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Reading Close Reading: Twentieth-Century Criticism, Twenty-First-Century Poetry

by

Charles David Legere

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Lyn Hejinian, Chair

Assistant Professor Eric Falci

Professor George Lakoff

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Abstract

Reading Close Reading: Twentieth-Century Criticism, Twenty-First-Century Poetry

by

Charles Legere

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Lyn Hejinian, Chair

In the prevailing critical reading paradigm, poetry is an exceptional instance of language that projects its own world. Cleanth Brooks holds that a poem should be read as if it were in “dramatic context”: any effects the poem might have only apply as if on stage. This dramaturgical metaphor frees poetry of obligation to verisimilitude, and suggests an orientation that Theodor Adorno then construes into a politics: poetry stands so resolutely apart from society as to repudiate it. But the figure also predetermines that the relation between poetry and its immediate referents will be universally vicarious: poets and readers only engage with their worlds through what Kenneth Burke calls “identification,” which Paul DeMan darkly extrapolates into the state of all language, a “linguistic predicament” also known as “death.” We can only *imagine* doing something in a poem, never actually do it.

In my dissertation, I read eight twenty-first-century poems—Vanessa Place’s *Statement of Facts*, Ben Lerner’s *Angle of Yaw*, Juliana Spahr’s *The Transformation*, Rob Fitterman’s “The Goths,” M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, Claudia Rankine’s “Situation #1,” Bhanu Kapil’s *Humanimal*, and Lisa Robertson’s “Face/”—in which the poets try to reclaim agency for poetry by performing poetic acts of reading that mimic or parody the “dramatic” metaphor in poetry criticism. I cast these poets’ interventions into twentieth-century institutional, disciplinary, and pedagogical history into relief by the poems with four reading methodologies—close reading, contextualization, historicization, and lyricization—in each of my chapters. In my readings, I attend to these poems’ direct repercussions—the ways they move their readers; I argue that by pushing back on their readers’ readings, contemporary poets are working to re-claim political efficacy for poetry.

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

I dedicate this work in memory of Louise Babin Légère, my mémère. Before she came to the United States in 1942, she taught school in a one-room schoolhouse in Canada, where, as told me, she disliked having to teach English to her fellow francophone Acadians. I am sure she would have preferred I had written on her favorite subject, algebra, but I think she would be proud anyhow, and insist on reading this.

I thank my dedicated readers, Lyn Hejinian, Eric Falci, Robert Hass, and George Lakoff, for their tutelage, resistance, guidance, skepticism, wisdom, and occasional forbearance. It has been such a privilege to be able to run ideas by Geoffrey O'Brien, Christopher Nealon, Charles Altieri, Kent Puckett, Dan Blanton, Katie Snyder, Sue Schweik, Colleen Lye, Robert Kaufman, Mitch Breitwieser, Catherine Gallagher, Abdul JanMohamed, Shannon Jackson, Joanna Picciotto, and Elizabeth Abel at Berkeley, as well as Juliana Spahr at Mills, Brenda Hillman at St. Mary's, and Virginia Jackson at Tufts. I thank Henry Abelove, Phyllis Rose, and Annie Dillard, my mentors at Wesleyan, for what in retrospect seems like a particularly open-handed faith in me. I also thank fellow students, artists, and colleagues Matthew Rahaim, Hillary Gravendyk, Dan Thomas-Glass, Jasper Bernes, Chris Mead, Jennifer Scappettone, Katie Simon, Julia Bloch, Natalia Cecire, and Sarah Townsend for all our various conversational exchanges that fed pointedly or tangentially into my project. Also: Ian Wheeler-Nicholson, for help with words, and Jason Pontius, for giving me an awesome place to work.

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Closest to my heart, I thank you, Louisa, for your love and support.

Introduction

Dear Reader...

I want to make a case that we close read poems as coherent sets of choices with consequences. In my dissertation, I close read eight twenty-first-century works of poetry that all contain scenes of reading: Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts*, Ben Lerner's *Angle of Yaw*, Juliana Spahr's *The Transformation*, Rob Fitterman's "The Goths," M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, Claudia Rankine's "Situation #1," Bhanu Kapil's *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children*, and Lisa Robertson's "Face/." In their poems, these poets anticipate, absorb, and try to take responsibility for the reading of their writing. To do so, contradictorily, they have to rebuff reading, at least in part: they continually undermine the reader's point-of-view and perspective, cut-and-paste sections of text wholesale from other contexts, appropriate the jargon of criticism and theory, and impersonate reading protocols, all to frustrate a twentieth-century Anglo-American academic poetry critical paradigm that would frame poems as inert linguistic artifacts. In short, these poets baffle close reading in order to press us to do more with it.

In my first chapter, I provide an etymology of close reading, which, over the course of the twentieth century, went from a spatial descriptor for the proximate scrutiny of tiny print to a technique for integrating a poem's parts into an idea of its entirety. This shift coincided with a change in its function as a part of speech: close reading became the name or noun for a distinct and portable activity, so that we *do* a close reading. The nominalization also migrated into a verb form, where it shorthanded an entire complicated history of the theoretical conceit of poetry's separability: we do not closely read or read closely, but *close read* a poem. Throughout this project, I retain this orthography ("close read" without a hyphen); I do not want to discard close reading, but expand it. I believe that the twenty-first-century poetry I examine requires that I mine the established critical and academic terminology for its ongoing applicability, value, and irony. The irony being that when we close read poems, we often disregard what they are about.

The twenty-first-century poems I read in this project are all about their and our present-day contexts, and subsequently demand a mode of reading that can account for what happens when material—source-text, medium, reader and reading—migrates between the putative inside of the poem and outside. I respond in what follows by attending not only to what these poems *are*—their concrete formal particulars—but also what they *do*: I look at their effects, whether realized or frustrated, advertent or unwitting, immediate or second-hand. I oppose any kind of reading that would underestimate the poet's or poem's efficacy by assuming that poetry is merely an end-product of its context, the vector or vehicle of social, political, and/or institutional forces, or one concrete example of an aesthetic archetype. Because my goal in this project is to model a way of reading poetry that gives it credit for its agency, relevance, and power, I close read these poems by attending to how they move their readers—me, and you.

*

This entails reading through a predominant figure for reading in twentieth-century poetry criticism, one which is intimately tied to close reading and formalism: the theater. In my first chapter, I write about this metaphor's pre-history in a pedagogical experiment in poetry reading I.A. Richards first performed as "field work" for his 1929 book *Practical Criticism*: Richards clipped the authors' names off of poems, distributed them to his Cambridge undergraduates,

solicited their readings, and collected and collated them (3). Richards attests that he only uses these artificially anonymous poems as an expedient or “suitable bait” to draw out telling responses, and he takes the many clichéd readings he collects from his undergraduates as a sign of just how much work is needed to clarify perception, expression, and thought (3,4). The program for global clarity and literacy that Richards begins to spell out in *Practical Criticism* (and which he would later elaborate in his work promulgating “Basic English” as a universal language) was beside the point for later poetry critics. They picked up instead on two aspects of Richards’ experiment: the conditions of isolation for reading, and reading’s inevitable insufficiency to its object.

In his 1938 essay “Narcissus as Narcissus.” Allen Tate turns Richards’ experimental conditions—the poem out-of-context—into an empirical baseline for reading: all we have to go on is the poem at hand, static on the page. Thus, in an exemplary reading of his own “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” Tate is forced to conclude that due to the nature of poetry reading, the author’s thoughts and ideas—in this case, *his own*—are inaccessible to the reader (17). In their 1938 textbook and anthology *Understanding Poetry*, the different editions of which I analyze in chapter two, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren emphasize that the reader of poetry needs to start with the poem on the page, irrespective of its effects (ix). In his 1947 *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks recasts this article of faith with a theatrical figure, asserting that we should always read poetry as if it were in “dramatic context”—on an imaginary stage, separated out from ordinary language. The figure of the theater frees poetry from fidelity to verifiability, so that the poem only needs to work within the context of the stage—“as poetry,” as Brooks and Warren phrase it (ix). Brooks’ coupling of alleged empirical fact (*via* Richards) with a metaphor of theatricality also captures what he calls poetry’s essential “paradox”: only what is physically present of the poem is available for reading, yet even that is an act.

Nevertheless, the figure is strained even from the outset, since, for one, both theater and poem require audience or reader credulity. And, as Richards’ experiment demonstrates, readers have variable tastes. So, in his 1954 book *The Verbal Icon*, W.K. Wimsatt expands “dramatic context” to incorporate an imaginary “dramatic reader,” suggesting we read as if we were looking over an ideal reader’s shoulder (xv). Even as Wimsatt tries to include the reader in what he calls a “total experience or total knowledge” of poetry, he carries forward an exclusivity particular to Brooks’ version of the dramaturgical metaphor, and pushes the poem’s real readers out of the scene (xvi). In the third edition of *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren try to address the value of poetry for that audience: they maintain that they had meant to imply right along that the poem in “dramatic context” can have real ethical and political implications for its audience. Still, these effects always come at a remove. If we buy that close reading provides an edifying experience in itself, then the method effectively reverse-engineers a contradictory presupposition: poetry requires close reading, to which it is always at heart inevitably unavailable. This is an existential crisis of poetry, which, for Tate, dramatizes the total and irremediable “cut-off[-ness]” which pertains at all levels: poem, poet, “I” of the poem, and reader (x).

*

John Ashbery absorbs the dramaturgical metaphor from poetry criticism into his 1977 poem “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” in order to call its bluff. “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” is a poetic re-casting of a drama: Chuck Jones’ 1953 *Merrie Melodie* cartoon “Duck Amuck.” In

Jones' cartoon, Daffy arrives on-stage (so to speak) dressed as a musketeer, only to find the scenery around him ill-suited to his costume. When Daffy protests, the backdrop gets switched out, but he finds himself equally out of place. Throughout the cartoon, Daffy grows increasingly infuriated as he finds himself plunked down over and over in a series of settings—a barnyard, an arctic igloo setting, a Hawaiian island, and so on—for which he is never properly suited. The more loudly he complains, the more absurd his costumes and backdrop become. At his most discombobulated, Daffy finds himself in front of a childishly drawn cityscape with a flower-petal head, a flag for a tail, and flipper feet:

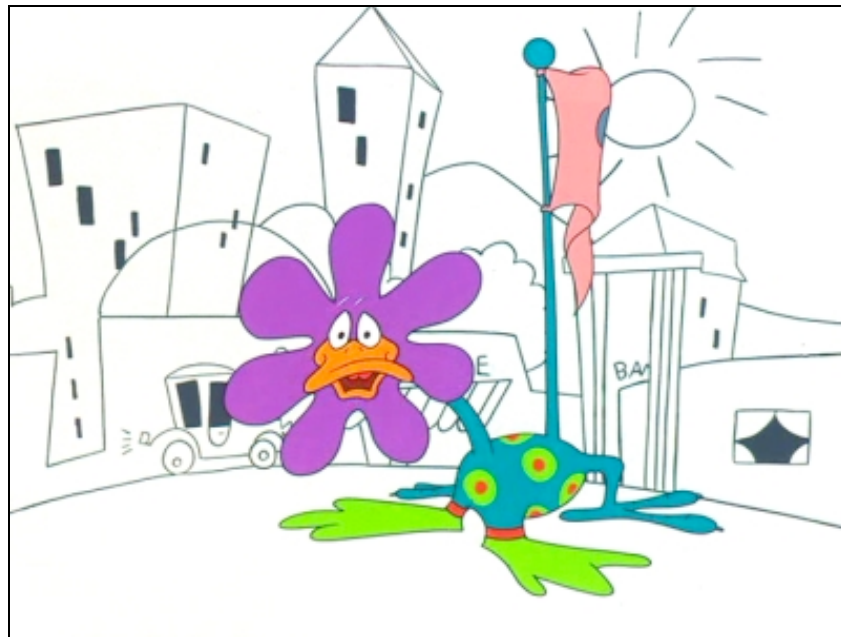


Fig. 1. From "Duck Amuck," 1953

At the end of the cartoon, as Daffy rages behind a door that has been drawn in front of him and then slammed shut, the viewer's perspective pans back to reveal that Bugs Bunny has been animating the cartoon all along. "Ain't I a stinker?" Bugs confides.

Ashbery flags his poem's affiliation to "Duck Amuck" with his title, and takes from it a rigorously repeated operation of de-contextualization. "Daffy Duck in Hollywood" is peppered with proper nouns that at first seem weighty or meaningful, but never do connect, relate, or come to mean anything. The first two sentences of Ashbery's poem:

Something strange is creeping across me.
 La Celestina has only to warble the first few bars
 Of "I Thought about You" or something mellow from
Amadigi di Gaula for everything—a mint-condition can
 Of Rumford's Baking Powder, a celluloid earring, Speedy
 Gonzales, the latest from Helen Topping Miller's fertile
 Escritoire, a sheaf of suggestive pix on greige, deckle-edged
 Stock—to come clattering through the rainbow trellis
 Where Pistachio Avenue rams the 2300 block of Highland
 Fling Terrace.

In much the same way that “La Celestina[’s]” song makes “everything” in the second sentence’s long parenthetical “come clattering,” Ashbery’s conjuring of an overabundance of particulars scatters readerly synthesis. Ashbery’s poem’s characteristic operation is to stymie its readers’ desire to place or fix details into an overarching reading. If we read “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” as an Ashberian *ars poetica*, it is one that sets art against interpretation: the poet’s task in Ashbery’s poem is to relentlessly undermine any overarching idea that the reader might try to form by scrambling the reader’s coordinates. “Ain’t I a stinker?,” Ashbery seems to reiterate.

The reading that “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” pits poetry against its readers. Even as readers do their best to tame a poem by integrating its details into a reading, the poem’s peculiarities consistently escape such subordination. The effect is to make the objects within it seem insignificant, fungible, and absurd: over the course of Ashbery’s 120-line-long poem, the litany of particulars shades into slapstick. In this reading, there is righteousness in Ashbery’s refusal: poetry refuses to be used in the service of any one overarching idea. But there is a self-defeating element to it, too. Ashbery brings his readers to the edge of an interpretive *mise en abîme*: any and all readings of the poem are foreordained to failure. In the end, the only appropriate reading of Ashbery’s poetry is a self-abnegating one: a burst of self-deprecating laughter or a resigned shrug in the face of poetry’s impenetrability.

In a 2010 piece called “The Future Continuous: Ashbery’s Lyric Mediacy,” poet Ben Lerner (whose poem “READING IS IMPORTANT...” I write about in both chapters one and two) says that Ashbery’s poetry “manages to describe the time of its own reading in the time of its own reading” so that “we experience mediacy immediately” (206, 203). If, as Brooks asserts, a poem is a “little drama,” and a poem’s words should be read in “dramatic context,” both Ashbery and the twenty-first-century poets I read in my dissertation like Ben Lerner self-consciously put their own reading on stage. These performances of reading deflates the dramaturgical metaphor that imputes to poetry the ability to generate its own context. Ashbery parodies Brooks’ metaphor of the drama of the poem, and dramatizes the failure Tate sees at every level—poem, poet, “I” of the poem, and reader—of poetry; Lerner, Place, Spahr, Fitterman, Philip, Rankine, Kapil, and Robertson pick up Ashbery’s thread. These poets parody and vacate the interpretive schema to press readers to read outside of it.

*

Nevertheless, if these twenty-first-century poets do aspire to escape the restrictions of academic close reading, why even engage it? By absorbing the language of literary criticism and theory, have they unwittingly flagged their own total absorption into the academy? I think not, because the poets I read in this project do not reject all of close reading, but an insidious distinction between poetry and everyday language. In *How to Do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin writes that literature cannot be apprehended as a “performative” instance of language because it is “insincere” or “parasitical” (22). The poets I write about pointedly collapse the distinction, so that literature is no longer a dismissable exception to language; poetry has full access to the persuasive, rhetorical, and effective power of everyday speech. There is a lot to be salvaged from close reading, such as the sustained attention to the workings of language. The twenty-first-century poets I read in my dissertation are ultimately trying to build on the foundation of close reading to activate it.

I am trying to do double-duty in this project by attending both to the ways these poems controvert their reading and the effects they have on their readers. Since poetry is figured in its

own way as limited, I am trying to attend to these poets' aspirations—what they want to do—as well as the disparity between their aspirations and their reality, what they actually do. In the first chapter, I address the formalist synecdochal tautology—that a poem's concrete particulars make up what W.K. Wimsatt calls its “total experience,” which is then unavailable except through its parts—by doing a reading of Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts* that connects each and every formal particular of her poem to its potential consequences. In my second chapter, I extend this re-vamping of close reading by addressing the way that close reading integrates local-level features into a universal archetype. Here, I examine Juliana Spahr's *The Transformation*, Rob Fitterman's “The Goths,” and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, focusing particularly on the way that poetry's local features have global political repercussions. In my third chapter, I take on a version of historicism that treats the poem as the end-product of its historical determinants, and offer readings of Claudia Rankine's “Situation #1” and Bhanu Kapil's *Humanimal* that show how their poems re-write, over-write, and controvert history. My fourth chapter is its own creature: my reading of Lisa Robertson's own lyric reading of her own “I” that writes against what Virginia Jackson calls “lyricization” (100).

The usual take on the New Critics has been to run them down for making poetry self-contained and apolitical—for “sever[ing]” poems “from both author and reader,” as Terry Eagleton writes in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (41). But over the course of this project, I have come to deeply respect the New Critics for their repeated efforts to clearly answer the question of what value poetry had to civic and political life. Still, the New Critics passed on a contradictory idea (which I retrace to the foundations of the discipline in my third chapter): that poetry's value to its immediate context derives from its extraordinary ability to transcend that context and create its own. This idea opens up readings of poems that respect their imaginative capacities, but makes poetry subject to its readers' willingness to buy into that conceit. It also makes poetry seem indirectly relevant at best.

At Berkeley, I have often begun my classes with an informal survey. I ask: who here is intimidated by poetry? The high-achieving Berkeley undergraduates, who more often than not aced their high school classes, took AP English, and got high scores on their SAT Verbal tests, more often than not, *all* raise their hands. Students have come to feel that poetry can only be read with professional training. The value of close reading is that it presses us to approach poems with an accentuated intensity and rigor of perception, and I am invested in showing why twenty-first-century poetry merits that close reading. But I think these poems also ask us to push farther than we have before: to do more with close reading. This will entail asking fundamental questions about poetry's value. The poems I write about are themselves about rape, globalization, race, colonialism, and human rights—all of the poets I write about have political agendas and ambitions. I claim in this dissertation that poems are charged with agency, and twenty-first-century poets exercise this agency first and foremost on their own reading, which is in itself a political intervention.

Chapter One

Beyond Close Reading

Poet Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts* consists in large part of descriptions of rape, and audiences react strongly when she reads it. In a 2010 interview in the newspaper *The Scotsman*, Place describes one such response.

There was a woman in London this past summer who became quite upset, she was sobbing in the bathroom for some time. Afterwards she confronted me about how I felt about having done that to her. I told her I hadn't done anything to her, she had had a reaction to a piece of writing. I'm holding up a mirror, making people look at their own reactions.

In her work as a lawyer, Place defends convicted sex offenders in appellate court; *Statement of Facts* is her legal writing, re-published nearly verbatim. The following disclaimer appears on the cataloguing information page of the recently published 430-page print-on-demand Blanc Press edition of *Statement of Facts*:

All quotations and accounts in this book were taken directly from the trial transcripts of cases that Vanessa Place handled on appeal. All these transcripts, and the appellate briefs filed in each case, are matters of public record. However, the names of the people herein, as well as other direct modes of identification, have been changed to protect their privacy. So, the text is, as Place herself says, a "self-appropriation" (Godston). But *Statement of Facts* is also an ethically complicated project, inasmuch as that it takes graphic accounts of other peoples' trauma and purports to present them as literature.

