Prose*, edited by Robert J. Bertholf, 97-137. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1995.

-----, *Roots and Branches*. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1964.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Second Edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Edelman, Lee. "The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 32 (1986): 95-114.

Eliot, T. S. *After Strange Gods*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1934.

-----, *The Complete Poems and Plays*. London: Faber and Faber, 2004.

-----, "The Metaphysical Poets." *Selected Essays*, 281-291. London: Faber and Faber, 1951.

-----, "Mr Barnes and Mr. Rowse." *The Criterion* 8 (1928): 690-691.

Ellingham, Lewis. "'The King's Two Bodies' from *Poet, Be Like God: Jack Spicer's Circle in San Francisco, 1956-1965*." *Line 7/8* (1986): 57-89.

-----, and Killian, Kevin. *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

Eskin, Michael. "Bakhtin on Poetry." *Poetics Today* 21 (2000): 379-391.

-----, *Ethics and Dialogue in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

-----, "Introduction: The Double "Turn" to Ethics and Literature." *Poetics Today* 25 (2004): 557-572.

-----, "On Ethics and Literature." *Poetics Today* 25 (2004): 573-594.

Falcetta, Jennie-Rebecca. "Acts of Containment: Marianne Moore, Joseph Cornell, and the Poetics of Enclosure." *Journal of Modern Literature* 29 (2006): 124-144.

Festenstein, Matthew. "John Dewey: Inquiry, Ethics, and Democracy." *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*. Edited by Cheryl Misak. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008: 87-109.

Finkelstein, Norman. 'The Case of Michael Palmer.' *Contemporary Literature* 29 (1988): 518-537.

-----, *On Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010.

-----, "Robert Duncan, Poet of the Law." *Sagetrieb* 2 (1983): 75-88.

Fischer, Barbara K. *Museum Meditations: Reframing Ekphrasis in Contemporary American Poetry*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006.

Fletcher, Angus. *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment and the Future of Imagination*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Fredman, Stephen. *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Gardiner, Michael. "Alterity and Ethics: A Dialogical Perspective." *Theory, Culture and Society* 13 (1996): 121-143.

Gardner, Thomas. *Regions of Unlikeness: Explaining Contemporary Poetry*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

Gilson, Annette. "Disseminating "Circumference": The Diachronic Presence of Dickinson in John Ashbery's "Clepsydra." *Twentieth Century Literature* 44 (1998): 484-505.

Gizzi, Peter. "Jack Spicer and the Practice of Reading." *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, edited by Peter Gizzi, 173-225. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

Golding, Alan. *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

Gonzalez, Francisco J. *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998.

Goldberger, Paul. "Frank Stella Architecture." *Frank Stella: Painting Into Architecture*, 11-32. New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007.

Green, Daniel. "Literature Itself: The New Criticism and Aesthetic Experience." *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (2003): 62-79.

Grossman, Paul. "Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics." *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, 368-381. Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Guilbaut, Serge. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Gurevitch, Zali. "The Tongue's Break Dance: Theory, Poetry, and the Critical Body." *The Sociological Quarterly* 40 (1999): 525-542.

Hand, Sean. *Emmanuel Levinas*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009.

Haynes, Deborah J. *Bakhtin Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts*. London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2013.

Heffernan, James. *The Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Hejinian, Lyn. *The Beginner*. Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2002.

-----, *The Fatalist*. Richmond, CA: Omnidawn Publishing, 2003.

-----, "Introduction." *The Language of Inquiry*, 1-6. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

-----, *My Life*, Revised Edition. Los Angeles, CA: Sun and Moon, 1987.

-----, "The Rejection of Closure." *The Language of Inquiry*, 40-58. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.

Herd, David. *John Ashbery and American Poetry*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Hickman, Ben. *John Ashbery and English Poetry*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Hill, Leslie. "'Distrust of Poetry:' Levinas, Blanchot, Celan." *MLN* 120 (2005): 986-1008.