The jacket of the Blanc Press edition of Place's book offers that *Statement of Facts* is the first part of a trilogy called *Tragodia*, with *Statement of the Case* and *Argument* forthcoming. But the Blanc Press edition is not the first appearance of *Statement of Facts*. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith published a section of it in 2010 in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. The entirety was first published in translation as *Exposé des faits* by the French press *è@e* in 2010, as well as in an earlier excerpt from the same press titled *Tina n° 5*. Still earlier, in 2009, Ubu Editions published a 67-page excerpt online as a PDF in its "Publishing the Unpublishable" series. In other words, even though *Statement of Facts* does qualify as "unpublishable" due to its subject-matter, unusual length, and near-total lack of poetic characteristics, it has been thoroughly published. The text's publication is, I believe, its formal imperative.

Even though *Statement of Facts* has some precedent—Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* (1975) and *Holocaust* (1978), apply poetic effects like line-breaks and page-spacing to historical legal documents—Place's project is singular in that it does not alter its source material. In a different context—that is, if it were not published by Blanc, *è@e*, or Ubu—*Statement of Facts* would be and *is* legal document. So, I see *Statement of Facts* as raising two questions, formal and ethical. The first: if this text can rightly be called poetry, what makes it so? And then, what are the ethical consequences of presenting this text as poetry? These two intertwined questions coalesce into what I take to be the defining problematic for twenty-first-century poetry: namely, what are the ethics of poetic form?

In response, I argue in this chapter that we should close read form as a set of strategic choices motivated by their anticipated consequences. That is the positive formulation of my argument; the negative is against the kind of close reading that would subordinate all of a poem's

formal features to its whole. The logical premise for this kind of close reading is that poetry is an extraordinary instance of language that projects its own context. Cleanth Brooks calls this “dramatic context” in *The Well Wrought Urn*: he holds that we should read poetry as if it were on stage and set apart from everyday life (135). In Brooks’ figure, the poem’s particular features feed into its overall theatrical or poetic effect, a “total context” from which we readers are at a remove (154). In close reading, the poem remains beyond close reading. Likewise, when Place calls her text a “mirror,” she figures it as so opaque as to be reflective, and innocent of its repercussions. However, I think that *Statement of Facts* belies Place’s claim, undercuts the logic behind close reading, and presses its readers to rethink the ethics of formalism.

*

The problem is that formalism is a loaded term. We can see this in the terms of a debate that *Statement of Facts* recently sparked—a debate that grew out of a reading of the book in page proofs and even in advance of the publication of the Blanc Press edition. At the “Rethinking Poetics” conference organized by Bob Perelman and Michael Golston at Columbia in this last June of 2010, poet and conference attendee Stephanie Young reports on one of her blogs that Marjorie Perloff “ma[de] the comment, during a formalist reading of Vanessa Place’s forthcoming *Statement of Facts*, that the rape victims in the book are ‘at least as bad or worse than the rapists.’” Perloff then asked Young to post her reply on the blog:

I was NOT saying that anyone deserved to be raped or that the raped are no better than their rapists. That’s an egregious simplification. What Vanessa’s book shows, by the sheer evidence of the police reports and court documents is that the culture of rape is largely a socio-economic problem.

Perloff goes on to refer readers to Place’s forthcoming text (“Read the book!” she writes) for corroboration. On Young’s blog, many, many other poets and readers then reply to Perloff, mostly to condemn her and her reading, even in advance of the publication of the full-length English-language edition of *Statement of Facts*.

I want to try to get to the bottom of this condemnation, because I think *Statement of Facts* prompts us to re-think the way we read poetic form. The perception of a deep-seated problem with formalism comes out in the terms of the exchange: when Stephanie Young accuses Marjorie Perloff of doing a “formalist reading” of the poem, Perloff seems taken aback, and responds that Place’s book seems like “an interesting limit case” that begs the question of “whether or not it feels... [like] ‘poetry,’ and if so why, if not why not?” “If that’s formalist,” Perloff writes, “so be it.”

Statement of Facts is certainly, as Perloff says, a “limit case,” in that it has so little in the way of form, and is so deeply disturbing. But the “Rethinking Poetics” debate is probably more about formalism than Place’s text. Perloff sees the formal novelty of *Statement of Facts*: she would begin by reading its form, and use the content as means of addressing its formal status. This rankles poets the poets in the room who acutely feel the limitation that formalism imposes on their own work. The poets at the conference would rather set aside the question of text’s form to address its politics head-on.

I think both reactions are wrong. Both grow out of a context in which poetry is subject to a certain kind of close reading; neither connects form and consequences. The avowals and abuses of formalism both come out of the same poetry critical history of reading that I retrace in this chapter from its pre-history in I.A. Richards’ 1929 *Practical Criticism*, through its mid-century

emergence as a technical term, and into its eventual hardening into New Critical doctrine. To refute the formalist logic that a poem requires we read it in the context of poetry, I point out an oversight in Cleanth Brooks' famous reading of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn": that Keats' "Ode," like Place's *Statement of Facts*, is about rape. I draw on John Dewey's idea of form in *Art as Experience* to present an alternative way of reading in which form is credited with efficacy. Finally, I end with a poem by Ben Lerner that itself ends by smashing the figure of the "mirror" that Place defensively evokes in response to her critic, the sobbing woman. In this chapter, I offer a new way of close reading because the poets are prompting me to do so: in their poems, twenty-first-century poets push the logic of poetry criticism and theory as far as it will go.

*

In his 1964 essay "The Artworld," Arthur Danto provides a rubric for this kind of give-and-take of art with its theory by positing that what makes art art is little more than a mutual understanding among artists, critics, audiences, collectors, teachers, museums, and the like. "To see something as art," he writes, "requires something that the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (580). For Danto, what distinguishes a naïve viewer's and an art-savvy viewer's perception of Andy Warhol's 1964 *Brillo Boxes*, for example, is that Warhol's sculpture is enveloped in an "atmosphere of artistic theory" and informed by the "knowledge of the history of art." While a naïve viewer sees just Brillo boxes, an art-savvy viewer will recognize the way that Warhol's sculpture comes in the wake of an entire preceding history and theory of art. An art-savvy viewer could, for example, draw a line of opposition directly between Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*. "It is the theory," Danto writes, that prevents a work of art "from collapsing into the real object which it is" (581). The subtlest viewer will notice in addition that Warhol does not use "real" Brillo boxes, but copies—his plywood boxes are hand-painted, and somewhat larger than their originals—as if to make explicit the precarious quality that distinguishes works of art from "real object[s]." But artists post-Warhol like Vanessa Place *do* use "real object[s]," and the challenge for their critics is to figure out what makes that art art. Or perhaps you could say that the challenge for their audience is to figure out if we think their art really does qualify as art.

Danto's "artworld" takes us part way towards understanding how poets are writing through a whole history and theory of poetry, as embodied in criticism: when we read, we might as well assume that poets are aware of the terms of our critical apprehension. But twenty-first-century poets are trying to press beyond poetry criticism and their "artworld." That is to say, twenty-first-century poetry presses its close readers to go beyond the self-enclosed "world" of poetry and criticism to think about the alleged reality of extra-poetic "real object[s]." The constitutive difficulty of a text like Place's *Statement of Facts*—its condition of limitation—is not internal to it, but outward-facing. Close reading is one vehicle of twentieth-century poetry and poetry criticism's aesthetic strategy, but twenty-first-century poetry asks us to push beyond close reading to re-configure the relationship of poetry and the extra-poetic to apprehend a new aesthetic strategy. To do that, we have to understand where the fine line between the world of the poem and the world at large comes from: we have to re-trace a history of close reading.

*

“Close reading” has come to mean many different things to different people: its meaning, as Cleanth Brooks would point out, is context-specific. In the nineteenth century, before it signified a way of reading poetry, “close reading” was necessitated by myopia, claustrophobic, and headache-inducing; it referred to painstakingly picking out abstruse prose, and hovering over a book to make out small print. The OED cites Virginia Woolf’s 1938 use of the two words together in her diaries. “I think to fill in the time quietly by forcing myself to do a Horace Walpole sketch for America. Why not? It means close reading,” she writes. Woolf undoubtedly meant something quite different from what we now mean by close reading, and her diary betrays some distaste for the prospect. In her *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Virginia Jackson credits John Guillory for having traced a positive coinage of “close reading” to 1951, to Ruben Brower’s *The Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading*. Still, “close reading” must have been in some kind of circulation before that, because, in a 1948 address to the MLA, Douglas Bush (Helen Vendler’s teacher, who she thanks in her *Keats’ Odes*) identifies it by name to dismiss it for being insufficiently scholarly. He writes: “The new critics’ close reading of poetry has braced the flaccid sinews of this generation of readers and has had *some* highly beneficial effects upon teaching and writing” (13). At some point in the mid-twentieth century, close reading became a word to connote a way of looking at a poem as an object in isolation—in almost experimental conditions. This is the first of two transformations of the term: the practice calcified into method and the predication shifted so that “reading closely” became doing a “close reading.” Close reading really came into its own after a second development, the dropping away of its own provenance: at some point, the method became self-justifying, and was taken as an affirmation of poetry’s exceptional linguistic status. The emergence of the term coincided, that is, with a major shift in the theory of poetry, and subsequent transformation in poetry’s reading. Still later, close reading would come to variously mean a reading that honors texture, focuses on literariness, pays attention to particulars, or puts language in context. I am interested in looking at the close reading that resides between these different manifestations, an average of close reading, or an intertextual manifestation of it—which has its origins in I.A. Richards’ 1929 book *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*.

*

Even though I.A. Richards could be said to have pioneered close reading, he neither close read himself, nor invented the term. *Practical Criticism* was Richards’ experiment in poetry reading: he distributed mimeographed handouts of poems with the authors’ names removed to his Cambridge undergraduates, and collected their responses, which he called “protocols.” He then used these protocols to identify patterns of misreading: “stock responses,” “flabby thoughts,” “irrelevancies,” “moral objections,” “technical presuppositions and arbitrary renderings,” “vacuous resonances,” “sentimentality,” “preconceptions,” and “over-literal reading” (vii-xii). Richards names these pitfalls to advocate for a more rigorous and objective way of reading poetry. His further goal was general and global clarity of thinking and communicating. In the introduction to *Practical Criticism*, Richards describes his “three aims”:

First to introduce a new kind of documentation to those who are interested in the contemporary state of culture whether as critics, as philosophers, as teachers, as psychologists, or merely as curious persons. Secondly, to provide a new technique for

what those who wish to discover for themselves what they think and feel about poetry (and cognate matters) and why they should like or dislike it. Thirdly to prepare the way for educational methods more efficient than those we use now in developing discrimination and the power to understand what we hear and read (3).

So, on the one hand, *Practical Criticism* is a pure experiment with poetry; it is also, as Richards himself says, “field-work in comparative ideology.” Richards’ proto-close-reading differs markedly from what would become close reading, in that for him, not an end, but a means to ascertaining “ideology.” Richards continues on to write that “poetry is a central and typical denizen of this world” and that it is,

eminently suitable *bait* for anyone who wishes to trap the current opinions and responses in this middle field for the purpose of examining and comparing them, and with a view to advancing our knowledge of what may be called the natural history of human opinions and feelings...

In other words, having taken stock of the then-current state of the idea of poetry, and the way people read it, Richards finds it insufficient. His privileged Cambridge undergraduates have sloppy and presumptuous takes on the poem: they think of poetry as memorable snippets with readily available moral messages which can be peppered into conversation to show their education, class, taste, and refinement. Yet they rarely understand the lines they quote. For all of the prevalence of poetry, our ideas about it are muddled. Richards points to this imprecision as a way of pressing for clarity of thought—he would have readers jettison the baggage of sedimented associations, cliché, and received wisdom. And this does not just apply to poetry: as Rodney Koenecke explains in *Empires of the Mind: Basic English in China, 1929–1979*, Richards (along with C.K. Ogden) invented and promulgated an 850-word “Basic English” as a universal language.

Still, some of the language that would later prove useful in detailing the methodology of close reading is already present in *Practical Criticism*. For one, “reading.” In the introduction, Richards defines a “reading”:

I asked each writer to record on his protocol the number of ‘readings’ made of each poem. A number of perusals made at one session were to be counted together as one ‘reading’ provided that they aroused and sustained one single growing response to the poem, or alternatively led to no response at all and left the reader with nothing but the bare words before him on the paper. This description of a ‘reading’ was, I believe, well understood (4).

In this way, Richards helps bring about a shift of predication, so that “reading” becomes a product, an objective of the apprehension of the poem. What we can see here is the collapsing of several different occasions of reading through a poem into one statement about what the reader takes from or makes of the poem, one “reading.” Richards was trying to find his way through variant reading practices into a right reading.

Richards also uses the word “close,” although in an instructively different way from what it would later become. Among the poems Richards hands out to his subjects is D.H. Lawrence’s “The Piano,” which he seems to be at pains to show is a poem, and a good one. Here, Richards faults the protocol-writers for the lack of “closeness of reading” they practice. Most of the student protocol writers have failed to stay closely enough to the literal meaning of the lines. From Lawrence’s poem:

A child is sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings....
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

In this case, for Richards, a right reading hinges on the careful distinction between “tingling and tinkling,” the meanings of which take shape contextually.

In subject, in metre, in treatment, in diction, in every *isolatable* character, the poem almost pressingly invites condemnation on the score of gross sentimentality (105, his emphasis).

In their readings, many of Richards’ protocol-writers fault Lawrence’s poem for describing the piano as variously tingling, tinkling, and booming. In response, he writes:

Always, in looking over these protocols, it is illuminating to compare the type of comment with the closeness of the reading evinced. So particular attention here may be invited to the fact that 8.13 [the protocol writer] has not noticed any difference between ‘tingling’ and ‘tinkling,’ he has not even observed which word is used when. It would be superfluous to expect him to have considered whether the closeness of the child’s ear to the strings might have anything to do with the character of the sounds, or whether, when the children stand up to sing, a ‘tinkling’ would not then replace ‘the boom of the tingling strings’ (106).

In a footnote, Richards adds: “A quite simple experiment will settle these points. ‘Tingling’ of course, is the vibration. The vividness of the poet’s memory is remarkable.” For Richards, the protocol writers’ massed failure to suitably grasp Lawrence’s carefully chosen words for vibrations is nearly a failure of reserve. He writes:

The writer feels the danger of misreading the verse form, but though not coming close enough, imaginatively, to ‘the boom of the tingling strings’ and through not working out the contrasts in the poem, he is victimized by his imparted rhythm in the end. Since the poem does not turn out to be what he expected, he does not take the trouble to find out what it is (111).

Here, Richards is trying to counteract what he sees as complacently moralistic tendencies of the protocol writers—their “strictures.”

A reader who can think the woman is singing—‘softly, in the dusk’—on a concert platform has not managed to approach very closely to the poem, and his strictures are less binding for that reason (113).

In Richards’ reading of the readings, the protocol-writers reveal that they are being blocked by their false ideas, their common misconceptions—that they are letting their prejudices get in the way of their readings.

Richards’ corrective is akin to close reading inasmuch as that he advocates a more rigorous and specialized mode of reading. He says dismissively that one of the respondents is summing everything up, like a newspaper reader: “We shall frequently notice the influence of this summary, ‘newspaper’ type of reading in what follows,” he writes (106). Nevertheless, Richards’ negative model was not what we could identify as close reading: for Richards, “closeness of reading” means fidelity to literal meaning, the ability to take the poem’s words at their most basic level without jumping to conclusions. Richards’ “strictures” would themselves become close reading only in retrospect when Richards’ experiment—the way he removed the names from the authors’ poems—became the conditions of isolation for close reading. Richards modeled close reading as a practice in his experiment, even if he himself did not actually do it—rather, he pointed out his students’ inability to close read. Another foreshadowing of close reading: Richards knows right along who wrote which poem.

What was more important than the literal poem for Richards was the attitude or mode of thinking that the poem elicited. In his earlier (1925) *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Richards

goes so far as to attest that the poem as object can be thrown away—he calls it a “pseudopoem.” In a diagram from *Principles*, Richards shows how the words of the poem are not the proper object of analysis, but merely the occasion of the neural firings—attitudes and impulses—which the poem activates.

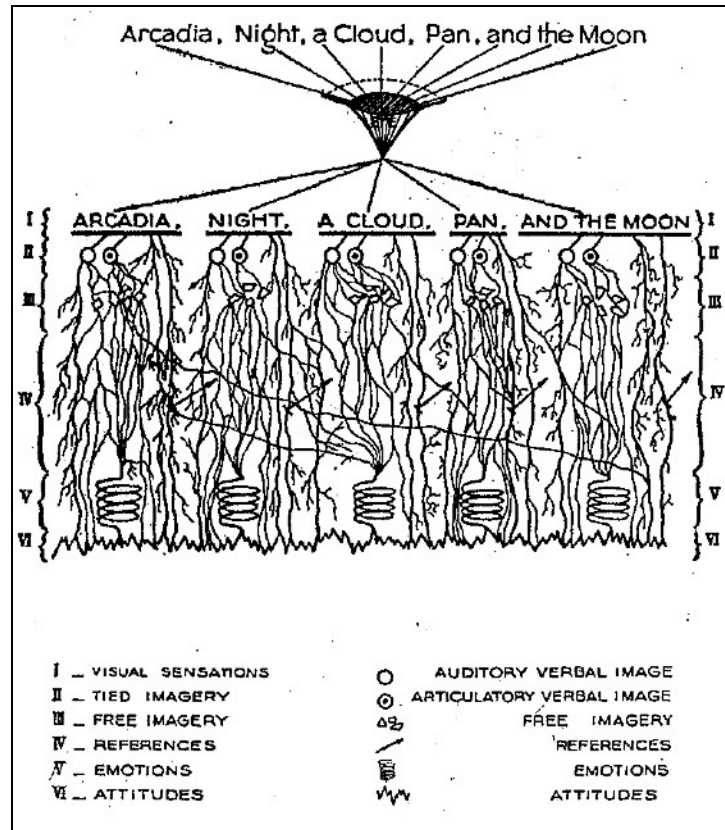


Fig 2. from Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism*, pg. 116

In Richards' diagram, the poem's words ("Arcadia...", from Browning's "Pan and Luna") pass through the eye where they are transformed from "visual sensations" into the higher cognitive functions: "emotions" and "attitudes." Here, the poem serves to straighten the neurological pathways of the mind and bolster its readers' abilities to build lucid and logical "attitudes." For Richards, the true poem lives not on the page but in the mind.

In *Practical Criticism*, Richards applies the "pseudopoem" to question of belief. He uses the final lines of Keats' 1820 "Ode on a Grecian Urn"—

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

—to point out the fallacy of reading a poem's words as the direct statement of its author's beliefs. He writes that,

There are very many people who, if they read any poetry at all, try to take all its statements seriously—and find them silly.... There are those who succeed too well, who swallow 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty...' as the quintessence of an aesthetic philosophy, not as the expression of a certain blend of feelings, and proceed into a complete stalemate of muddle-mindedness as a result of their linguistic naïvety (187).

Well aware that Keats' lines do not express a logical proposition, Richards asserts that their validity derives not from facticity but effect: how they make their readers "[feel]" about "beauty" and "truth." He then places this right reading of the poem as pseudopoem in a larger framework. In the book's last sentence, Richards explains the social value of the right reading of poetry:

The lesson of all criticism is that we have nothing to rely upon in making our choices but ourselves. The lesson of good poetry seems to be that, when we have understood it, in the degree in which we can order ourselves, we need nothing more (351).

What carries forward from Richards was this association of aesthetics with perfectability: poetry, he thought, corrects bad habits of mind, so we can communicate with each other clearly. In that state of correctness of reading, the material trace of the poem becomes transparent or non-existent—a therapeutic obviated by the patient's good health.

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Richards set the stage for a radical re-formulation of poetry's place in society: he set up a contrast with sloppy newspaper reading (and "message-seeking") because he wanted to use poetry to improve readership on the whole. Subsequent critics used Richards' contrast to focus on developing a specialized readership for poetry. To retrace the twentieth-century Literary Critical staking out of poetry's exceptionalism through its reading, I turn to a seminal close reading: Allen Tate's 1938 reading of his own "Ode to the Confederate Dead" in "Narcissus as Narcissus." Tate was an influential teacher at the University of Minnesota and Princeton—where, by the way, he attested that "people cannot be taught to write" ("We Read as Writers," 505). "Narcissus as Narcissus" is pedagogical, since Tate reads his own poem in order to model reading in general; it also offers a reading of his own self, and *the* self. The term that Tate settles on in this reading is "solipsism"—as he announces, his "Ode" is "'about' solipsism, a philosophical doctrine which says that we create the world in the act of perceiving it" (595). But that "perceiving" and "creat[ing]" are fraught: in Tate's account, the poet only knows himself, and despairs for the "failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society" (596). Tate recalls this specifically as a problem with the "experience" of the writing of the poem, pointing out that his own experience was his and his only, ineffable and incommunicable. In his "Ode," Tate laments the fact that the dead and the past can no longer speak to us; near the end of his poem, he grasps after an experiential "knowledge / Carried to the heart," only to find that that "knowledge" and "act" can never be put into words. ("What shall we say...?" he laments.) In the essay, Tate interprets his own "blind crab" from the "Ode" ("...You shift your sea-space blindly / Heaving, turning like the blind crab...") as an "intimation of the nature of the moral conflict upon which the drama of the poem develops: the cut-off-ness of the modern 'intellectual man' from the world" (598). Post-Richards, the New Critics frequently called upon these tropes of disability: they characterize both "man" and the poem as "blind," "cut-off," or "mute" (DeMan's "Autobiography," Brooks' *Well Wrought Urn*). So, the "solipsism" that Tate identifies in his "Ode" is not just a theme, it is a problem, a *crisis*, and a "failure... to function objectively" of the isolated, inarticulate "I." It falls to the poem, then, (whether the "Ode to the Confederate Dead" or *Statement of Facts*) to redeem that "failure," or contain it.

In "Narcissus as Narcissus," Tate invests poetry with an ontology so pronounced as to be isolating. For instance, when he says that his poem "is 'about' solipsism," Tate has to put quotation marks around "'about,'" because, in his mind, a poem cannot really properly be said to be "about" anything at all—a poem just *is*. Tate goes on to fine-tune his prepositions: "...as a

poet I am concerned with the experience of ‘solipsism.’ And an experience *of* it is not quite the same thing as a philosophical statement [—which Tate would not purport to making—] *about* it.” (596). Tate’s trouble with “about”-ness grows out of his idea of the poem’s artifactuality: a poem cannot properly be said to be “about” anything because all it is is an object. Tate, like other New Critics, says a poem is *just* a thing, *only* itself (the “poem as poem,” they called it, and “the poem itself”), and, as such, “[cut-off]” (Brooks and Warren, ix). To retain or contain the ineluctable singularity of its self, the poem becomes so distinctive as to be walled-off, self-enclosed, and “solipsistic.” According to Tate, there are no re-traceable lines of connection to or from the page, nor between the poet and his own world, nor the reader and that world, nor the reader’s own—the poem’s quiddity is so profound that it is “narcissis[ti]c.” Tate readily concedes that this stated inexplicability of the radical ontology of the poem is self-contradictory; “Experience means conflict...” Tate writes, and “conflict is always a logical contradiction, or philosophically an antinomy” (597). In addition to tropes of disability, New Critics like Tate were fond of Keats’ “negative capability”; they enshrined the states of uncertainty and inaction—the experience of “cut-off-ness” and the “cut-off-ness” of experience—in the poem absolutely. Although the level of extraordinariness that Tate and Brooks afford the poem is the sign of the highest respect, and assumes, for example, that ordinary language is incomparable to that of the poem, it also imposes a fundamental crisis on the poem. This kind of reading gets us to a point: it helps us see the bind into which the conditions of isolation that serve as close reading’s presupposition put the poem. But in “Narcissus as Narcissus,” Tate turns the state of in-between-ness—the “cut-off-ness” of “man” and its counterpart in the “solipsism” of the poem—into a defining, absolute, insoluble crisis.

This idea of “solipsism” is not Tate’s alone: it developed by fits and starts and hand-in-hand with twentieth-century poetry criticism. “Solipsism” is a version of Richards’ “pseudo-statement,” for one. To a man, the New Critics rejected Richards’ idea—it smacked to them of psychology, which they considered anathema to poetry—but they retained the procedure: the cutting away of the author’s name, with all of its implied politics, history, and context. Twentieth-century poetry critics bucked against the deterministic accounts of the self suggested by late-nineteenth-century historicist scholars like Hippolyte Taine, who wrote that the author is nothing but the product of his “*race, milieu, et moment*.” History was odious to the New Critics (and they claimed the title of “critics” to distinguish their project from that of the “scholars”) because historicist valuations of poems had often fallen back on the social status of the poets, or appealed to the authority of tradition. At the same time, in cutting away the author’s name and historical context to give ontological priority to the “poem itself,” the New Critics found themselves in a vicious circle. The very terms they came to attach to the poem—John Crowe Ransome’s “miracle,” Cleanth Brooks’ “paradox,” R.P. Blackmur’s focus on “irony,” William Empson’s “ambiguities,” and Tate’s “solipsism”—betray both their fascination with the intricacies and subtleties of the words on the page, and, their inability to explain the mystery of how these subtleties worked off the page. At first, a methodological shift to close reading provided a powerful tool to make the poem more explicit. But what started for Richards as an experiment and continued through the New Critics as a counter-principle later calcified into a rule; W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe’s Beardsley’s famous essays on the “Intentional” and “Affective Fallac[ies]” persuasively assert the unverifiability of any claims statements about a poem that begin or end off the page. For the early twentieth-century Literary Critics, this problem of reading the poem came to serve as an analogy for the crisis of modernity—the ennui, disaffection, and dissociation of the modern subject. Tate’s “solipsism” is not only a theory of

the subject, but a serious setback for reading; since there is no way to say anything about the vehicle for “solipsism” called the poem better than the poem itself, you might as well just repeat the poem verbatim. Tate, for his part, can hardly bear to read his own “Ode,” and writes: “One can no more find the quality of one’s own verse than one can find its value, and to try to find either is like looking into a glass for the effect that one’s face has upon other persons” (607). “Narcissus as Narcissus,” which is about the “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” is about a “solipsism” redoubled in reading. The poem—absolutely and categorically, because it is poetry—is fated to fall silent, and its reading, at a further remove, is only deepening silence.

For Tate, artificiality plus artifactuality translates into exceptional status for the language of the poem, as well as its speaker. The poem’s first person is unshackled or “[cut-off]” from “history,” “race, milieu, [and] moment,” and neither the “I” nor the poem are beholden to verifiability. “...In poetry, all things are possible,” writes Tate, “—if you are man enough” (597). Tate does not call what he does in “Narcissus as Narcissus” a “close reading,” but it is still an important step, because Tate’s is a reading that demonstrates simply that parts of his own poem work together to create a complete, if elusive, whole. But Tate is working at cross-purposes: in “Narcissus as Narcissus,” Tate tries to cut himself out of his own poem. While this might be liberating, it is also very strange. Tate invests the poem—his own “Ode”—with a radical autonomy so pronounced as to be self-defeating.

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The next development of this thread in poetry criticism came in the form of a metaphor that suggests that poetry conjures its own context: the theater, and what Cleanth Brooks calls “dramatic context” (135). It comes *via* Brooks’ 1947 reading of Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in “Keats’ Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes,” from *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. In his essay, Brooks transforms the conditions of takes Richards’ experiment in *Practical Criticism*—the isolation of poem—into a context for reading specific to poetry. Brooks also builds on Tate’s supposition of the poem’s “cut-off-ness” to sketch out a way of reading vicariously.

In “Keats’ Sylvan Historian,” Brooks does a close reading of the famously troublesome words from the penultimate line of Keats’ “Ode”: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” In fact, Brooks’ essay is a defense of Keats’ lines against T.S. Eliot’s statement in his 1929 essay “Dante” that the “line strikes me as a serious blemish on a beautiful poem, and the reason must be either that I fail to understand it, or that it is a statement which is untrue” (231). Eliot’s charge had actually come in response to Richards’ reading of Keats’ lines as “pseudopoem” and “a certain blend of feelings” (*Principles*, 187): Eliot maintains that the “feelings” the line evokes should correspond to their purport. Keats’ troublesome lines also violate a principle of exclusion: the injunction against didacticism in literature. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” appears to the close reader as overtly didactic, even fatuous; it falls outside the purview of close reading, and, by extension, of poetry itself. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” is neither particular, nor concrete, nor objective, nor close-read-able—it is abstract, vague, ungraspable—and frankly, trite. Because of these troublesome words, which violate outright Brooks’ and Eliot’s prohibitions against explicit moralizing, Keats’ poem seems to resist the formal preconditions of close reading. Nevertheless, Brooks’ reading of the “Ode” is a recuperative close reading: Brooks wants to prove that the offending phrase is no accident.

Brooks' reading in this case hinges on punctuation: he redeems the otherwise trite-seeming closing lines of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by simply adding quotation marks to them. According to Brooks, in Keats' troublesome lines, it is the urn itself which speaks—In his version, the last sentence of the "Ode" reads:

[*this is the poet addressing the urn*] When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

[*this is the urn speaking*] 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Once Brooks has added these quotation marks, it becomes apparent according to Brooks that the Grecian Urn—and not John Keats—attests that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," spoken by the urn, merely constitutes another artistic paradox of the "Ode": that the "silent form" of the urn can speak. At the time of the poem's composition, around 1820, quotation marks were still a relatively new technology of the printed page and written word; as Jack Stillinger points out in *The Texts of Keats' Poems*, there is no manuscript of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," so we cannot be sure where exactly Keats would have placed the quotation marks. But Brooks tells us none of that—he finds evidence for the quotation mark immanently within the poem, by reading the "say'st" preceding the Urn's lines. By adding quotation marks, Brooks is able to distance Keats from "Beauty is truth..." and save him from T.S. Eliot's charge. In other words, according to Brooks, Keats stages a logic-defying speech act in the "Ode" in which an inanimate object opens its mouth to make a self-consciously illogical statement. The statement becomes not a trite didacticism, but a weird and cartoonish twist. Once we have grasped that it is the Urn who speaks, it would be strange to take what it says literally, or to read it as Keats' assertion of a poetic theory.

At the same time, Brooks takes what the Urn says *very* seriously. Though Brooks writes that his "interpretation... differs little from past interpretations," it is crucial, because it limits the obligation or responsibility that the work of art has to philosophical "truth" (134). As minor as it seems, by adding quotation marks, Brooks highlights the way the poem is imaginary, and absolves the "Ode" of fidelity to veracity. What Brooks does when he puts "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," in quotation marks is put the phrase in what he calls "dramatic context"; he says that we should treat the poem as if its words were on stage, and relinquish any demands we have for truth-to-life (135). (Later, in the 1950 edition of *Understanding Poetry*, he and Robert Penn Warren will refer to the poem as a "little drama.") In Brooks' reading, Keats' "Ode" cites the urn as it speaks a paradox about itself. The very inexpressivity of "Beauty is truth..." becomes an apt figure for poetry's fundamental incommunicativeness. Like the figures on the urn, which forever move and live even as they are cast in stone for eternity, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," only applies in a special separate sphere: the realm of the work of art. Brooks reads a theory of poetry into this statement's unreadability, and extrapolates a universal: that poetry is verifiable only by reference to itself, or in aesthetic terms. By putting the statement in the urn's mouth (so to speak), Keats mitigates it: it holds, if only within the poem, or on the urn. His turn is to find a truth of aesthetics in the poem's not-being-beholden to truth, and it is something that only a work of art could say, and only in its own inarticulate non-saying way. Ultimately, the only "truth" of poetry *really is* "beauty." For Brooks, the troublesome phrase in the "Ode" can be read as a self-consciously illogical affirmation of the essential paradox of poetry.

What makes Brooks' close reading paradigmatic is that he would have us put invisible quotation marks around Keats' entire poem, and all poems. That is to say: the poem provides a

grounding and an apt rationalization for close reading. Brooks has Keats say it for him. He reads the words that follow “Beauty is Truth...,” in the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as a gloss on the way the phrase should be understood, or “know[n].”:

[*again, this is the urn speaking*]

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, [*now this is Keats*] that is all
ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Brooks says that Keats here both totalizes and delimits our reading. For readers, everything except the bull’s-eye of the artifactual poem is peripheral, afield, and indeterminate. The reader can only speculate as to the author’s intention or the poem’s effect, but he/she *can* support a claim about a poem by reference to what is on the page. In Brooks’ reading, Keats provides a self-satisfying methodology. This works cannily, and takes us to the tautology of Brooks’ idea of the “[drama]” of the poem: once a poem is lifted out of all contexts but the poetic, the only way we have to make sense of a poem—how it works, what it is doing—is by checking it against itself. For Brooks, a poem is not answerable to reason, logic, accuracy, etc., but only to what is specific about the category of poetry—that is the paradox of it. This reading paradigm effectively lifts poetry out of spheres of language use that rest on argument and facticity, setting it apart as a special and extraordinary instance of language. If we read a poem in “dramatic context,” (and we have no other context into which to read it) we effectively read it as complete with its context—there are no accidents or random events, because all of the poem’s formal particulars fit together to create a whole. In its fullest expression, this kind of close reading becomes either righteous or vacuous (depending how you feel about it), because it makes all poems out to be about an ineluctable tautology of poetry. In fact, Brooks’ reading leans heavily on the themes of “mute[ness]” and “silence” in Keats’ “Ode” because the truth of poetry is both inexpressible and ultimately unreadable.

But I want to point out an oversight in Brooks’ close reading of Keats’ poem, one having to do with what the “Ode” is about. In his reading, Brooks deprecates “mere... facts,” and validates, instead, “history without footnotes.” He eschews the research that would have determined, for example, that figures on the side of the “Grecian” urn are posed in a rape scene—as, for that matter, are many Greek vases, and Roman and English knock-offs of them. (See also Zeitlin’s 1991 “On Ravishing Urns: Keats in his Tradition.”) The first line of Keats’ poem, “Thou still unravish’d bride,” and the 8th, 9th, and 10th lines, “What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? / What struggle to escape? ... What wild ecstasy?” make this clear enough for a literal-minded reader. As a result, when Brooks takes the final lines, spoken by the urn, and commented upon by Keats,

‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

as providing “not only beauty, but insight into [an] essential truth” of art’s relation to life (which is “the quintessence of an aesthetic philosophy,” Richards would say dismissively), I feel Brooks’ reading straining. At some point, the *aboutness* of this work of art has been lost. I am reluctant to ignore this rape to say the urn is just about poetry itself. James A.W. Heffernan says his 1991 essay “Ekphrasis and Representation” that Keats’ “Ode” is about representation itself, and I am inclined to agree. Even if we agree with Brooks that Keats mitigates his troublesome aesthetic statement by placing it in “dramatic context,” he also vexes it by putting it in a poem about a representation of rape: the poem wonders aloud what it means to present as art a depiction of rape.

I want to point out another salient feature of the close reading that Cleanth Brooks performs of the “Ode.” Cleanth Brooks does not really “close read” the poem: he extracts an idea of “dramatic context” from it, or—more accurately—*imposes* such an idea on it. That is to say, the method that Brooks applies to Keats’ “Ode” does not grow out of the poem itself. Brooks’ close reading hinges on an issue in textual editing, and relies on an idealized version of the poem. As he makes clear at the outset of the essay, the “Ode” has already been savaged by T.S. Eliot and obviated by I.A. Richards—it now necessitates extra work. This is probably because Keats’ “Ode” exemplified much of what modernist poets and critics like Eliot and Richards were trying to jettison. Why, then, would Brooks impose a twentieth-century method—one best suited to modernist poetry—on a nineteenth-century Romantic poem? Brooks picks this poem to bridge the gap between modernism and tradition with an idea of culture and a way of finding it out. His reading works to project a twentieth-century poetry critical strategy retrospectively onto Keats’ “Ode.” Close reading, we are to gather from Brooks’ analysis, is not just a new development in literary theory, but a way of finding out what is fundamental to poetry. Like its object, close reading is disciplinarily specific, autonomous, and self-justifying.

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Nevertheless, this kind of close reading was not the only option at the time, and here I turn to an alternative: John Dewey’s take on form in his 1932 book *Art as Experience*. Dewey begins by setting out a pragmatic idea of the interrelation of the person and the objective world: any “live creature,” he claims, comes up against obstacles, and it is in the process coming to terms with these obstacles that she or he reshapes both the world and her or himself (1). When Dewey applies this notion to art, he concludes that *form* is art’s fundamental characteristic, because it is the record or proof of the artist’s transformation of the material world. Form, in Dewey’s model, both draws from and re-shapes the “objective” world. Dewey does not adequately explain how this encounter comes across to the viewer or reader, but I think it is supposed to be something like: our experience as readers is our coming-to-terms-with the artwork’s form.

Because Dewey is invested in art’s sociability, he rejects any reading that would detach it from either the context of the artists’ production or of the reader’s reading. He writes:

When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience (3).

Later, when Dewey talks about “civilization” towards the end of *Art as Experience*, he points out that as artists come and go over time, societies retain their artworks, which helps them apprehend their seemingly inhospitable world. Dewey sees form as motivated by the questions of both how the artist transforms the materials she or he encounters, and how the art’s audience then comes to terms with that form.

This, I think, is also a way of answering the question of poetic form I raised earlier about *Statement of Facts*—what changes when we read this book as poetry? In *Statement of Facts*, Place poses a challenge similar to Keats’: she is pressing her readers to think through and come to terms with what the text is about. Place is asking us to read it as a poem—and not only as a poem about poetry, but a poem about what we think and feel when we read about rape. Both Keats and Place are troubled, I think, by the ways that the world enters into art, and vice-versa; both, I think, make something of that.

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I began by quoting Vanessa Place's answer to a woman who approached her after a reading, sobbing. If you recall, Place refuses to take responsibility for the woman's tears, and holds that her text is just a "mirror." The passage again:

There was a woman in London this past summer who became quite upset, she was sobbing in the bathroom for some time. Afterwards she confronted me about how I felt about having done that to her. I told her I hadn't done anything to her, she had had a reaction to a piece of writing. I'm holding up a mirror, making people look at their own reactions.

But *Statement of Facts* belies Place's disavowal of its effects. Like the woman Place describes, I am deeply disturbed by *Statement of Facts*, and I do not want to ignore that feeling. Indeed, I feel an ethical responsibility to resist the impulse to turn away from what is disturbing about Place's text: the materials she transforms in her work of poetry. When Place calls *Statement of Facts* a "mirror," she deflects the woman in the audience's response, and redoubles the injustice that her text is pressing us to acknowledge.