Hirschkop, Ken. *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, Second Edition. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.

-----. "Why is God's Name a Pun? Bakhtin's Theory of the Novel in the Light of Theophilology." *The Novelness of Bakhtin: Perspectives and Possibilities*, edited by Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist, 53-70. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2001.

Howe, Susan. *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*. Hanover: NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.

-----, *Singularities*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1990.

Huntsperger, David. *Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry: Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, Hejinian*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Izenberg, Oren. *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Jay, Gregory S. "Discovering the Corpus." *T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, edited by Harold Bloom, 75-94. New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007.

Jenkins, Matthew G. *Poetic Obligation: Ethics in Experimental American Poetry* After 1945. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2008.

Jeffreys, Mark. "Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics." *PMLA* 110 (1995): 196-205.

Johnson, David K. *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. Chicago IL, The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Jovanic, Spoma & Wood, Roy V. "Speaking from the Bedrock of Ethics." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 37 (2004): 317-334.

Jung, Hwa Yol. "Bakhtin's Dialogical Body Politics." *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words*, edited by Michael Gardner and Michael Mayerfield Bell, 95-11. London: Sage Publications, 1998.

Kahn, Douglas. "John Cage: Silence and Silencing." *The Musical Quarterly* 81. (1997): 556-598.

Kalaidjian, Walter. "Transpersonal Poetics: Language Writing and the Historical Avant-Gardes in Postmodern Culture." *American Literary History* 3 (1991): 319-336.

Katz, Daniel. *The Poetry of Jack Spicer*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Katz, Jonathan D. "Identification." *Difference – Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, 49-70. Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1998.

-----, "John Cage's Queer Silence; Or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse." *GLQ* 5 (1999): 231-252.

Kaufman, Robert. Lyric's Expression: Musicality, Conceptuality, Critical Agency." *Cultural Critique* 60 (2005): 197-216.

Keenaghan, Eric. "Life, War, and Love: The Queer Anarchism of Robert Duncan's Poetic Action during the Vietnam War." *Contemporary Literature* 49 (2008): 634-659.

-----, "Vulnerable Households: Cold War Containment and Robert Duncan's Queered Nation." *Journal of Modern Literature* 28 (2005): 57-90.

Kemp, Jonathan. *The Penetrated Male*. Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2013.

Kostelanetz, Richard. "How To Be a Difficult Poet." *The Old Poetries and the New*, 87-110. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1981.

Kotz, Liz. *Words To Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.

Kropotkin, Peter. *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002.

Krueger, Joel W. "Levinasian Reflections on Somaticity and the Ethical Self." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 51 (2008): 603-626.

Lakoff, George. "Continuous Reframing," *A Guide to Poetics Journal: Writing in the Expanded Field 1982-1998*, edited by Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten, 111-118. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

Leavis, F. R. "How to Teach Reading." *Education and the University: A Sketch for an English School*, 105-140. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Lehman, David. *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1999.

Leja, Michael. *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*, translated by Michael B. Smith. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999.

-----, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985.

-----, "Ethics as First Philosophy," *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand, 75-87. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1989.

-----, "God and Philosophy." *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, 129-148. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996.

-----, "Is Ontology Fundamental." *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, 1-10. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996.

-----, "Language and Proximity." *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, 109-126. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.

-----, *Otherwise Than Being: or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998.

-----, "Paul Celan: From Being to Other." *Proper Names*, translated by Michael B. Smith, 40-46. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.

-----, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, 47-60. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.

-----, "The Poet's Vision." *Proper Names*, translated by Michael B. Smith, 127-139. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.

-----, "Poetry and Resurrection: Notes on Agnon." *Proper Names*, translated by Michael B. Smith, 7-16. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.

-----, "Reality and its Shadow." *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, 1-14. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.

-----, "The Servant and Her Master." *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand, 150-159. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1989.