The main formal feature of *Statement of Facts*, which, as a direct transcription of legal writing, has no conventional poetic form to speak of, is simply that it masquerades as poetry. As such, it invites close reading, and one redeeming value of close reading is that it presses me to look hard at the graphic details of *Statement of Facts*, which I would otherwise hesitate to linger on. *Statement of Facts* is divided into 33 separate "Statement[s] of Facts," each a freestanding narrative of a sex crime. In one about prostitution in Los Angeles, we read:

From Gage to Florence at Figueroa is known as a 'ho track': pimps there were hassling prostitutes, yelling at the women to leave their current pimp and work for them. Tabethna had a pimp, had been working, and wanted to be left alone....

About two blocks from McDonald's, Tabethna noticed a man was following her in a car. She'd seen the man on Hollywood Boulevard before; she started walking faster, then cut down to the back street, still followed by the man, driving with a dog.... The rule on the street is if a prostitute looks a pimp in the eye, she's chosen to work for him. Tabethna assumed appellant was a pimp because he was black. Tabethna didn't want to look at appellant because she didn't want to get in trouble with her current pimp: she turned around, he got behind her, putting his arm on the gate, barricading Tabethna. Tabethna did not try to push appellant away because he was bigger than she was. Appellant asked Tabethna who her folks were, meaning who was her pimp. Tabethna pointed at her right calf, where her then-pimp's name ("Chosen") is tattooed... When Tabethna decided to talk to appellant, she became 'out-of-pocket,' essentially giving appellant permission to take her. This consent is one of the rules of the game: the game dictates that once a prostitute has a pimp, that prostitute can't get "out of line" with another pimp. This includes eye contact and conversation; if a prostitute doesn't 'stay truthful' to her pimp, the pimp will beat her (22-23).

Note here the way race plays into the world Place describes. Because most customers are white men, and most pimps are black, prostitutes are strictly prohibited from looking *any* black man in the eyes. Indeed, if a prostitute does look a black man in the eyes, she gives unspoken consent to be taken possession of by that man. These warped communicative norms grow out of the extreme disparities between white and black, rich and poor in Los Angeles. Here, we can see why Marjorie Perloff might say that "rape" has something to do with a "socio-economic[s]." We

can also see this in another section of *Statement of Facts* where Place describes a child's sexual abuse:

At the time of trial, Nyssa B. was fifteen years old; Nyssa's parents, Pana and Giorgio, divorced when Nyssa was three... Eventually they [Pana and Nyssa] moved into a Torrance apartment with appellant, Pana's stepfather. Nyssa called appellant 'grandpa,' and he lived with the family for the next five years.... Pana waitressed throughout Nyssa's childhood; appellant was Nyssa's primary caretaker while her mother was at work.... The first time appellant touched Nyssa inappropriately, Nyssa was five years old (311).

Nyssa's mother has to leave her with her step-grandfather while she is at work because she cannot afford licensed childcare. In many of Place's descriptions of child sexual abuse, the child has been left with an unqualified and untrustworthy guardian because the parents have no other choice. In a phrase from another "Statement of Facts," one in which an infant who is less than one year old has been hurt in a sexual assault, we read that the parents drop the infant off at 6am so they can leave for work, but the daycare providers stay in bed until 9am (285). What forces these parents to leave their children in unsafe homes is poverty. It is not quite that "the culture of rape is largely a socio-economic problem," but that, as *Statement of Facts* makes plain, poor people, blacks, women, and children are more vulnerable to sexual assault.

At the beginning of this chapter, I said that Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts* asks a question about the juncture of form and ethics. I also identified the formal imperative of *Statement of Facts*: that the text requires that it be published and read as literature. Since Place's text is devoid of poetic effects—it has no line breaks—to flag it as poetry, it is nearly impossible to generate a reading that explains the text's intra-textual formal features in the context of the whole book. The most immediate formal choice of Place's is, rather, the simple fact of its being published in a small-press poetry format, as poetry. Place's *Statement of Facts* is a poem not by authorial fiat or self-nomination, but through a reciprocal interaction between poet and reader that it prompts. Close reading makes it a poem, in part. But rather than a Tate-eian or Brooksonian version of close reading, I would prefer that we apply the kind of reflexive reading practice that Brooks describes in *Practical Criticism*: a continual re-thinking of what blocks us from reading. In this text, the power inequality inherent in sexual violence also prevails across other domains: in representation and hermeneutics. If we turn away from this knowledge, we reinforce an injustice which is largely maintained through willed ignorance.

I am not saying that the power of Place's *Statement of Facts* derives from its making us acknowledge that rape is a "socio-economic problem." That, unfortunately, might make it seem like rape is always somebody else's problem, a poor person's problem. Rather, I read *Statement of Facts* as a disclosure of the sexual injustice that pervades all levels of contemporary society. Furthermore, I read *Statement of Facts* as a text that overwhelms its readers with the feeling—of disgust, loathing, nausea—that this widespread sexual injustice makes us feel. When Stephanie Young assails Perloff for doing a "formalist" reading of *Statement of Facts*, she objects to a reading that ignores the text's effective repercussions. When Vanessa Place dismisses the "sobbing woman," she sidesteps the ethical repercussions of her formal choice.

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On the back cover of Ben Lerner's *Angle of Yaw*, in place of an author photo or book blurb, you find a box of text, full-justified—a poem from inside the book that deploys figures of reading in order to undo them.

READING IS IMPORTANT because it makes you look down, an expression of shame. When the page is shifted to a vertical plane, it becomes an advertisement, decree, and / or image of a missing pet or child. We say that texts displayed vertically are addressed to the public, while in fact, by failing to teach us the humility a common life requires, they convene a narcissistic mass. When you window-shop, when you shatter a store window, you see your own image in the glass.

In its placement, the poem turns its book inside-out, and reverses the poetry with its wrapping—the bar-code, ISBN, price, and glossy packaging which make the literature into a commodity. Market research tells us that the average consumer looks first at a book’s cover, then turns it over to look at the back copy, then looks at the inside flaps, and only then flips perfunctorily through the pages. The poem’s placement where we would otherwise expect a blurb suggests shaping forces which are not ready-at-hand: the physical book enters into an economy, and an individual reader’s practice and posture becomes typical. The poem’s location on the back jacket, in place of an author photo or a book blurb, points towards socialized behaviors—the average, typical, or predictable behavior of a prospective reader, potential book-buyer, or consumer—lifted from the inside of the book, the author’s text speaks out on the glossy cover where other voices usually announce genre and price to booksellers, librarians, and potential consumers. Lerner’s poem’s specific situation says something about its larger situation, and about the larger situation of the book, poetry, and publishing. And even in the first words of the text itself (“READING IS IMPORTANT because it makes you look down...”), this back-cover text shifts point of view from the reader’s eyes to an observer’s, so that while the reader reads, she or he is also being read, and reading reading. Lerner’s text—one poem from an eponymous series of ninety prose poems inside the book—an internal poem externalized to the cover—draws attention to all the physical apparatus of reading: the “page,” the reader’s head-down posture, his/her “expression.” At the same time, in its text, the poem points very explicitly to context—or, you could say, the text points to the exigencies of its own medium: the second and third clauses of the poem contrast the horizontal plane of the “page” with the “vertical plane” of an “advertisement, decree, and / or image of a missing pet or child.” These words from the back-cover poem echo one of *Angle of Yaw*’s epigraphs, from Walter Benjamin’s “One-Way Street”:

Printing, having found in the book a refuge in which to lead an autonomous existence, is pitilessly dragged out into the street... If centuries ago it began gradually to lie down, passing from the upright inscription to the manuscript resting on sloping desks before finally taking to bed in the printed book, it now begins just as slowly to rise again from the ground. The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular (456).

In the passage from Benjamin, reified printing’s special privilege is precarious, and endangered by mass culture. The lines from the back-cover poem point outside themselves in several ways to

an exterior, to a larger framing context, to a social context: the physical context and spatial orientation which frame a text's meaning. Before *Angle of Yaw* even begins, the poem on the back cover of the book makes the reader conscious of the conventions of the book and the procedures of reading, and self-conscious of being a reader. Even as Lerner's "READING IS..." thematizes reading by making the reader read reading, it casts reading—its own reading included—into doubt. It leaves an area of uncertainty around the validity of reading, its purport or import, which is what are we trying to do when we read.

The scene of violence in the last sentence of the poem—"When you window-shop, when you shatter a store window, you see your own image in the glass"—pointedly smashes the figure of the mirror that Place uses to defend her *Statement of Facts*, and the impenetrable "narcissism" that Tate evokes to not explain his "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Lerner's poem relentlessly turns its readers off the page, towards reading's repercussions.

Chapter Two

The Perfect Letter

“Is Criticism a True Thing?”

—Keats’ marginalia for Johnson on Shakespeare

If, as Cleanth Brooks asserts, a poem should be read as if it were on stage or in “dramatic context,” then Ben Lerner stages a scene of reading in “READING IS IMPORTANT...” that parodies interpretation.

READING IS IMPORTANT because it makes you look down, an expression of shame. When the page is shifted to a vertical plane, it becomes an advertisement, decree, and / or image of a missing pet or child. We say that texts displayed vertically are addressed to the public, while in fact, by failing to teach us the humility a common life requires, they convene a narcissistic mass. When you window-shop, when you shatter a store window, you see your own image in the glass.

From the individual scene of reading in the poem’s first sentence, Lerner anticipates and manipulates his poem’s reader’s perspective, panning out and then back in from the “you” at the beginning to “the public” in the middle and then back to “you.” When Lerner returns to that singular reader at the end, she or he now seems besieged, because the “shatter[ed]... store window” near the end of the poem alludes to a scene of violence with global political implications: the “Battle in Seattle,” when demonstrators against the World Trade Organization’s 1999 N30 meeting smashed the windows of chain stores in the city’s downtown. In the poem’s last image (“your own image”), Lerner offers an inversion of his beginning: if the first words interpellate the book’s reader as a potential book-buyer or consumer, the “window-shop[per]” at the end comes face-to-face with his or her own self-image as both customer and perpetrator. At the poem’s end, “you” the reader stand looking at layers of reading flattened into one opaque text: the splintered reflection, the broken store window, and the poem in hand. In “READING IS IMPORTANT...” Lerner links reading, globalization, and violence in terms that are historical, textual, and material, and on an axis that connects individual acts and their social implications.

The question I ask in this chapter grows out of twenty-first-century Anglophone poetry’s engagement with the twentieth-century Anglo-American academic poetry critical reading paradigm: how to read poetry in a global context. I pursue this question in response to sticking points that I see in both the poetry and the criticism. First, that numerous works of twenty-first-century Anglophone poetry—Lerner’s *Angle of Yaw*, for one—self-consciously re-enact scenes of reading in order to break them down. In *Metropolis XXX* (2004) and *Zong!* (2008), both of which I will discuss in this chapter, Rob Fitterman and M. NourbeSe Philip import extra-literary source-text into their poems, pressing their readers to come to terms with aspects of poetry’s extra-literary semantic, linguistic, literary, global, and political contexts. But the way we have to read a poem steers us away from a reading that accounts for these public contexts—and this is the second sticking point. The way we have to read a poem cannot apprehend both poetry’s singular texture and its worldly entanglements: close reading fends off poetry’s global repercussions by taking its local-level features as universal particulars. While twenty-first-century Anglophone poets like Lerner, Fitterman, and Philip deploy a myriad of metaphors for perception—film, video games, sports, geography, law, etc.—they are always figuring reading in

such a way as to agitate against close reading's built-in aversion to the global. In response to this—and, building on the approach to form that I spell out in my last chapter—I propose that we close read poetry's local features by attending to their global repercussions.

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At first, I had actually planned to begin this chapter by reading a moment of frame-switching from Spahr's 2007 poetic autobiography *The Transformation* as a parable for contemporary Anglophone poetry's relationship to its Anglo-American academic criticism. As Spahr explains, *The Transformation* is the story of her move from the Poetics program at SUNY Buffalo to the University of Hawai'i, and the shift in perspective that ensued. Spahr writes,

In graduate school they had been taught a map of poetry that had the avant-garde squaring off at the borders against various national literary conventions. But when they got to the island in the middle of the Pacific and looked at the poetry that surrounded them they realized that this map of poetry that they had been taught in graduate school no longer made sense and they had to make new maps (80).

and,

Trying to figure out where to place things... they looked at the poetry around them. They looked in particular at the poetry written by those who had genealogical ties to the island from before the whaling ships arrived. It slowly dawned on them, but it was so obvious they could not understand how they had managed to not think on it before, that poetry had a different resonance, a different importance in places of activist anticolonialism. All sorts of poetry. Both radical and not so radical. Both poems written in the expansionist language and poems written in the language that had been on the island before the whaling ships arrived and poems written in the pidgins and creoles, the burrowing languages, the negotiated languages (80-81).

In *The Transformation*, Spahr tells the story of the several and revelatory shifts in perspective—creative, critical, political—brought on by the context-switch she experiences, and she makes her text read awkwardly to dramatize for the reader her felt sense of the discrepancy between these frames of reference. For example, Spahr uses the first-person plural in place of the first-person singular throughout the book: “they” instead of “I.” *The Transformation* is the “story of how [she] became aware” that in Hawai'i she is a “they.” She draws a phrase from W.H. Auden's 1939 poem “Edward Lear”—the “cruel, inquisitive they”—to describe this “cruel inquisitive sense... of not being a part of us or we... the sense of accusation, whether they wanted to be or not” (21).

One of the ways Spahr's “they” is a “they” instead of an “I” is that she realizes in Hawai'i that as a professor at the University she is a part of a “national educational complex” and a teacher of the “expansionist language” (55). Her sense of her outsider-ness, unintended complicity, and “they”-ness are all wrapped up with pedagogy and institutions—and with representations of them. Later in *The Transformation*, Spahr equates herself with the figure of the “haole schoolteacher,” who presses Wordsworth's “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” on students who have never seen a daffodil. (“Haole” is a pejorative term in Hawai'i for a white person.) She explains:

When they got to the island, they realized... they were of the complex, a complex that was set up for them and by them. They were the haole schoolteacher, a figure that shows up in numerous poems and novels written on the island. As the haole schoolteacher, they

suddenly were someone who had a series of arbitrary rules that had to be followed to the letter. They were committed to their way of grammar and spelling, so committed that they beat or otherwise humiliated students who did not follow their rules. They allowed only a certain number of bathroom breaks, no matter the needs of the students' bladders. They gave out wrong information and punished students for not reciting it back incorrectly. They told histories where colonizers were liberators. They were devoted to literacy and argued that civilization was impossible without it. They made students wear itchy and too tight shoes that pinched. And they were always improperly dressed, perhaps wearing slippers and panty hose beneath their skirts, items that were wrong for that climate and then they were, as a result, sweating a little too much and thus had a slightly stale smell. They were always too red in the face, a red face caused not only by sun on their fair skin and improper, overly warm, dress but also by frustration, the frustration that happens when they are in a foreign culture and cannot figure out the rules and thus get angry and flustered. This emotion caused a certain rigidity in their body, a strange way of walking, and even created a strange way of thinking. The haole school teacher in the poems and novels was someone who made students write imitations of Wordsworth's poem *Daffodils* despite the fact that daffodils could never grow in the tropics (72-3).

As Spahr points out in the notes at the end of *The Transformation*, the figure of the haole schoolteacher comes from Lois Ann Yamanaka's and Sia Figiel's novels, among other places—indeed, the white schoolteacher who teaches Wordsworth's poem is a trope of postcolonial literature, and a kind of caricature. Likewise, the version or reading of Wordsworth's poem that this schoolteacher would typically impose is reductive. Spahr even shorthands the title of Wordsworth's poem as "Daffodils." Here, then, Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud":

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Then thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in a sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Nothing in Wordsworth's poem precludes its being read by students who have never seen daffodils. One could even make a case that *not* knowing what a daffodil looks allows for a more imaginative reading of the poem, which is more about wistfulness or nostalgia than the specificity of the daffodils. Indeed, in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," Wordsworth's theme is the sense that the general—the "dance" of the "thousand"—leaves, more than the particular: there is no singular daffodil. Nor, for that matter, is there anything about "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" that predetermines the later pedagogical use to which it would be put, or the symbolic charge it would take on. Nevertheless, Wordsworth's poem became a part of and an emblem for the curriculum of a state-funded, compulsory, and uniform educational system in Hawai'i that has suppressed languages other than English (Hawaiian, Pidgin or *Da Kine*, Japanese, Portuguese) in favor of the English language and Anglo-American culture for more than a century. "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" presently appears on standardized tests for English-language schools in India, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Australia, Wales, and Northern Ireland (the ICSE, GSCE, and HSC exams). The poem's afterlife as the haole schoolteacher's typically out-of-place lesson becomes a thickening irony for a contemporary audience. It would be incongruent, then, to insist on a reading specific to the local features—the "vales," "hills," "lakes," and "trees"—of "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," even as Wordsworth's poem enacts a displacement from one locality and moment to another. For a teacher to guide a full-class reading of Wordsworth's poem towards sympathetic identification with the universality of the states of feeling that grow out of the individual experience of nostalgia seems willfully ahistorical, and insensitive to Wordsworth's unsettling of perspective by memory.

Spahr uses Wordsworth's poem to shorthand the disparity between the cultural work that poetry would try to do, and that which is done to it. In *The Transformation*, Spahr somatically self-identifies as the "haole schoolteacher": she describes the "too red[ness] in the face," "sweating," "frustration," and the "rigidity" that she takes on. She registers her realization that even though her poetry aspires to description, there is also a figuring that goes the other way: she herself is being figured, flattened, and caricatured. Far from defeating her, the difficulty of this dialogue is what motivates or drives Spahr's poetry—and what she then tries to challenge her readers with. Spahr's poetic memoir explores a problem with reading poetry that becomes all-too-evident with the proliferation of contextuality.

In the meantime, Spahr registers this proliferation of contexts in the first-person of her poetic memoir. The "they" Spahr uses for her self in *The Transformation* collapses her place or complicity in "large systems" and her personal domestic life and into one pronominal shifter (33). As Spahr moved to Hawai'i, she also began a three-person domestic partnership: she moved from Buffalo to Hawai'i with two male partners. She writes:

Two of them had been a couple for many years. This relationship was intense and variable and intellectually driven. One of them had met another. This relationship was intense and variable and passionate. Two of them had assumed that one of them would no longer be one of them. But it did not work out that way. No one broke up with anyone. Things just went on. And now one of them had taken a job on an island in the middle of the Pacific and the other two had to decide whether to move or not. They had met one

afternoon in a bar and talked about the move. And there they decided to fix their relationship into a triangle. At the bar meeting it was awkward for them to talk. They felt uncomfortable and there was a lot of silence, but they decided anyway that they would all move to the island together. They liked each other and they admitted this. All of them learned from all of them. They all had their own interests and these interests intersected and overlapped with other interests and all felt they could be shaped by each other into some new thing (14-15).

Spahr's use of the "they" is a way of making the consciousness of this unconventional relationship omnipresent in *The Transformation*. A selection from the text:

they got to the island
they had to make new maps
they looked
It slowly dawned on them
they could not understand

Even as Spahr recognizes that as a white academic from the mainland she represents a hegemonic culture and colonialist power, she also feels that she does not fit this type. She literalizes her non-normativity in *The Transformation* with a "they" that signifies her complicity with the "cruel, inquisitive they," and her three-person domestic partnership. Spahr is a "they" who is a "haole," but her "they" entails various memberships and groupings that overlap and contradict, such as family, class, race, culture, language. As such, Spahr's "they" folds several frames and ways of seeing simultaneously into one.

Later in *The Transformation*, Spahr figures the perspectival re-orientation that the frame-switching she describes prompts as a re-orientation of scale. She writes: "They had been looking, they realized, through the wrong end of the telescope and now, once they had learned to look through the end with the eyepiece, they were able to focus in and see" (83). Like Lerner in *Angle of Yaw*, Spahr looks at things over and over from different angles in the hopes of eliciting in her readers an altogether new way of looking. I read the moment of frame-switching in *The Transformation* as itself a reading—a contextualization—of reading itself. The visual metaphors (of a "map" and "telescope") in effect constitute a referendum on reading of poetry in the context of globalization. From the moment of frame-switching Spahr describes in *The Transformation*, I had originally planned to extrapolate a broader re-consideration of the paradigm of reading. I had intended, specifically, to read Spahr's poetic autobiography as a parable for academic reading's exclusion of contemporary post-colonial poetry.

Recently, however, Spahr anticipated my argument: In an essay called "The '90s," in an issue of *Boundary 2* on "American Poetry after 1975," (guest-edited by Charles Bernstein) Spahr argues that anti-colonial and avant-garde poetries of the 90's actually have something in common: both "blatantly turn away from standard English in order to say something *about* English" (159, my emphasis). Spahr cites Steve Evans' attestation (from his 1997 "Dynamics of Literary Change") that "If Bob Perelman and Maya Angelou switched curricula vitae and a month's worth of reading engagements, publication venues, and institutional functions, no one would *not* notice" (23). She counters that this kind of critical emphasis on difference creates a "balkanized vision of contemporary literatures" at odds with the "increasing awareness of the importance of globalization to literary study" (172). In "The 90's," Spahr aligns post-colonial and language and post-language poetry by way of the difficulty of their language: poems that use pidgin words and those that disassemble or fragment both render the language opaque and open for critical attention. She looks at poems by a range of writers—Jamaican-American writer

Claudia Rankine (who I also write about in Chapter 3), American avant-garde writer Rosmarie Waldrop, Tobagonian-Canadian writer M. NourbeSe Philip (whose *Zong!* I write about in this chapter), and many others—to broaden poetry criticism’s purview to include American, world, Anglophone, avant-garde, and post-colonial poetics (173). There are two reasons that avant-garde and anti-colonial poetry of the 90’s are yoke-able, according to Spahr: they both draw from the anti-globalization movement of 90’s, which galvanized at the “Battle in Seattle,” and which united identity-based and political protest movements against a common foe, and they both use English in the era of global English (173-4).

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Anglophone literature and globalization are linked *via* global English. Spahr cites David Crystal’s *English as a Global Language* (1997) to point out that at some point in the 1990’s, English became the most widely spoken language in the world for the first time in history, with somewhere between 337 and 508 million speakers (174). English is not the most widely spoken first language worldwide, but is, rather, a widespread second language. This fact endangers thousands of less-common local languages: in Peru, for example, when young people learn Spanish as a first and English as a second language, they drop Quechua, a widely-spoken native language. English has grown so precipitously despite being uncommon as a first language because it is the most-taught of all languages, the dominant or official language in 60 countries, and global economic and technological *lingua franca*, all of which Crystal attributes to the confluence of the nineteenth-century colonial linguistic infrastructure of the British Empire, and twentieth-century American economic, technological, and cultural predominance. There is a lot of literature on the moral implications of the English language’s predominance, and the question of whether Global English is expedient or insidious (cf. Bobda, Phillipson, Hagège). What is clear is that many of the world’s high-school and college-age students are clamoring to learn English; that there are “Global English” or “World English” academies all over the world to teach older students “business” English; and that the pace of language-death—as Claude Hagège points out in *On the Death and Life of Languages*—exceeds that of language-generation. Spahr reads the form of avant-garde and anti-colonial poetics as the flip-side of globalization and Anglophone global hegemony: these poetics use what Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch’ien calls “weird” Englishes to undercut standard English normativity. What is remarkable about Spahr’s argument is that it has the potential to transform what we make of the way poems work, and relate the micro-level features of the poem to macro-level patterns.

Still, I am skeptical, because I think a barrier still stands between the so-called “avant-garde” poetry, which is often difficult, and “anti-colonial” or more obviously political poetry: an idiolect or professional vocabulary. I take Spahr’s pre-empting of my argument as an occasion to push both hers and mine farther. To try to understand how “avant-garde” and “anti-colonial” poetry could be read in the political context of Global English, I want to focus on a feeling in twenty-first-century poetry which indexes its relationship to the global. This is a feeling of *disciplinarity*, at least in part: a consciousness that the study of Anglophone poetry in the English Department has been marked historically by the conspicuous avoidance or occlusion of the promulgation of English by the English Department. It is also a *guilty conscience*—the sense that poetry may be an accomplice to mass linguisticide. In Juliana Spahr’s poetry, this takes the form of a prevailing discomfiture.

Spahr says as much in the at the end of “The 90’s,” when she says that in her 2001 book of poems, *Fuck You Aloha I Love You*, she herself “blatantly turn[ed] away from standard English” by “pointedly includ[ing] both Pidgin and Hawaiian words” (182). Yet, at the same time—and I think this is fascinating—she calls herself out, dubbing her own use of non-standard English and non-English an “appropriation” and a “presumption,” and confessing that “that book now makes me nervous” (181-2). The last sentences of “The 90’s” face up to this “nervousness”:

I do feel like I need to keep what I learned from these works of the ’90s—that the languages and the words of others come with recognitions and obligations and debts and are always unavoidably in our mouths—and not forget it in the turn of the century. I am, in other words, after writing this, now more suspicious of my nervousness, less willing to excuse it (182).

We see here that the feeling that Spahr here “confess[es]” points elsewhere—to the “recognitions and obligations and debts” of the “languages and the words of others.” It grows out of historical self-consciousness (“I need to... not forget [what I learned] in the turn of the century”) and demands a difficult reflexivity (“I am... less willing to excuse it”).

This feeling of nervous self-consciousness extends beyond *The Transformation* and “the 90’s”: Spahr here amplifies something she picks up from her earlier work. In one short stanza from *Fuck You Aloha I Love You*, Spahr describes it:

What I am confessing.

When I am lost simple juxta-
positions seem to make sense.

This is because I am lost between
two places.

I have abandoned sureness.

To the feeling of “nervousness” that she “confess[es],” then—and she also has a “confession” in “The 90’s”—we can add an earlier history for the feeling in a displacement (“I am lost between / two places”) that she describes in *Fuck You Aloha I Love You*. Spahr’s earlier book of poems is about the same thing as *The Transformation*: her move from the continental US to Hawai’i. So, Spahr’s feeling of “frustration,” “nervousness,” and “stuttering” runs through the passages from *The Transformation*, “The 90’s,” and *Fuck You Aloha I Love You*. We can now track this feeling through three different texts, and notice that it registers both intellectually and viscerally, and has to do with “appropriation” and “guilt,” writing and displacement, and history and art-forms. We can note that the catalyst for Spahr’s “nervousness” is a displacement, one that is a “learn[ing]” experience. Nevertheless, what causes the feeling was already there—even, that is, prior to her and her partners’ move to Hawai’i.

The feeling of “nervousness” in Spahr’s poems is also entangled with reading. You can detect this in the preface to her 2001 critical monograph *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*, when Spahr writes about her working-class background, and her father’s “unschooled obsession with reading” (xi). In her preface, she writes:

As this book is about reading, I’ve tried to leave the reading in: in endnotes, in marginal quotations, in the text itself. That part has been fun. The harder part has been the more personal one of who I am when writing this. I have often felt caught between an academic scene and a poetry scene that are often antithetical in desires and intents. I

remain committed to both, and appreciate the pleasures of both, but I often felt that I could please neither master. When I looked one way, the other way went out of focus. And then when I looked the other way, the one way went out of focus. Please forgive, then, the awkward, bifocal moments that are this work.

Here, Spahr makes one more “confess[ion]”: “Please forgive,” she writes, “the awkward, bifocal moments...” Note too, that she here pairs a visual metaphor with a descriptor of her feeling: since she cannot focus on academia and poetry at the same time, her work is full of “awkward, bifocal moments.” This figure from *Everybody’s Autonomy* is strikingly similar to the aforementioned figure Spahr uses in *The Transformation* to describe her realization that meanings shift with context (“They had been looking, they realized, through the wrong end of the telescope...”) (83). Spahr’s feeling is not only about being out-of-place in Hawai’i, it is also akin to her feeling of being out-of-place as a working-class writer in the academy. As such, the geographical displacement she describes in *Fuck You* and *The Transformation* only amplifies a linguistic displacement of which she is already well aware. The discomfiture cuts across Spahr’s creative, scholarly, and critical practice—indeed, it seems to grow out of that cutting across. It also serves to indict the English literature’s assumed racial, class, and national character.

It is really Spahr’s work as a poet, critic, and teacher—her poetic and pedagogical practice—that brings the feeling she describes in her work to a head. In the very next stanza or paragraph after the telescope metaphor in *The Transformation* that I previously quoted, Spahr turns to the classroom:

The poetry that was attentive to the sovereignty movement on this island in the middle of the Pacific demanded not only that they see their writing and their teaching position as carrying expansionist histories and thus responsibility, but it also redefined the questions. ...They began to see poetry as a series of contiguous systems, systems that did not merge but that were still beside one another. They found themselves asking who they wrote with and why. They found themselves questioning ambiguity and its presumed neutrality in their work. They brought these questions into their classroom messily. They paused and stuttered a lot. They contradicted themselves and they got confused. They are not heroes in this story (82).

In this passage, the way she teaches poetry (here telegraphed with the word “ambiguity”) is complicated by its encounter with Hawaiian culture, and freighted by “confus[ion]” and “stutter[ing].” Leaving aside what she writes about “poetry as a series of contiguous systems...that did not merge but that were still beside each other,” which sounds like Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of the *champs* or field (which I pick up on in chapter four), Spahr’s publication of “The 90’s” aptly demonstrates what I would single out as the salient feature of contemporary poetry: an acute self-consciousness about its own interpreters’ interpretive framework. The relations between her article, memoir, poetry, teaching, criticism, domestic life, class, and race make it impossible to read her poetry in isolation from her other writing. In fact, Spahr’s cross-platform writing militates against the object-status that poetry criticism would project onto poetry as a precondition for its reading. In *The Transformation*, this takes the form of a taking-out-of-context. Twenty-first-century poetry like Spahr’s performs a poetry stress-test, and takes poetry’s reading and aesthetics to the breaking point to fully exploit it and push it farther. The feeling of discomfiture in Spahr’s poetry is that of a writing restricted by disciplinary constraints; the feeling of discomfiture she communicates to her readers presses them to read more, and better.

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But, again: an institutional barrier remains between avant-garde and anti-colonial English-language poetics. It comes out in the terms of a recent Comparative Literature critical debate about “close reading” and *weltliteratur*. In “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000), Franco Moretti calls for a mode of “distant reading” that would subsume the mass of Anglo-American twentieth-century literary criticism’s micro-level textual readings into macro-level global patterns. Moretti evokes both Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s words on *weltliteratur* (from a January 1827 letter to Johann Peter Eckermann’s):

I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men.... National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach (166).

Moretti’s idea is that “distant reading” could, for example, be used to construct a morphology of the novel as it moved from France to Britain to Russia over the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. But I should point out that Goethe’s letter continues:

But while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to some particular thing, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Serbian, or Calderon, or the *Nibelungen*; but, if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented. All the rest we must look at only historically; appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes.

The potential of Moretti’s “distant reading” lies in its hope to counterbalance to a presumption of affirmation of individual expression endemic to humanist literary criticism. The danger is that when the criticism of *weltliteratur* looks across boundaries, it “only” looks at disparate world literatures “historically” to fit them into an extant and overriding western European literary framework.

As if in response, in a short piece called simply “Close Reading,” Gayatri Spivak defends old-fashioned close reading as an antidote to a “bad [i.e. instrumentalist] globalization” that would reduce a text’s particularities in the service of any kind of larger abstract project (1613). (“Close Reading” was part of a forum at the CUNY Graduate Center in 2005 called “The Humanities in Human Rights: Critique, Language, Politics”; Spivak’s comments on “close reading” explicitly address the way that literary criticism can be brought to bear on the question of human rights.) For Spivak, the humanities have the potential to flesh out global policy and legal thinking by attending to the local-level texture which the social sciences are ill-equipped to consider; close reading can prevent policy’s subsumption of individual voices and lives to a bottom line. In this way, Spivak turns the “old-fashioned” New Critical deference to a text’s singularity (the poem’s autochthony, cf. chapter one) into respect for its alterity.

In her 2003 book *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak then activates her version of “close reading” to operate transnationally—on the scale, she says, of “planetarity.” She suggests that close reading can cut across the boundaries of time and place while still respecting the alterity of the individual work by amending to it the notion of *teleopoiesis*, an “imaginative making” that can unfold over space and time “without guarantees.” Spivak draws *teleopoiesis* from what she calls the “performative contradiction” in Aristotle’s apostrophe “O my friends, there is no friend,” which Jacques Derrida describes in *The Politics of Friendship* (30). That is to say, *teleopoiesis*, which is “imaginative making” at a remove, is just as self-consciously impossible as

Aristotle's apostrophe, and yet it *is* possible and necessary. The seeming impossibility of *teleopoiesis* is part of the gambit of friendship. Spivak then defines *teleopoiesis* as: "to affect the distant in a *poiesis*—an imaginative making—without guarantees, and thus, by definitive predication, reverse its value" (31). To anticipate and reach after effects "without guarantees" is what links writers to each other, with the bonds of friendship or affiliation, across the boundaries of time and place. Spivak suggests we "close read" in this spirit, and reach across time and space to find in texts the potential to be *affected*—to be open to such effects, linkages, friendships, affiliations. Later, she turns this imaginative making through writing into a mode of reading, and writes that a "copying (rather than cutting) and pasting" akin to *teleopoiesis* "is part of the general technique" she is advocating (34). For example, *teleopoiesis* makes it possible for J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* to draw on, extend, and modify the subversive potential of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, even beyond Conrad's capacity. Another example Spivak offers—in terms of reading, rather than literary re-writing—is Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which Spivak reads as open to a reading that would adopt, adapt, apply, and extend it into the context of present-day feminism. *Teleopoiesis* is Spivak's positive formulation in *Death of a Discipline*: it allows her to leverage the traditional New Critical deference to an object's unknowability into a respect for each and every text's alterity. It also allows her to make close reading into an exercise that applies beyond the bounds of the individual text. But, the kind of "close reading" that Spivak advocates (in "Close Reading" and *Death of a Discipline*)—a "close reading" in which the New Critical deference to the unknowability of the poem-object becomes an abiding respect for the text's alterity—can easily shade into a universalizing reading. That is to say, if the approach, focus, and ends of close reading are *all* textural, they are as much as fore-ordained: the close reader will inevitably mobilize a text's formal features into evidence of its irreducibility. In this version of close reading, alterity becomes an overriding trait, common to all texts, the basis for affiliation—and a stopping point for reading. The notion of *teleopoiesis* that Spivak aptly borrows from Derrida—a "copying (rather than cutting) and pasting" across the boundaries of place and time—to amend to close reading's purview *does* begin the work of attuning close reading to the text's extra-textual implications. However, it is also in tension with the reading-for-alterity that Spivak defends in *Death of a Discipline*: literary affiliations that Spivak seeks out such as those between Conrad and Coetzee seem to always privilege the fore-runner's status as source-text and literary forebear. At best, a text from a broadened twenty-first-century world-literature canon and/or an extra-canonical text will be read for its relation to—perhaps its subversive relation to—its canonical literary source-text. If we approach literary texts looking for irreducible texture, *teleopoietic* close reading can easily turn into a universalization of the literary—Spivak's method is specially built to detect the continuities and affiliations between literary works, rather than transformations. I think that Spivak is onto something—I just think it is myopic of her to cling to her "old-fashioned" version of close reading, since she does not allow that a text might have its own singular relationship to a context aside from the literary. And the reason that it is hard to reconcile literature's place in its literary and extra-literary contexts is that close reading was fine-tuned to discriminate between the two.

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A few moments in the history of the discipline reveal the blockage that I think that twenty-first-century poetry arrays itself against—the lifting out of literature from language. This disciplinary history is significantly less ancient than that of the language. In a 1967 *College*

English article, “Where Do English Departments Come From?” William Riley Parker writes that “...the teaching of English, as a constituent of college or university education, is only about 100 years old, and *departments* of English are younger still” (339, his emphasis). Like many ancient-seeming institutions, the English department is a nineteenth-century phenomenon—a “Johnny-come-lately,” Parker calls it—grafted onto the long-extant scholarship of the language (341). Thus, he says, while “as scholars we have matured... as teachers we—the same people—are still children in our ignorance or innocence” (342). It took so long for English to come into its own because it caught in a tug-of-war between Language and Literature. Proponents of Language—the established Anglo-Saxonists, grammarians, orthographers, historians, and philologists for whom nation, history, and race were part and parcel with texts—resisted the encroachment of the critics and Belles Lettrists who advocated particular attention to the special features of Literature. Indeed, the first English Professor in England, the Rev. Thomas Dale, was the “Professor of English Language *and* English Literature” at University College, London in 1828. That was the year that University College, London (UCL) opened as an alternative to the seven ancient universities—Oxford, Cambridge, St. Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, and Trinity College Dublin—which had until then been the only institutions of higher education in all of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Reverend Dale was well aware of the divide between language and literature, so, in his very first lecture (entitled “English Language and Literature: An Introductory Lecture,”), he hesitantly offered English Literature as a model of “diction” and “accuracy of expression,” suggesting a “union of both” Language and Literature in utility (7-9). He tried, in other words, to articulate the usefulness of literature. That solution was, of course, totally unsatisfactory. In *The Rise of English Studies*, D.J. Palmer reproduces some of the questions the first final examination that Reverend Dale gave. On his first final exam, one of his questions was:

Why is D a perfect letter? (22)

If Reverend Dale’s question betrays befuddlement about what exactly English teachers taught when they taught English, it must be noted that this confusion was general. The eventual resolution of the language / literature divide only came about with an opposite response: first, Matthew Arnold’s nineteenth-century articulation of the pedagogical utility of the non-utility of literature, and, second the twentieth-century articulation of literary criticism’s exclusive focus on literature. The latter made it possible for English to wash its hands of the language side of English Studies—which the reader was supposed to just know without having been taught. This dynamic between language and literature came to be applied to the relationships between scholarship and criticism, literacy and the English department, and the poem’s peripherals and the poem itself. As such, it established a formula or abstract template which is still operative today.

The irony, however, is that English began in England with the importation of the study of English as an alien language from the Empire’s peripheries into its heart. Post-secondary instruction in English began as a kind of language study in Scotland in the eighteenth century, long before Prof. Rev. Dale: In *Devolving English Literature* (1992), Robert Crawford traces English to eighteenth-century instruction in composition and prose style in Scotland—a place where English English was still a foreign tongue. In 1707, with the Acts of Union, Scotland and England had joined in an imbalanced merger to become the United Kingdom, and over the next decades, texts like Thomas Sheridan’s *Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762) prescribed excerpts from English Literature as exercises in pronunciation of proper metropolitan English. By 1783, instruction in proper English had percolated up into writing instruction in the

universities: Adam Smith was one of the first instructors to teach English at the University of Glasgow. English in Scotland, however, was instruction in the English *language*, still far from the discipline of English as we know it; instruction in English *literature* only began to take shape after the turn of the century in India. For this history, we turn to Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (1983). As Viswanathan writes, in 1818, James Mill, author of an exhaustive three-volume *History of British India* in 1818 and the influential *Elements of Political Economy* in 1821 (and father of John Stuart Mill) was among those who advocated a less violent and more coercive civilization of the India through English-language education. (Mill had never visited India, and never would.) It is no coincidence that a Scottish missionary named Alexander Duff started the Calcutta School in 1830 to inaugurate a system of English education in India. In 1835, an act of Parliament made secondary and post-secondary English-language instruction in India standard and crown-financed—this long before any such act in England, Ireland, Scotland or Wales. MP Thomas Babbington Macaulay's oft-cited "minute" on Indian education was part of the debate that led to this act. On behalf of the use of the English language for Indian education, Macaulay points out that it is "likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East," "the language of two great European communities which are rising, the one in the south of Africa, the other in Australia," and that it is therefore the most "useful." Even though Matthew Arnold is often cited for his role in the sacralization of literature in a rapidly secularizing society, Viswanathan points out that this transfer of values really began in India. Viswanathan writes:

In what must be described as a wryly ironic commentary on literary history, the inadequacy of the English model [of civilizing Indians] resulted in fresh pressure being applied to a seemingly innocuous and not yet fully formed discipline, English literature, to perform the functions of those social institutions (such as the church) that, in England, served as the chief disseminators of value, tradition, and authority (7).