-----, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

-----, "Wholly Otherwise," translated by Simon Critchley. *Re-Reading Levinas*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, 3-10. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Librett, Jeffrey S. "The Finitude of Method: Mourning Theory from the New Criticism to the New Vitalism." *Comparative Literature* 64 (2012): 121-149.

Lingis, Alphonso. *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Lipari, Lisbeth. "Rhetoric's Other: Levinas, Listening, and the Ethical Response." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 45 (2012): 227-245.

Logan, Williams. *Reputations of the Tongue: On Poets and Poetry*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999.

Loizeaux, Elizabeth Bergmann. *Twentieth Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Lolordo, Nick. "Charting the Flow: Positioning John Ashbery." *Contemporary Literature* 42 (2001): 750-774.

Luszczynska, Ana. "The Opposite of the Concentration Camp: Nancy's Vision of Community," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 5 (2005): 167-205.

Lyons, Graham. "Is the Qeendom Enough (without the Queen)?: Poetic Abdication in Robert Duncan and Laura Riding." *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*, edited by Stephen Collis & Graham Lyons, 89-106. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2012.

Matterson, Stephen. "The New Criticism." *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Patricia Waugh, 166-176. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Mazur, Krystyna. *Poetry and Repetition: Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2005.

Mc Donald, Henry. "Aesthetics as First Ethics: Levinas and the Alterity of Literary Discourse." *diacritics* 38 (2010): 15-41.

Mc Hale, Brian. *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004.

-----, "Poetry as Prosthesis." *Poetics Today* 21. (2000): 1-32.

-----, "Poetry Under Erasure." *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, edited by Eva Müller-Zettlemann and Margarete Rubik, 277-301. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.

Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

Michelis, Angelica. "Eat my Words: Poetry as Transgression." *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, edited by Eva Müller-Zettlemann and Margarete Rubik, 81-95. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.

Middleton, Peter. "The Contemporary Poetry Reading." *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 262-299. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Mikkonen, Kai. *The Plot Machine: The French Novel and the Bachelor Machines in the Electric Years (1880-1914)*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001.

Mildenberg, Ariane. "Through the Wrong End of the Telescope: Thresholds of Perception in Joseph Cornell, John Ashbery and Maurice Merleau-Ponty." *Joseph Cornell: Opening the Box*, edited by Jason Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor, 137-156. Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd, 2007.

Mileaf, Janine. *Please Touch: Dada and Surrealist Objects After the Readymade*. Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2010.

Misak, Cheryl. "The Reception of Early American Pragmatism." *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, edited by Cheryl Misak, 197-223. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Mitchell, W. T. J. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Mohanty, S.P. and Monroe, Jonathan. "John Ashbery and the Articulation of the Social." *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 36-63.

Monroe, Johnathan. *A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.

Monte, Steven. *Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French and American Literature*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

Morgan, Michael M. *Discovering Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Morris, Daniel. "Responsible Viewing: Charles Simic's Dime Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell." *Papers on Language and Literature* 34 (1998): 337-357.

Morrissey, Belinda. "The Ethical Foundation of Performativity." *Social Semiotics* 15 (2005): 165-184.

Mossin, Andrew. "Unveiling Expectancy: Nathaniel Mackey, Robert Duncan, and the Formation of Discrepant Subjectivity." *Callaloo* 23 (2000): 538-562.

Müller-Zettelmann, Eva. "'A Frenzied Oscillation:' Auto-Reflexivity in the Lyric." *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric*, edited by Eva Müller-Zettlemann and Margarete Rubik, 125-145. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.

Murphy, Margueritte S. *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*. Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*, translated by Peter Connor, et al. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Nealon, Christopher S. *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Nealon, Jeffrey T. *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.

North, Joseph. "What's "New Critical" about "Close Reading"? I. A. Richards and His New Critical Reception. *New Literary History* 44 (2013): 141-157.