So, what David Crystal calls Global English is by no means an accident of history, or a recent phenomenon, but part of a colonial program to spread English as not only a "language of commerce" but also of "intrinsic value." English, in other words, was an import from the Empire's peripheries to its center, and came at the juncture of race, class, power, language, and literature—as it still does. Nevertheless, to become English, English would have to shed its practical orientation, explicit connection to society, and colonial origins. In Scotland, English was prose style, composition, and pronunciation; in India, it was both "useful" and "intrinsic[ally] valu[able]." It did not have a place yet in the metropole, because close reading had not yet come into existence.

That is why before English was really established (Oxford's English Studies program was founded in 1888), the work English Professors did looks strange to our eyes. For example, the first Professor of English in the United States—Francis A. March, at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, in 1857—tried, like Rev. Dale, to find a balance between the study of English literature and that of the English language. He is probably most often cited today as an example of what *not* to do, if you are an English professor. For one, March practiced and advocated phonetic spelling: in "The Study of English," he writes that "Lerning to read should begin erly" (240). March wanted to promote the progress of the English Language: in an 1860 address at Amherst College, "The English Tongue: A New Speech," he writes that English "is a living unity, an organic whole; having its final causes within itself" (28). He worked on dictionaries and orthographies because he believed, like Macaulay in India, that English would soon become a Global *lingua franca*. He says in his 1888 essay "A Universal Language" that,

The expectation that English will come into universal use is... based... on the character and circumstances of the people. The English people have been the great colonizers of modern times. They have taken possession of America, of Australia, of South Africa, the regions which are to be the seats of new empires, and they control and assimilate the populations which flow into them and which grow up in them (62-3).

It is not clear whether March knowingly echoes Macaulay's minute on Indian education here. Because March wanted to perfect the soon-to-be-universal language of English, he condemned any ignoble literature that would impede its progress. In "Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* Redivivus," he calls Whitman's "diction... repulsive... the strained speech of an uneducated man" and dubbing him "a literary 'crank' of the most desperate kind" and—most quotably and gloriously—"a prophet of the nude" (188). Still, it is important to understand that March was just trying to explain what *value* the study of English literature could have for his students, and this explanation often took the form of an explicit submitting of the subset of literature to the whole of language. For example, what March says about Shakespeare in "A Universal Language" is striking.

It is absurd to talk of one man making a language; it is doubtful whether one person can make a book of national importance. The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *Kalevala*, are believed to be growths from old ballads; the Shakespeare folio is too great to have been written by Shakespeare (62).

That is to say, for F.A. March, Literature was an appendage of Language, and even Shakespeare takes a back seat to the "living unity" and "organic whole" of a Language which ultimately "[has] its final causes"—a historical telos—"within itself." March's embrace of language over literature would eventually fall out of favor, particularly with twentieth-century literary critics. This is probably due to the breakdown of the link between language and literature: it became dubious to link the two with any program of improvement. It seemed, instead, that the best thing was to focus on how the totality of each independently worked.

In Professors Dale and March we see versions of the "haole schoolteacher" who Spahr feels herself uncomfortably metamorphosing into in *The Transformation*. In the endnotes to *The Transformation*, Spahr describes coming across Césaire's account of the "mediocre colonizer" in *Discourse on Colonialism*: "I have an intense memory of reading this shortly after arriving in Hawai'i," she writes, "and gulping with self-recognition when I came to it" (220). And after the passage (earlier quoted) on the "haole schoolteacher," Spahr writes "But mainly and most horrifically, they were mediocre" (72-3). Spahr recognizes that as an English teacher in Hawai'i, she is an unwitting emissary of what Ngugi Wa Thiong'o calls the "cultural bomb" of English (94, her citation). She writes:

They taught in a department whose purpose was to teach the literature that was written in a language that had a long colonial history, an expansionist language that was spreading to more and more places every day. The resonances of this expansion were especially felt in their time, when more and more languages were disappearing every day, disappearing so quickly that some predicated that at least 90 percent of the languages in the world would disappear in the next hundred years (74).

She also recognizes the "mediocr[ity]" of her own position as the unwitting mouthpiece for the "expansionist language." So, the feeling of "messi[ness]," "stutter[ing]," "confusion," "nervousness," "suspicion," "frustration," "[guilt]," and "misunderstanding"—the "chill," "goosebumps," "red face," and "gulp of self-recognition"—comes at the convergence of global English and Spahr's job as English Professor. In other words, Spahr's feeling is both historical

and disciplinary—with origins in English’s methodological occlusion of its own colonialist history and ongoing role.

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The realization of this occlusion evokes discomfiture in Spahr partly because it has been buried, even relatively recently. In a 1940 *Kenyon Review* essay, “Literature and Power,” Lionel Trilling pinpoints this disciplinary transformation or birth of English to November 14th, 1857—the date of Matthew Arnold’s first lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford (119). Trilling identifies in Arnold the characteristic stance of literary criticism: a simultaneous turn *towards* and *away from*. What makes Arnold’s “On the Modern Element in Literature” historical is that it was the first Regius lecture ever to be delivered in English (instead of Latin). Nevertheless, Trilling turns to Arnold not merely for having given the lecture in English, but also for a subtler explanation of the relationship between literature and society than those then currently in circulation. In “Literature and Power,” Trilling himself dismisses the idea that “history is supposed to be the weather, of which literature is the recording barometer,” and counters instead that “art offers an experience that is justified in itself” (121, 124). He singles out, by way of contrast, the progressive historian V.L. Parrington, who read Walt Whitman, William Cullen Bryant, and Mark Twain for the reflections in their writing of nineteenth-century economy and politics in his *Main Currents in American Thought* (121-2). Trilling re-states what he says Arnold himself put into words: that we should never look to literature for “function[ality]” or “immediate ends,” but less time-specific “qualities of things,” “form,” and “style” (119-120, 124, 125). “Literature and Power” makes Arnold’s “On the Modern Element in Literature” a touchstone for the uncoupling of literature from politics and history; as such, it joins the ranks of the twentieth-century disavowals of literature’s influence on politics, history. Still, Trilling is technically wrong about English’s birth, and he misconstrues Arnold. Arnold’s “On the Modern Element in Literature” is about the abiding utility of the classics for then-contemporaneous would-be readers of “modern” English, and grew into a call for educational reform in which English-language translations of Greek classics would be available for students who were standard-bearers for imperial policy. Nevertheless, it is important to take Trilling’s reading as a prescription. If we take Trilling’s interest in Arnold seriously, we can see that he looks to Arnold to carry his legacy forward with a re-articulation the values of literary *criticism*, as opposed to scholarship. Perhaps then, we can just as well approximately locate the date when language and literature came to be truly isolated from each other, and English became entirely the study of poetry’s local features in their exclusively *literary* context, with Trilling’s 1940 essay.

In the meantime, the odd and striking thing about “On the Modern Element in Literature” is that it is not about then-modern Anglophone literature at all: it is, rather, about “adequacy.” Arnold says that his goal is to “establish the absolute, the enduring interest of Greek literature, and, above all, of Greek poetry” (37). Early in the lecture, he dismisses England and its Literature in brief, quoting Sir Walter Raleigh’s *Historie of the World* to point out how “digress[ive],” “obsolete,” “[helpless]” and “clue[less]” it is (26). In place of English, Arnold turns to Greek, and offers Thucydides, Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes as the best of all literature—“critical,” “highly developed,” “insight[ful],” and “distinct[ive]” (27-8). Of Sophocles, for example, he writes:

If in the body of Athenians at that time there was, as we have said, the utmost energy of mature manhood, public and private; the most entire freedom, the most unprejudiced and

intelligent observation of human affairs—in Sophocles there is the same energy, the same maturity, the same freedom, the same intelligent observation; but all these idealized and glorified by the grace and light shed over them by the noblest poetical feeling (28).

For Arnold, the quality of Sophocles' writing is a multiple, so to speak, of his civilization (he calls Athens the "height of civilization") and his own "poetical feeling" (23). Thus, the individual achievement of a work of Literature is in a dynamic relationship with a social whole, a nation, people, a "race"; Arnold draws an analogy between fifth-century Athens and nineteenth-century England. Arnold calls the relationship between literature and society "adequacy," as if to suggest that Thucydides, Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes bore the burden of generating literature adequate to their own auspicious epoch. "Adequacy" is a formula or system that relates aesthetic works to society. The term works on a categorical level: adequacy describes a bond between the "material basis of [the] political and practical life" of a society and aesthetic output; it also works across time by connecting mid-nineteenth-century England with ancient Greece (30).

In fact, Arnold comes up with "adequacy" to specifically address an ostensible conflict between two curricula: the established Greek and Latin classics, and the inchoate canon of English Literature. By the time of Matthew Arnold's Regius lecture, English had begun to infiltrate the higher tiers of education in England as it rose from the Dissenting Academies. These non-sectarian Dissenting Academies—where rigor and practicality were valued above tradition, and instruction in English was more practical than Greek or Latin—had been founded in the seventeenth century to provide for children of non-Anglicans. They had been suppressed by the educational institution for more than a century: the 1334 Stamford Oath, for example, forbade Oxford graduates from teaching elsewhere, and was only revived to suppress the growth of these Academies. As Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools, Arnold was very aware of the pressure that English-language education was putting on education as a whole, and he had become a promoter of education reform: his essay "Democracy," first published in 1861, would advocate state-sanctioned standardized curriculum. The question that Arnold is addressing in "On the Modern Element in Literature," if indirectly, is that of educational accessibility. Arnold stakes out a position—albeit one characterized by a turn *away from* contemporaneity—in a mid-nineteenth-century debate about the place of English-language literature in English-language education. Arnold's take is that exemplarity does not reside in novelty, but waits in the past to be ascertained, to be *read*. "On the Modern Element in Literature" does the advance work of defending the "public" school reading list of classics familiar from his own education at Rugby and Oxford against the encroachment of English Literature, and, justifying a curriculum of English-language translations of these Greek and Latin classics for a broader and middling audience of readers and students. His Regius Lecture lays out a hierarchy of access: the children of the aristocrats would read Greek and Latin in the original, while the lower classes could read them in translation. Later, Arnold would adapt the hierarchy to make the "classics" of *English Literature* suitable for the highest educational level—but, in 1857, "On the Modern Element in Literature" was the opposite of a policy paper: it only provides a rationale for his structure of curriculum and access based on the quality and the qualities of the literature itself.

Indeed, Arnold's idea of "adequacy" grows out of a proto-close-reading of the particulars of texts. Later, for example, in his "On Translating Homer" (1861), Arnold will write about Homer's "grand style" and unite the "nobility" of his diction with his greatness as a writer. In other words, he will link the aspects or qualities of Homer's texts with their social import and seriousness, exemplarity, and quality as works of literature. Because Homer's very words

resonate with grandiosity, Arnold faults Dryden, Chapman, and Newman for having rendered Homer's language into old-fashioned or overly colloquial English. According to Arnold, Homer needs to be direct, clear, and elegant—although he does not offer his own translation. In his earlier 1857 Oxford Lecture, Arnold only provides an example of less-than-grand style: Lucretius, whose “depression,” “ennui,” and “detachment” fail to recommend him to the modern reader: he is “overstrained, gloom-weighted, morbid; and he who is morbid is no adequate interpreter of his age” (33). Lucretius is less-than-exemplary for the Modern era, because his tone is frustrated—Lucretius' is a language of unactualized feeling and thought, a Literature that disavows seriousness and importance. As the contrast between Homer and Lucretius indicates, Arnoldian “adequacy” inheres in aspects of the text, qualities that cut across time and translation. Arnold's insight into the connections between the qualities of literature and its quality makes him an important figure in the discipline of literary studies. Arnold proscribes a way of reading, which Lionel Trilling would eventually point to as the beginning of English Studies.

In effect, Arnold was the progenitor of close reading: “adequacy” was his word for the reciprocity of the concrete particulars of the text and their historical contexts. Literary criticism from before the twentieth century looks very different from that which follows the New Critics because earlier critics and scholars used quotations to merely echo their own positions, rather than considering the workings of these source-texts. In “Literature and Power,” Trilling extols Arnold's focus on the local effects of texts, but he also reads Arnold's turn away from the “modern” (in “On the Modern Element in Literature”) as a repudiation of the global repercussions of literature and its reading. Trilling turns to Arnold to contrast his approach to what he saw as a reductive sociological and historical textual analysis. As inexact as it might be, Trilling's take on Arnold is important because it helps us see that when twentieth-century Anglo-American literature focused on texture, it effectively did so to the detriment of the political. For Trilling, the New Critics, and champions of close reading, the experience of reading the local in a text was repeatable, portable, reproducible, and—in its own way—global. The problem was that this was not so much a global as a universal reading.

*

To talk about the shift in culture that coincided with the rise of close reading, I turn to a narrative of the school; I find it in the Introduction to Raymond Williams' 1976 *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. In 1945, Raymond Williams came back from war and re-enrolled at Cambridge University. One day, talking with another veteran, the two agreed: “we just don't speak the same language”—that both Williams and the other veteran felt uncomfortable at the university because they had missed some important transition or transformation that had occurred in the lost years. Williams expands upon this idiom:

When we come to say ‘we just don't speak the same language,’ we mean something more general: that we have different immediate values or different kinds of valuation, or that we are aware, often intangibly, of different formations and distributions of energy and interest (9).

Williams had returned after a four-year absence from the university to find that either his own or the university's “values,” “energ[ies],” and “interest[s]” had shifted. He locates this shift in a catalytic term. He writes:

I found myself preoccupied with a single word, culture, which it seemed I was hearing very much more often... in the study of literature... to indicate, powerfully but not explicitly, some central formation of values (10).

Again: in 1945, Williams returns to a subtly different university from the one he had left before, where a variant of New Criticism is the leading school of literary criticism, and close reading the prevalent methodology. Here, he finds himself out of step with this school of thought—with “some central formation of values” having to do with a word, “culture,” that organizes a widespread set of “energ[ies],” and “interest[s].” “Today I can explain what I believe was happening,” he says: the formation of “an idea of criticism which, from Arnold through Leavis, had *culture* as one of its central terms” (11). First-hand, Williams is describing the concurrent development of critical methodology and culture, a development that took place in both the UK and the US, following similar, albeit different, trajectories. He describes looking culture up in the OED years later: “[the] changes of sense I had been trying to understand had begun in English, it seemed, in the early nineteenth century.” This was the same time as the beginning of the re-configuration of the study of texts in the university: the Rev. Thomas Dale was appointed at University College, London in 1828. That is to say, the word “culture” had begun to change not long after Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—a poem that (like Brooks’ reading of it) itself does cultural work across time, in its own look back at antiquity. Culture began to refer not to manners and customs, but to two different and related ideas. The first, a very broad and almost anthropological meaning: all of the values, norms, expectations, and works of a people, nation, society, or even our species—a global notion. The second, more specific and local, a timeless common element of the plastic arts, music, theater, and poetry. Close reading assiduously excluded the first to cultivate the second. Close reading requires an idea of “dramatic context” to put the local features of the poem into an intra-poetic and exclusively *literary* context. By excluding *language*—with all of its global political entanglements—close reading establishes a field of poetry as autonomous, separate, “self-validating,” and only answerable to its own rules.

*

In fact, close reading would predominate in the classroom for decades by way of pedagogy, and specifically *via* Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s influential 1938 textbook *Understanding Poetry*, which, as Alan Golding points out (in his *From Outlaw to Classic*), sold well more than 300,000 copies, and went through three editions and seven printings. *Understanding Poetry* is a kind of self-contained poetry pedagogy kit for teachers and students for classroom use: it includes both an anthology of poems and model explications of them.

The first (1938) edition of *Understanding Poetry* begins with a “Letter to the Teacher,” in which we read that: “A poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships, and the poetic quality should never be understood as inhering in one or more factors taken in isolation” (ix). Brooks and Warren also say that a teacher should never substitute “paraphrase of logical and narrative content,” “study of biographical and historical materials,” or “inspirational and didactic interpretation” for the poem. In this edition of *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren still provide a place for literary history—in this first edition, the poem is the “ends,” and what we know about the author’s life and times can be mobilized to achieve that ends. “Paraphrase,” they write, “may be necessary as a preliminary step in the reading of the poem,

and a study of the biographical and historical background may do much to clarify interpretation; but these things should be considered as means and not as ends” (iv).

However, over the course of the first, second, and third editions of *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren beat a retreat from this earlier position, even as they try to further flesh out the original idea. In the second (1950) edition, Brooks and Warren call the poem a “little drama,” and emphasize its special mode of “being”—both ideas which build on notions articulated elsewhere (namely Brooks’ 1947 *Well Wrought Urn* and John Crowe Ransome’s 1941 *The New Criticism*) as “dramatic context” and “ontology.” First, in a “Postscript” which they add after the “Letter to the Teacher,” Brooks and Warren talk about what is outside of the poem’s purview:

A study of poetry that starts from the notion of the poem as a little drama can scarcely be said to ignore the human materials that enter into poetry, for the dramatic situation is dramatic only because it urgently involves human impulses (xxiv).

As they attest, poetry is “self-validating” and has “intrinsic value.” In an echo of close reading’s self-perpetuating quality, they write:

What the relation is between this intrinsic value and other values is a most vexed and delicate question, one that can scarcely be settled here. Perhaps it can never be settled.

Perhaps it is the fundamental kind of question that must be lived through, over and over again.

Here Brooks and Warren ask us to imagine the poem on the proscenium stage, and ourselves in the audience suspending our disbelief: this conceit has performance built into it. But there is also something undeniably defensive about their revisions. “Some teachers have felt that *Understanding Poetry* implied a disregard for historical and biographical study,” they write; they say that in the earlier 1938 edition they *did* “impl[y]” both a “relation of criticism to other kinds of literary studies” and between the poem and “its historical situation” and “the body of the poet’s work” (xxi).

In the third 1960 edition, Brooks and Warren take this even further by trying to include the reader. Rather, Brooks and Warren argue that the implications of their “little drama” of the poem have been there right along, and that the reader (“unlike a robot”) should recognize these dramatic implications of the poem’s form:

Poems are read by human beings, which means that the reader, unlike a robot, must be able to recognize the dramatic implications of the form. In earlier editions of this book we assumed, perhaps too confidently, that these provisos were clearly implicit in our thinking. If, in this revision, we spell them out, that can do no harm (xiv).

In the three editions and the evolution of *Understanding Poetry*, we can track two ideas: that the poem’s particulars should be referred to its totality, and that any implications or ramification of this circular and synechdochal dynamic are second-order ramifications that grow out of our engagement with the poem. The later editions do some backtracking to establish the now-missing critical context into which their original critical conceits fit: against a regnant literary scholarship that disregarded the particulars of the poem. However, Brooks and Warren find themselves, by the third edition, re-articulating the connection between a method that focuses on the poem, and its world by claiming that we can read poem for the “value” it derives from the fact that it springs from “basic human impulses” (22).

*

In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak tries to defend and update close reading by appending *teleopoiesis* to it. When Spivak proposes pairing close reading's attentiveness to texture with a *teleopoietic* "copying (rather than cutting) and pasting" she also—and presumably unknowingly—evokes twenty-first-century poetry's preoccupation with appropriation. For example, Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* (2003) is a verbatim transcription of the *New York Times* of September 1, 2000, K. Silem Mohammad uses Google to generate the language of his poems in *Deer Head Nation* (2003), and Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts* (2010) is her re-publishing of legal writing as poetry. These poetic acts of "copying (rather than cutting) and pasting" push Brooks' admonition to read a poem in "dramatic context" to its breaking point; by putting extra-literary texts into the form of poetry, they exaggerate the role of consequential context in reading. Much of this appropriative poetry (such as Mohammad's Flarf project) draws racist, sexist, pornographic, homophobic, disturbingly violent, and rankly consumerist language from the web in the service of a two-pronged criticism: of the toxicity of contemporary society, and the quiescence of a poetry which would turn a blind eye to it. But I think we can read more into this poetry: this "copying... and pasting" effectively re-wires its own close reading to open it up to pointedly extra-aesthetic questions.

For example, in a talk that poet Rob Fitterman first delivered at Small Press Traffic in San Francisco in 2000 called "Identity Theft: My Subjectivity," Fitterman says of the appropriative impulse in general that: "The strategy is to reframe works that already exist in new contexts to give them new meanings... The plagiarist takes a source and reframes it in order to call attention to its new context, to cull meaning from this shift" (5-6). Fitterman began his talk by playing Alice Cooper's 1971 song "Is It my Body?" Alice Cooper is the name for the on-stage persona of the musician Vincent Furnier and the rock band he sings in; the band's stage act is horror-show vaudeville that notoriously incorporates a guillotine. In "Identity Theft," Fitterman says, "I really like Alice Cooper as a sentimental throwback, and as rock music and I find it cheesy and silly and interesting as a reference to a particular moment that is an important departure from a more authentic rock. There is both an embrace and a critical distance" (5). The "embrace and... critical distance" that Fitterman takes towards Alice Cooper's music and shtick (which I think Furnier also takes in his performance as Alice Cooper) approximates the relationship Fitterman fashions for the reader to the source-text that he appropriates in a poem called "The Goths" from *Metropolis XXX: Metropolis XXX: The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* is part of a series of texts—*Metropolis 1-15* (2000), *Metropolis 16-29* (2002), and *Sprawl: Metropolis 30A* (2010)—which all re-contextualize source-text; "The Goths" is a verbatim transcript of an Angelfire web-page (a personal webpage, that is) for "Goths of Color" spelling out a set of "Bad Kitty Laws." (I have reproduced the website on the entire next page.)

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Bad Kitty Laws



Being a Bad Kitty is an art, and we are artists. We can conceal ourselves in any setting, blend in with any background, and disguise ourselves with anything around us. We only LOOK like we fit in with these people...and we find it amusing that they cannot tell the difference. Everything is all just a game, but we are playing to win.

Being a Bad Kitty means that we may be domesticated, but we are not tame. Our claws are still the sharpness of a hunter, beneath our lounging sensuous forms is muscle. We can strike and strike hard, but only when we feel threatened, and we are always in control of the situation we are in. Bad Kitties kick ass, but take names beforehand.

Being a Bad Kitty means that we do what we want when we want. We cannot please everyone, so we might as well please ourselves. Being comfortable is always preferable to being "in". What we wear and what we enjoy is a part of our beings that we will not compromise. It is an expression of our selves. We accept that it might mean we do not 100% fit in everywhere, but Bad Kitties enjoy their own territory anyway.

Being a Bad Kitty means making everyday acts sensuous. From bathing with lots of oils to eating t.v. dinners by candlelight, everything that we do can become a ritual to ourselves for us to enjoy and revel in, purring all the while. It is sitting in the sun, dozing. It is a single piece of Godiva chocolate. It is chai tea at just the right temperature. It is velvet leggings. It doesn't matter what is being done, as long as it is lengthy, drawn out to the utmost, and done with full sensual enjoyment.

Being a Bad Kitty means that there are going to be some people who cannot stand us, either because we are foreign to them, because our coat is the wrong shade, because we are shaped like a Maine Coon and not like a Sphinx. In true Bad Kitty fashion, ignore them. These people do not understand the true mystical nature of the Bad Kitty, and we cannot teach the ignorant. And if there is something a Bad Kitty is a master at, it is "ignoring with style".

Being a Bad Kitty means wearing what we want to wear, when we want to wear it, and everyone else can piss off. The only requirement is that it is as sensual as we are. We know what looks best on us, and we do not moan about those few extra pounds or the fact that perhaps our legs are just two inches too short. We are works of art, we know how to be sensuous as any size or shape or color of coat, and we play up with style. Bad Kitties are NEVER trashy.

Being a Bad Kitty means having groups of other Bad Kitties for social grooming and fun, but never taking on the group mind. Bad Kitties can associate with other Bad Kitties without the cat-fights and territorial battles, because that is undignified, and we would rather be a DOG for a day than be undignified. Bad Kitties do not feel the need to argue why we differ on certain points, and if we are truly with other Bad Kitties, explanations should be unnecessary anyway.

Being a Bad Kitty means remembering the Laws of Goth when appropriate, enjoying past pleasures and treats, but never resting on the past's laurels. There are always new territories to explore, new terrain to conquer, and new bad kitty things to do. Being a Bad Kitty means to never be bored.

Being a Bad Kitty means taking risks. Nine lives are built in, and rather lose one of those lives to experience than hoard them for a rainy day that never comes. Be as confident as a cat crossing the street. There are always a few people who are going to speed up and try to hit us, but as a Bad Kitty, we know how to swerve when we need to, and when to let that cat in front of us get hit by the car.

Being a Bad Kitty means that taking responsibility is a subtle art like anything else. Falling off the couch happens...we lick our fur back into place, and stalk away with dignity. Next time, we'll remember how to do things properly.

Most of all, being a Bad Kitty is KNOWING how beautiful and bad we really are...and loving every minute of it. Keep your coat sleek and neat, your claws well trimmed but sharp, keep yourself graceful and your tail up always. All Bad Kitties, no matter the size, breed, fur coloration or temperament, are works of art, and the people around them recognize it, even if they do not know why they are drawn to you, drawn they are.

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Fig. 3. "Bad Kitty Laws"

Even at a cursory reading, it is apparent that the rhetoric in the source-text for “The Goths” of the “Bad Kitty” subculture within the Goth counter-culture is deeply problematic. As bold as the performance of confidence on display in “The Bad Kitty Laws” might be, it relies in equal measure on the conformity it exacts from its audience. The first “stanza” of Fitterman’s poem reads:

Being a Bad Kitty means that we may be domesticated, but we are not tame. Our claws are still the sharpness of a hunter, beneath our lounging sensuous forms is muscle. We can strike and strike hard, but only when we feel threatened, and we are always in control of the situation we are in. Bad Kitties kick ass, but take names beforehand.

The Bad Kitty affectation (“Bad Kitties kick ass”) has suspicious motives: an individual who takes on the “Bad Kitty” persona not only needs to be a cat to express herself, but also needs other people to follow her and do the same thing. If we find the “Bad Kitty Laws” creepy, we can only imagine just how desperate the people who follow these Laws must be. The fourth stanza reveals some details of the Law-giver’s and potential followers’ lives:

Being a Bad Kitty means making everyday acts sensuous. From bathing with lots of oils to eating t.v. dinners by candlelight, everything that we do can become a ritual to ourselves for us to enjoy and revel in, purring all the while. It is sitting in the sun, dozing. It is a single piece of Godiva chocolate. It is chai tea at just the right temperature. It is velvet leggings. It doesn’t matter what is being done, as long as it is lengthy, drawn out to the utmost, and done with full sensual enjoyment.

At first glance, the “Bad Kitty Laws” are stupid and escapist: “Bad Kitties” retreat from their communities and lives into infantile fantasies, and through the far-fetched persona of a ridiculous anthropomorphic projection of an animal. So, on the one hand, Fitterman’s “The Goths” could be aligned with the kinds of social and cultural critique implied in Flarf.

That said, it seems cruel to pick on the “Bad Kitties.” For one, it is fascinating that there is a sub-sub-culture of “Bad Kitties” within the Goth subculture—and that a group of women have connected through the web to fashion an alternative means of self-identity, rather than acceding to other peoples’ ideas of their “authentic” identity. The “Bad Kitties” are an example of the liberating “plasticity” of identity that Fitterman describes in “Identity Theft,” a mechanism so flexible that “Bad Kitties” can become un-self-consciously absorbed in their online personas. The full complexity of the “Bad Kitty” community remains to be inferred from the poem—I will just aver that there is an entire culture of people who write in chat rooms on the internet in the voices of cats. Indeed, I could also point to LOLCats—websites where people attribute funny sayings to photos of cats—and “furries,” who are people who like to dress up as animals, often cats. There is also something dear about the vulnerability of the “Bad Kitty,” a “Goth of Color” who would so readily expose her own insecurities and vulnerabilities on a public website. The fifth stanza of the poem reads:

Being a Bad Kitty means that there are going to be some people who cannot stand us, either because we are foreign to them, because our coat is the wrong shade, because we are shaped like a Maine Coon and not like a Sphinx. In true Bad Kitty fashion, ignore them. These people do not understand the true mystical nature of the Bad Kitty, and we cannot teach the ignorant. And if there is something a Bad Kitty is a master at, it is ‘ignoring with style.’

The “Bad Kitty” community are disempowered outsiders (“some people... cannot stand us”), oddballs (“we are foreign to them”), and perhaps overweight (“we are shaped like...”); if they have chosen to come together to act out a harmless fantasy of empowerment on the internet, it

seems insensitive to fault them. While I do not want to make any overly lofty claims for the interactivity and community that the internet can foster—nor do I think these claims are justified by Fitterman’s poem—I do think that the experience of reading “The Goths” makes palpable the vulnerability underlying the bravado of the Goth subculture. We read:

Being a Bad Kitty means that taking responsibility is a subtle art like anything else.

Falling off the couch happens when we lick our fur back into place, and stalk away with dignity. Next time, we’ll remember how to do things properly.

“The Goths” elicits a multivalent or multi-faceted close reading by merit of having re-contextualized the text of this website into a poem. Fitterman’s poetic ethics takes the form of a fidelity to his source-text: Fitterman chooses to leave the “Bad Kitty Laws” unaltered, and let the different paragraphs or strophes come across as stanzas of a poem. By repurposing the source-text, Fitterman asks his readers to bridge the literature / language divide and apply a close reading to an extra-literary text, and to honor the irreducible local texture of the source-material. Brooks and Warren pin the value of poetry on its “spring[ing]” from a “basic human impulse”: Fitterman’s “Bad Kitt[ies]” try their hardest to be other than “human.”

*

In her 2008 book *Zong!*, M. NourbeSe Philip also feels responsible to her source-material: her “imaginative making” is ethically motivated, and demands, in turn, a close reading that apprehends what’s outside of the poem’s “dramatic context.” First, the background: in 1781, a British ship named the *Zong* left the island of São Tomé off the coast of Gabon overloaded with slaves and headed for Jamaica. The *Zong* strayed from its course, the journey went on much longer than it should have, the ship began to run out of fresh water, and Captain Luke Collingwood—who knew that slaves who died a “natural death” would not be covered by insurance—ordered 150 of the slaves aboard thrown into the ocean. In Britain, the *Zong*’s underwriters declined to reimburse the ship’s owners for their loss of property, and the subsequent legal case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, took up the question of whether the ship’s owners should be compensated for the slaves thrown overboard. Nobody was ever tried for mass-murder. Philip’s poetic engagement with the story of the *Zong* is historical: she aims to re-tell the story of the massacre on the *Zong* in the voices of the slaves on the ship. She goes so far as to identify *Zong!* as a co-authored book: on the book’s cover, it says it is “as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng,” who the book’s inside jacket flap then identifies as “the voice of the ancestors revealing the submerged stories of all who were on board the *Zong*.” Since Philip’s only source is the English-language documentation from the court case, Philip has to go to her source-text for the telling and derange it to find the untold story: in *Zong!*, Philip’s fidelity is to what is beyond the source-text. For example, since none of the names of the slaves on board the *Zong!* were ever recorded (and even the exact number of dead is in question), Philip puts names in tiny text underneath each page from the first section of her text. In effect, Philip is trying to write about the unreadability of the massacre on the *Zong*

She does this by re-training the reader’s eye. Unlike Fitterman in “The Goths,” Philip feels the need to take her source-text and spread it out over the page, scattering the words of *Gregson v. Gilbert* and the words she finds within words of *Gregson v. Gilbert* across the page. I reproduce part a page from *Zong!* below:

found a rose fou
 nd africa un
 der water
 proved
 justice danger
 ous the law
 a crime she
 died es es es
 oh es
 oh oh es es oh
 es s o
 s s o
 s s
 o s
 os
 os
 bone

Fig. 4. M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!, pg. 63

When a reader who is habituated to reading horizontally from the top left-hand to the bottom right-hand corner of the page tries to read *Zong!*, the placement of the words and word fragments makes his or her eye drift across the page. This state of readerly dislocation presses the reader to consider that the text might follow inexplicit conventions for layout or parsing. After several pages of this kind of reading, the reader will begin to wonder if she or he sees patterns: non-horizontal connections between the fragments of text on the page—"justice / ous / a crime she / died es"; syntax that convenes and then break apart and reconvenes—so that "justice" or "danger" can be "proved," but then "justice" is "proved danger / ous"; words that break apart into their roots and prefixes or suffixes, like "danger / ous"; words within words, like the "os" in "dangerous" and the "save" in "slave"; "white rivers" (as printers and compositors call them) of blank space flowing over the page; and the white space enveloping all of these words, which almost seems to conceal the hidden parts of some of these words. The diligent reader tracks an associative and recombinatorial movement of language down the page: the "dangerous" becomes

a ship's "SOS," then an *os*, which then translates from the Latin into "bone"; the "save" from "SOS" ("Save Our Ship") then becomes a "salve" and "slave."

More than anything else, Philip is modeling an approach in *Zong!* towards her source material which is inseparable from that source material's about-ness. The penultimate section of her book, entitled "Notanda," is a reproduction of her journal of reading and re-reading the source-text over a period of several years. Like Keats, Philip takes on the vexing problem of the poet's responsibility to the representation of a violence that underwrites the source-text. Like Fitterman, Philip exploits the resources of the poem's "dramatic context" to turn it inside out—so that we not only close read the fine-grain texture of loaded extra-aesthetic material, but also try to re-trace the connections between the now-formal particulars in the poem and their motivations and repercussions beyond the page. In this way, *Zong!* and "The Goths" are models for close reading, and ask us to re-think the way we approach a text: to listen with an ear for attribution, for alternate voices within this text, and for what is not in the text. What Philip is troubled by is that the dead from the *Zong!* came up against an incomprehensible wall of the English language. *Zong!* destabilizes English, in the way that Spahr describes; it also challenges the idea that poetry is defined exclusively by its local texture. Instead, works like *The Transformation*, "The Goths," and *Zong!* both model and encourage close readings that animate local-level features in the global political contexts.

Chapter Three

The Historiographical Animal

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
—*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 5

What does it mean to bring history to bear on the reading of a poem—to *historicize* a poem? In her 2006 video-poem “Situation #1,” Claudia Rankine is thinking through this question, or a version of it, at least: in her poem, Rankine performs a historicization of a few seconds of the 2006 FIFA World Cup Finals soccer match between France and Italy. I take care to say Rankine “performs” this historicization because hers is a mock-reading that empties out its own terms to press her readers to re-think what it means to project history onto a text in the first place. In this chapter, I extend close historical readings of “Situation #1” and Bhanu Kapil’s 2009 *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children* to argue that poetry works to continually re-configure and re-arrange its past and context. In doing so, I reject the kind of historicism that would figure poetry as a rôle player on a stage acting out a script authored by the invisible and precedence-taking determinants. I recommend we historicize poetry as maker, rather than actor, of history.

The metaphor of history as a play in which individuals are actors cuts across both poetry criticism and the philosophy of history: R.G. Collingwood, for one, maintains in *The Idea of History* (published 1946) that “The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the *re-enactment* of the past thought in the historian’s own mind” (215). For Collingwood, it is our uniquely human nature to layer writing upon writing as we re-imagine and re-write past lives. In Collingwood’s figuring, history is characterized by artificiality, but a critical historiography can sort through this super-compounded artifice to find the coincidence between past and present which can then be mined for the total, underlying, ahistorical laws, principles, or—in some formulations, though not Collingwood’s—“structure” of history. For Collingwood, under the pressure of a historiographically self-conscious historicism, history collapses into nature. That nature tends, however, to become a catch-all for an overriding critical pessimism, as historicism frequently discloses the primitive, animalistic, and selfish impulses—the “barbarism”—lurking omnipresent behind each individual historical event. In effect, the historian looking to contextualize an event or text often finds the Hobbesian “state of nature” it masks. Rankine’s poem pushes back against this idea of history’s nature.

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In “Situation #1,” Rankine adds a voice-over to a slow-motion video clip of French-Algerian soccer superstar Zinedine Zidane’s infamous headbutt of Italian defender Marco Materazzi in response to race-baiting in the 2006 FIFA World Cup Finals match. The headbutt is infamous because after Zidane was ejected, Italy went on to win in overtime, and fans were left wondering whether France could have won had Zidane been available. Zidane’s foul was also his

swan song as a player: he had previously announced that he would retire after the World Cup match, and he kept his word. In “Situation #1,” the video clip of the headbutt and the few crucial seconds before it is pixilated and blurry, so that neither Zidane’s nor Materazzi’s facial features are discernable. In the meantime, the sound that Rankine layers over the clip primarily consists of a reading of a collage of literary texts from across history—Franz Fanon, James Baldwin, Maurice Blanchot, Ralph Ellison, *Othello*, Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, Albert Camus, Homi Bhabha—all about the first-person experience of being a black man. Rankine’s video-poem begins with an epigraph from Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*,

...Nothing is isolated in history—*certain humans are situations* (12)

and I include a few excerpts from the voice-over text of “Situation #1” below:

Something is there before us that is neither the living person himself, nor any sort of reality, neither the same as the one who is alive, nor another...

(from Blanchot’s *The Gaze of Orpheus*)

Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word.

(from Ellison’s “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity”)

Let him do his spite. My services which I have done... shall out-tongue his complaints.

(from Shakespeare’s *Othello*)

The struggle to achieve contains for all its horror something very beautiful.

(from Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*)



Fig. 5. Still from Claudia Rankine’s “Situation #1”

In the voice-over, these texts are unattributed; at the end of the version of the video-poem available on Rankine’s web site, a rolling roster of credits provides most of the authors’ names. Rankine reads the voice-over text in a serious, warbling, and quiet voice. The track has a slight echo, and you can occasionally hear Rankine’s tongue clicking against the inside of her mouth.