O'Hara, Frank. "Letter to John Ashbery, 7 January 1960," in David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Oberprantacher, Andreas. "Beyond Rivalry? Rethinking Community in View of Apocalyptical Violence." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture* 17 (2010): 175-187.

Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse." *Collected Prose*, edited by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander, 239-249. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.

Palmer, Michael. "Active Boundaries: Poetry at the Periphery." *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*, 207-225. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008.

-----,"Autobiography, Memory and Mechanisms of Concealment." *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*, 267-292. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008.

-----,"Bad to the Bone: What I Learned Outside." 2002 Lecture at Jack Kerouac Centre of Disembodied Poetics. <https://archive.org/details/Michael_Palmer_lecture_Bad_to _the_bone_02P009> Accessed 18th May 2014.

-----, *Blake's Newton*. Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1972.

-----, *The Circular Gates*. Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1974.

-----, *Codes Appearing: Poems 1979-1988*. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2001.

-----, "Counter-Poetics and Poetic Practice." *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*, 237-266. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008.

-----, "'Dear Lexicon:' An Interview by Benjamin Hollander and David Levi Strauss." *Acts* 5 (1986): 8-36.

-----, "Figures in Space." *Places* 2 (1984): 55-58.

-----, "From the Notebooks." *19 New American Poets of the Golden Gate*, edited by Philip Dow, 342-350. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1984.

-----, "Interview: Conducted by Peter Gizzi." *The Exact Change Yearbook No. 1*. edited by Peter Gizzi, 161-179. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995.

-----, "Interview: Conducted by Keith Tuma." *Contemporary Literature* 30 (1989): 1-12.

-----, "Interview: Conducted by Lee Bartlett, *Talking Poetry: Conversations in the Workshop with Contemporary Poets*, 126-143. Albuquerque, NM: New Mexico University Press, 1987.

-----, "Interview: Conducted by Michael Gardner." Interviewed by Thomas Gardner. *Regions of Unlikeness: Explaining Contemporary Poetry*, 272-291. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

-----, "Jubilat Interview." *Jubilat* 1 (2000): 108-33.

-----, "A Language of the Unsayable: Some Notes on Irving Petlin." *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*, 156-178. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008.

-----, "Octavio Paz: Circulations of the Song." *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*, 104-121. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008.

-----, "On Robert Duncan." *American Poet* (1997) <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/ poets/m_r/palmer/palmeronduncan.htm> Accessed: 3rd August 2015.

-----, "On Robert Duncan's *Ground Work.*" *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*, 18-27. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008.

-----, "On the Sustaining of Culture in Dark Times." *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*, 28-44. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008.

-----, "Poetic Obligations (Talking About Nothing at Temple)." *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*, 83-103. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008.

-----, "Poetry and Contingency: Within a Timeless Moment of Barbaric Thought." *Active Boundaries: Selected Essays and Talks*, 47-60. New York, NY: New Directions Books, 2008.

-----, "Review: Shadow Train," in Lee Bartlett *The Sun Is But a Morning Star*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.

-----, "The River City Interview with Michael Palmer." Interviewed by Paul Naylor, Lindsay Hill and J. P. Craig. *River City* 14 (1994).

-----, *Without Music*. Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1977.

Patterson, David. "Mikhail Bakhtin and the Dialogical Dimensions of the Novel." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44 (1985): 131-139.

Pearce, Lynne. *Reading Dialogics (Interrogating Texts)*. London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1994.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers Volume 5: Pragmatism and Pragmaticism* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935.

Peperzak, Adriaan. *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Difference and Discipline: the Cage/Cunningham Aesthetic Revisited." *Contemporary Music Review* 31 (2012): 19-35.

-----, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*. Tuscaloosa, AL: Alabama University Press, 2004.

-----, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Persin, Margaret H.. *Getting the Picture: The Ekphrastic Principle in Twentieth Century Spanish Poetry*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997.

Pickering, Edward D. "The Roots of New Criticism." *Southern Literary Journal* 41 (2008): 93-108.

Pinchevski, Amit. "The Ethics of Interruption: Toward a Levinasian Philosophy of Communication." *Social Semiotics* 15 (2005): 211-234.

Plato. "Republic X," *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, Fourth Edition, edited by S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd and C. D. C. Reeve, 616-641. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011.

Quartermain, Peter. *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis to Susan Howe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Ransom, John Crowe. *The New Criticism*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941.

Reddy, Srikanth. *Changing Subjects: Digressions in Modern American Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Retallack, Joan. *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art Music*. Honover, NH: University of New England Press, 1996.

-----, "The Poethical Wager." *The Poethical Wager*, 21-46. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

-----, "Poethics of a Complex Realism." *The Poethical Wager*, 198-221. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Otherwise: A Reading of Emmanuel Levinas's 'Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence." *Yale French Studies* 104 (2004): 82-99.

Riera, Gabriel. "'The Possibility of the Poetic Said' in *Otherwise than Being* (Allusion, or Blanchot in Levinas)." *Diacritics* 34 (2004): 14-36.

Rosenblatt, Louis M. "The Poem as Event." *College English* 26 (1964): 123-128.

Roth, Moira. "The Aesthetics of Indifference." *Difference – Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, 33-48. Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1998.

Rothenberg, Jerome and Tedlock, Dennis. "Statement of Intention" *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics* 1 (1970): 1-2.

Rothfield, Philipa. "Differentiating Phenomenology and Dance." *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, edited by Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea, 303-318. Oxon: Routledge, 2010.

Sanyal, Deberati. *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form*. Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Santilli, Kristine S. *Poetic Gesture: Myth, Wallace Stevens, and the Desirous Motions of Poetic Language*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.

Scholes, Robert. *Protocols of Reading*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.

Schultz, Susan M. "Introduction." *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*. edited by Susan M. Schultz, 1-11. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1995.

Schwarz, Daniel R. "Performative Saying and Ethics of Reading: Adam Zachary Newton's 'Narrative Ethics.'" *Narrative* 5 (1997): 188-206.

Schwenger, Peter. "The Dream Narratives of Debris." *SubStance* 32 (2003): 75-89.

Scott, Joan W. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Selinger, Eric. "Important Pleasures and Others: Michael Palmer, Robert Johnson." *Postmodern Culture* 4 (1994) <<Accessed: http://www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/24/important-pleasures-and-others-michael-palmer-ronald-johnson/>. Accessed: 14th January 2015.

Setina, Emily. "From "Impossible" Writing to a Poetics of Intimacy: John Ashbery's Reading of Gertrude Stein." *Genre* 45 (2012): 143-166.

Shapiro, David. *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1979.

Shepherd, David. "Bakhtin and the Reader," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, edited by Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, 136-154. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.

Shoptaw, John. "Lyric Cryptography." *Poetics Today* 21 (2000): 221-262.

-----, *On the Outside Looking Out*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Shultis, Christopher. "Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the Intentionality of Nonintention." *The Musical Quarterly* 79 (1995): 312-350.

Silliman, Ron. *The Age of Huts (Compleat)*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.

-----, *The New Sentence*. New York, NY: Roof Books, 2003.

Simpson, Megan. *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Slinn, E. Warwick. "Poetry and Culture: Performativity and Critique." *New Literary History* 30. (1999): 57-74.

Sparshott, Francis. "The Philosophy of Dance: Bodies in Motion, Bodies at Rest." *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, edited by Peter Kivy, 276-290. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004.

Spicer, Jack. *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, edited by Peter Gizzi. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

Stam, Robert. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Stein, Gertrude. "Composition as Explanation," *A Stein Reader*, edited by Ulla E. Dydo, 493-503. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993.

Steiner, George. "On Difficulty." *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, 18-47. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Talisse, Robert. "Pragmatism and the Cold War." *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, edited by Cheryl Misak, 254-268. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Tarlow, Sarah. *Ritual, Belief and the Dead in Early Modern Britain and Ireland.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Tiupa, Valerii. "The Architectonics of Aesthetic Discourse." *The Contexts of Bakhtin: Philosophy, Authorship, Aesthetics*, edited by David Shepherd, 95-107. Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1998.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

Tyler May, Elaine. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008.

Vermeulen, Pieter. "Community and Literary Experience in (Between) Benedict Anderson and Jean-Luc Nancy." *Mosaic* 42 (2009): 95-111.

Vice, Sue. *Introducing Bakhtin*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.

Vincent, John Emil. *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Waldman, Diane. *Joseph Cornell*. New York, NY: George Braziller Inc, 1977.

Walhout, Mark. "The New Criticism and the Crisis of American Literature: The Poetics of the Cold War." *College English* 49 (1987): 861-871.

Ward, Geoff. *Language Poetry and the American Avant-Garde*. Keele: Ryburn Press/British Association of American Studies, 1993.

-----, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

Wasserman, Roseanne and Richie, Eugene. "'Curious Resemblances:' John Ashbery Translates French Poetry," *Collected French Translations: Poetry*, edited by Rosanne Wasserman and Eugene Richie, xix-xlv. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014.

Waters, William. "Poetic Address and Intimate Reading: The Offered Hand." *Poetry and Dialogism: Hearing Over*, Ed. Mara Scanlon and Chad Engbers, 97-122. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Watten, Barrett. "The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E between Discourse and Text.' *Poetics Today* 20 (1999): 581-627.

-----,"The Turn to Language and the 1960s." *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2002): 139-183.

Weaver, Andy. "Divining the Derivers: Anarchism and the Practice of Derivative Poetics in Robert Duncan and John Cage." *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*, edited by Stephen Collis & Graham Lyons, 189-210. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2012.

-----, "Promoting "a community of thoughtful men and women": Anarchism in Robert Duncan's *Ground Work* Volumes." *ESC* 34 (2008): 71-95

Wellek, René. "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra." *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1978): 611-624.

-----, and Warren, Austin. *Theory of Literature*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949.

Wershler-Henry, Darren. *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Williams, David-Antoine. "Tête-à-Tête, Face-à-Face: Brodsky, Levinas and the Ethics of Poetry. *Poetics Today* 30 (2009): 207-235.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *The Blue and Brown Books*. New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1958.

-----, *Culture and Value*, translated by Peter Winch. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984.

-----, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. Mc Guinness. Oxon: Routledge, 2001.

Woodcock, George. *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2004.

-----, *Anarchy or Chaos*. London: Freedom Press, 1944.

Woods, Tim. *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Contemporary American Poetry*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Wordsworth, William. "Intimations of Immortality," *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. V: 1806-1815*, 52-62. New York, NY: Cosimo, Inc, 2008.

Wright, Tamra, Hughes, Peter and Ainley, Alison. "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas." *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, 168-180. London: Routledge, 2002.

Wrighton, John. *Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.

Zawacki, Andrew. "'Relation Without Relation:' Palmer, Celan, Blanchot" *New German Critique* 91 (2004): 117-128.

Zukofsky, Louis. *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, Volume 1. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1963.

-----, "Bottom, *a weaver*." *Prepositions+: The Collected Critical Essays*, edited by Charles Bernstein and Mark Scroggins, 167. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

-----, "Interview [with L. S. Dembo]." *Prepositions+: The Collected Critical Essays*, edited by Charles Bernstein and Mark Scroggins, 229-246. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

-----, "An Objective." *Prepositions+: The Collected Critical Essays*, edited by Charles Bernstein and Mark Scroggins, 12-18. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

-----, "A Statement for Poetry." *Prepositions+: The Collected Critical Essays*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000. pp. 19-23.