In addition, we also hear an unplaceable background noise, which might be either a body noise, such a heartbeat or breathing, or a mechanical noise, such as a ventilator. On the whole, the poem's audio track serves to drown out that what is inaudible in the video clip, an utterance which none of the match's millions of spectators could decipher: what exactly Marco Materazzi said. After the match, British tabloids claimed to have secured the services of lip readers who said Materazzi either called Zidane a "dirty Algerian shit" or the "son of a terrorist whore," or wished an "ugly death to him and his family." Rankine's voice-over in "Situation #1" includes what some accounts have Materazzi saying to Zidane—"big Algerian shit, dirty terrorist, nigger..." Later, Materazzi would bring libel suits against *The Sun*, *Daily Star*, and *Daily Mail*, and each in turn would withdraw their allegations, pay him settlements, and publicly apologize. Still, Materazzi must have said something to provoke an experienced player like Zidane. In an interview on France's CanalPlus television station on July 12th, 2006, Zidane apologizes to children and parents who saw his foul, but also steps back from the specifics of his and Materazzi's interaction to attest that officials ought to proactively punish "*provocation*," rather than "*réaction*." He says: "*Est-ce que vous croyez, vous, dans une finale de Coupe du monde comme ça, alors que je suis à dix minutes de la fin de ma carrière, que je vais faire un geste comme cela parce que cela me fait plaisir?*" In the voice-over text of "Situation #1," Rankine includes an English-language translation of this question of Zidane's: "Do you think two minutes from the end of the World Cup final, two minutes from the end of my career, I wanted to do that?" Materazzi's notorious and probably racist slur and Zidane's subsequent foul reside in and cross over between both the poem's visual text and its voice-over text. But the basic formal elements of "Situation #1" are: the slow-motion video clip, and the audio track with its voice-over text and whirring noise.

Rankine works to elicit critical self-consciousness by asking her readers to figure out what the relationship is between the two formal elements that she juxtaposes in "Situation #1." One possible link is historical: since the voice-over collage is a historical cross-section of texts about race, Rankine's poem might well be taking up the past's persistence in the present. Since the voice-over texts are literary, Rankine might well be dramatizing the way that literary texts about universal themes speak to readers even after the immediate circumstances of their composition, audience, referents, and context have fallen away. In the meantime, Rankine ups the stakes of the reader's task of reconciling the two by lingering on a recent, racially charged, and widely viewed outbreak of violence. She holds out the possibility the juxtaposition of Zidane's headbutt and the texts of her trans-historical collage reveal a commonality that then points to human nature. As such, "Situation #1" looks at the way the text of history coalesces into present acts. And while the voice-over text speaks to the event, and vice-versa, it is the two together that make up the entire text of "Situation #1." In that way, the poem looks at an inverse and immanent transformation: the crystallization of an act into a text, which is then available for reading. Rankine's "Situation #1" asks us to decide whether its formal elements—video-clip and voice-over, act and text—are a closed circuit, or something else.

Of course, Rankine's poem is a historicization of Zidane's foul, and historicization is precisely the way of reading a text as *not* a closed circuit. Zidane's headbutt is what I.A. Richards, drawing on Freud in his 1936 *Philosophy of Rhetoric* to rebut what he (Richards) calls the "One and Only True Meaning Superstition," means by an "over-determined" instant: one in which a myriad of associations, connotation, correlations, and coincidences contribute to overall significance (38-9). As a prime example of a detail that adds associatively to overall meaning, Richards uses the "peacock's feather" from a sentence from Shakespeare's *Henry V*: "You may

as well go about to turn the sun to ice with fanning in his face with a peacock's feather" (Act IV, Scene 1). "Situation #1" adds historical specificity to Zidane's headbutt, layering and writing over it to accrue indirect detail, particulars, and information. Rankine slows it and the moments before it down, giving her audience time to think about the complex factors that go into making it happen, such as Zidane's awkward status as an Algerian on the French national team in light of Algeria's protracted struggle for independence against France and Algerians' present-day lower-class status in France, and the privilege Materazzi implicitly possesses merely by virtue of his whiteness. Nevertheless, Rankine's poem also takes specific purchase away from the moment by linking it up with a larger idea. What Rankine does with the headbutt is anachronistic, inasmuch as that the poem's voice-over text is made up of a range of literary texts (Fanon, Baldwin, Blanchot, Ellison, *Othello*, Douglass, Wright, Camus, Bhabha) from across history, all masquerading as Zidane's own first-person speech. The context into which Rankine puts Zidane's foul is emphatically trans-historical, and in this sense she de-historicizes the moment, plucking it out of its immediate context to put it into a literary context. In this sense, Rankine's "Situation #1" might be read as a historicization that implies that literature transcends specific moments in history, so that Zidane's acting out actually merely acts out a literary archetype—see *Othello*, *Native Son*—of the black man's irrational overflow of violence. In this reading of Rankine's reading, video-clip and voice-over, act and text form a complete circle with a timeless universal at its core.

What agitates against this—and I think this is the most important aspect of Rankine's poem—is that "Situation #1" is more historiographical than historical: it is artifice deliberately compounded onto artifice. In her poem, Rankine represents representations—the video of the foul and the voice-over text—to perform a second-order reading. If historicization is supposed to thicken our sense of a text's meaning by enumerating all its associations, connotations, correlations, and coincidences, Rankine does part of this work for us by folding a transect of literature about race into her own text: she auto-historicizes. And in doing so, she does not just historicize the headbutt, but stages a historicization of it, putting the operations of historicization on full display. That is to say, Rankine opens up the collage of texts to a re-reading by virtue of re-contextualizing them in her poem, and asks how the way we read these texts has conspired to predict our reading of the act depicted in the clip. History, here, provides a predetermined idiom of race and racism, and a framework for integrating all possible outcomes. In "Situation #1," Rankine reads an "over-determined" instant for how it has become so. In this way, Rankine's is a reading that undoes itself, because it partly shows how the reading of the specific moment is foreordained. In a way, then, Zidane's headbutt is not new, but a recycling of past interpretations.

But again, there is more to it than that: Rankine makes her readers aware of our historical pre-conception that history is repeating itself in Zidane's headbutt and her poem. The first time I saw and heard "Situation #1," it only gradually dawned on me that the voice-over was not Rankine's ventriloquizing of Zidane's interior monologue, but a palimpsest of other texts. (There is no indication at the beginning "Situation #1" of the voice-over text's source-texts; the version on Rankine's website ends with credits, but when I first saw the poem at a reading in 2006, it did not.) Indeed, I only came to recognize that the language was drawn from elsewhere when I heard the Shakespearean diction of the passage from *Othello*: "Let him do his spite. My services which I have done... shall out-tongue his complaints" (Act I, Scene 2). Rankine plays on the audience's gradually dawning recognition of the trans-historicity of the voice-over. As the audience realizes that the language is not original, we also recognize that the singular voice we have been projecting—imagining the words to be the clip's protagonist, Zidane's—is an illusion, behind

which is a rôle. But even more than this, I am interested in the very fact that “Situation #1” elicits self-consciousness in its audience, that it does something to its viewers, audience, or readers. The poem’s effect on its audience models an efficacy that Rankine can extend to the subject of her poem.

In sum, Rankine brings Zidane’s headbutt to bear on history in “Situation #1.” Even as Rankine does a close historical reading—and I see that flagged in her choice to play the video clip in slow motion, and focus carefully on one brief interval—she also focuses on an instant that disrupts paradigm of historical reading. She does an unreading, not only inasmuch as that the particular circumstances of Materazzi and Zidane’s interaction dissolve into a larger narrative of race, and the very texts of her text are drawn from elsewhere, but also in that the juxtaposition of voice-over and video-clip makes her poem’s artifice—her choice to think about race and history alongside this moment from contemporary sport—more readily apparent. This close unreading is necessitated by her subject: even with a phalanx of cameras around the pitch and hundreds of millions of people watching live on television, Materazzi says something to Zidane that is inaudible. He exploits a privilege that belongs exclusively to the white racist, whispers the slur that concentrates a word the racism palpable in the scene’s backdrop, and gets away with it. The tension now shifts onto Zidane: it is incumbent on him to disregard the slur, and maintain a prevailing façade of civility. Materazzi and Zidane are players in the theater of history, and the audience prays for no less than the continued maintenance of civility, artifice, and illusion—that is *our* rôle as audience, and, in the end, our complicity. Yet when Zidane suddenly bursts into violence, his act seems even more aptly tragic. His outbreak only adds verisimilitude to the scene. After the fact, it seems to have been predictable that Materazzi’s Iago-like use of language would bring down the game’s hero by activating his human nature. But remember: Rankine’s “Situation #1” lingers on an undecipherable slur. She depicts a gap in comprehensibility with repercussions. She asks us to read what reading misses, and in doing so, she reveals that we are not always equipped to read what is there to be read, and what needs to be read.

To Zidane, what happened in the game might have felt infuriatingly out of his control: he may have felt like—and we could well read him as—a puppet of history. But I will note that Rankine’s poem is about indecipherability, not ineffability. The reversal it focuses on is one in which the moment which is supposed to be the culmination of all texts itself apt reacts against history—a “*réaction*” to the “*provocation*.” Indeed, in Rankine’s poem, Zidane speaks: his monologue comes through the medium of the literary historical texts of the voice-over. Historicization is so often about enumerating social factors that bear on our understanding of poetry’s meaning, and Rankine’s poem does seem custom-built for a smart reading of a cross-historical inter-textual reading of race. But Rankine’s “Situation #1” is also about the bringing of history to bear on a reading in such a way as to recognize the potential for eruption. Rankine’s poem anticipates our historicization, and therefore demands a meta-historical reading: that we read it by considering the historical circumstances that lead it to thematize history. In the poem, Rankine mimics historicization in that she opens up one moment to be read as a synecdoche for the total historical picture of its time. But she also then makes it possible to read her emulation of reading as itself synecdochal for a current state of historical reading. She asks what historicization does for the historicizer, and what it would mean to historicize the present.

If we were to try to historicize Rankine’s “Situation #1”—a poem which itself historicizes—we might begin by re-constructing the conditions or context of its composition and reception, a context in which historicization itself comes under consideration. Rankine’s poem turns Zidane’s outbreak of violence into something more than a moment in history: it turns it into

a moment with historiographical implications. In other words, ours is a historiographical moment—to historicize Rankine’s poem we have to apprehend that context. For an example of what she’s writing against, I’m going to turn to a seminal New Historical text and a formidable reading (of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* and *Henry V*): Stephen Greenblatt’s widely influential, much-cited, much-reduced, and much-maligned “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*.” “Invisible Bullets” gives Rankine license and precedent to think about the ways texts from different times and places are interconnected via mechanisms of power. It also provides Rankine with an institutional and critical model for thinking through her own role as historicizer—that is, Greenblatt authorizes Rankine to think historiographically. But what I think Rankine thinks is wrong with Greenblatt’s essay—and I see this through the lens of Rankine’s poem—is his insistence that all possible subversion is subject to containment. Rankine re-enacts this kind of historicization as a way of showing its limits; she responds to a historicization that would read Zidane’s headbutt as if he were a puppet, and as if every subversive act were subsumable to a contained circuit of representation. That is to say, Rankine pushes back against the subsumption of individual agency to historicism’s history.

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I read Stephen Greenblatt’s 1985 essay “Invisible Bullets” as not only an elaborate reading of the stage-craft of state-craft in *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, but also as a referendum on the state of literary criticism. In his essay, Greenblatt famously reads Thomas Harriot’s 1588 *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* to draw out a dynamic of subversion and containment. According to Greenblatt, even if Harriot’s text has within it a trace of resistance to orthodox authorities of the time (church and state), that feeble impulse is part of, anticipated and neutralized by—perhaps even cultivated by—those same authorities in their exercise of power. In his essay, Greenblatt is careful to never pit Harriot against any single person who represents power in sixteenth-century England, like Queen Elizabeth: he rather locates power in a diffuse network of representations and their acceptable range of interpretations. Hence, Greenblatt can turn to Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* and *Henry V* and find that the monarch’s authority is only reaffirmed by the performance of its precariousness in the plays. In short, all possible readings that would find subversion in Harriot’s text or Shakespeare’s are themselves contained within a larger interpretive framework. Greenblatt turns this dynamic on contemporary readers: “We locate as ‘subversive’ in the past precisely those things that are *not* subversive to ourselves,” he writes, “that pose no threat to the order by which we live and allocate resources” (29, his emphasis). Our fantasy of the “subversive” element in a text is defused by the fact of the textuality of its context.

In those terms, authority can comfortably promote subversion to then appropriate it; indeed, Greenblatt focuses most of all on the places, in texts and history, where state power and literature coincide. He draws his theme from Shakespeare, who—no coincidence—comprises the literary critical enterprise’s central canonical presence. Shakespeare figures state-craft and stage-craft, and history as theater. For example, at the onset of *Henry V*, the chorus invokes the muse:

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene! (Act I, Prologue, Lines 1-4)

What I want to pick up on in “Invisible Bullets” is this hook or figure that Greenblatt picks up on from Shakespeare that also runs through the historiographical and literary critical traditions: the methodological figuring of text, history, and power as a drama.

Greenblatt comes at his main claim about politics in “Invisible Bullets” indirectly because he wants to emphasize power’s ubiquity. Greenblatt sees it as “over-determined,” in Richards’ sense: it prevails in all world’s particulars, even those that seem oppositional. Citing a statement attributed to Queen Elizabeth, “We princes... are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world,” Greenblatt reaffirms the widely held notion that “Elizabethan power... depends upon a privileged visibility” (44). Thus, on the most basic level, Greenblatt claims that this “privileged visibility” is by design heterogeneous: he writes that monarchical authority in *Henry V* “involves as its positive condition the constant production of its own radical subversion and the powerful containment of that subversion” (30). This dynamic then functions beyond the bounds of England and the Globe Theater, too: intellectuals like Thomas Harriot are recruited to “[test] upon the bodies and minds of non-Europeans or, more generally, the non-civilised... a hypothesis about the origin and nature of European culture and belief” (22). Regarding this “hypothesis” (about both “the origin and nature of European culture and belief” and “the nature of monarchical power in England”), Greenblatt says it is “supremely appropriate that... [it] should be tested in the encounter of the Old world and the New” (41, 22). And at a still further remove, Greenblatt’s claim about subversion and containment applies trans-historically. “Here, in the boundaries that contained sixteenth-century skepticism,” he writes, is “a place to confirm the proposition that within a given social construction of reality certain interpretations of experience are sanctioned and others excluded” (19). “Theatricality then is not set over against power but is one of power’s essential modes,” he writes (33). Finally, Greenblatt’s claim about “certain interpretations of experience” which are “sanctioned” speaks to present-day reading practices and readers of literature. Greenblatt calls the hypothesis underlying monarchical power, colonialism, and the theater “extremely dark and disturbing,” and points out that “its moral authority rests upon a hypocrisy so deep that the hypocrites themselves believe it” (41). He likens power to an all-encompassing drama that we readers help buttress, even when we generate readings of texts as subversive.

One substantial criticism of Greenblatt’s essay comes from Carolyn Porter, in her 1990 essay “History and Literature: After the New Historicism.” Porter points out that Greenblatt’s theatrical model of power effectively switches out the terms of the “formalist” reading mode for historical ones while retaining the scaffolding. The background for Porter’s claim is a then-regnant cultural materialism that sought, among other aims, to apply critical ways of thinking developed for literary texts beyond the bounds of the canon. Indeed, Greenblatt’s essay first appeared in a volume edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield called *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, which included an Afterward by Raymond Williams. So, Greenblatt’s essay was in conversation with not only an anti-historical New Critical and so-called “formalist” approach to texts, but also with cultural materialism. In her essay, Porter writes:

We confront a virtually horizonless discursive field in which, among others, the traditional boundaries between the literary and the extraliterary have faded, so that those trained to ‘read’ a text need no longer be constrained by the canon. The ‘document’ and the ‘archive’ are open wide to them, not as the repository of background materials but as texts in their own right. Herein, I think, lies the danger of a short circuit, in the shape of a license which authorizes literary critics to explore this discursive field by announcing,

‘Worry no more about how the text is related to reality. Reality is a text and you may read it at will.’ ... In the practice of some kinds of new historicism, this can mean that the social text turns out to be read as we have been trained to read a literary text, that is, in traditional formalist terms (257).

Porter maintains that when Greenblatt practices his version of historicism, he effectively “short-circuits” texts, reducing history in its broadest terms to a kind of text. In other words, in Greenblatt’s “Invisible Bullets,” the text at hand’s “dramatic context” becomes history. As sharp as Porter’s criticism of Greenblatt is, remember that Greenblatt’s essay also suggests literary critics become the unwitting performers of that authority. Greenblatt’s model of history and any possible alternatives are difficult to grasp precisely because we are deeply embedded in it. Even the most self-conscious reader might not be fully aware that she or he is ideologically blinkered. In a way, then, both Greenblatt and Porter are trying to re-think the structure of a hermeneutic enterprise that from within seems invisible.

Actually, Greenblatt’s essay takes this exact issue up: his title, “Invisible Bullets,” comes from the Algonkians of sixteenth-century Virginia through Harriot’s *Briefe and True Report*, and refers to a means of grasping that which is outside of one’s interpretive framework (26). In the midst of catastrophic sicknesses that began decimating the indigenous people upon contact with Europeans, Harriot writes that a chief named Wingina approached the English and asked them to pray to their Christian God to direct the sickness upon his enemies (28). The English colonists answered Wingina that such a prayer would be “ungodly”: God would only make people sick “according to his own good pleasure as he had ordained.” Greenblatt writes that the colonists held that, “Indeed, if men asked God to make an epidemic he probably would not do it; the English could expect such providential help only if they made a sincere ‘petition for the contrary,’ that is, for harmony and good fellowship in the service of truth and righteousness.” Nevertheless, Wingina’s enemies succumb to illness not long thereafter, and the chief returns to the English to thank them with what Greenblatt characterizes as “the Algonkian equivalent of a sly wink.” Wingina’s enemies had been felled by “invisible bullets.” As Harriot writes in the *Briefe and True Report*, “Those that were immediately to come after us, they imagined to be in the air, yet invisible and without bodies, and that they by our entreaty and for the love of us did make the people to die... by shooting invisible bullets into them” (26). In this thicket of overlapping theories—the indigenous peoples’, Harriot’s, Greenblatt’s—filtered through different historical epochs, Greenblatt points out the irony that the Algonkians’ understanding of vectors of contagion as “invisible bullets” may well have been closer to our own present-day understanding of germ theory than the colonists’ idea of divine providence. It seems to us—and it seems, to a scientist and quondam atheist like Thomas Harriot—as if the colonists’ eventual annihilation of the indigenous people came about by happenstance: Harriot dubs it “marvelous accident” (28). “It may seem to a reader as if... all meanings were provisional, as if the signification of events stood apart from power,” Greenblatt writes (26). But no. Greenblatt claims that Harriot’s application of the idea of Christian providence to the deaths is a “Machiavellian anthropology,” and he spells out what he means by that several places in his essay.

One of the Machiavellian arguments about religion that most excited the wrath of sixteenth-century authorities: Old Testament religion, the argument goes, and by extension the whole Judeo-Christian tradition, originated in a series of clever tricks, fraudulent illusions perpetrated by Moses, who had been trained in Egyptian magic, upon the ‘rude and gross’ (and hence credulous) Hebrews (20).

He also writes that,

The *Discourses* treat religion as if its primary function were not salvation but the achievement of civic discipline and hence as if its primary function were not truth but expediency. Thus Romulus' successor, Numa Pompilius, 'finding a very savage people, and wishing to reduce them to civil disobedience by the arts of the people, and wishing to reduce them to civil disobedience by the arts of peace, had recourse to religion as the most necessary and assured support of any civil society' (20).

As Greenblatt sums up: "The very core of the Machiavellian anthropology that posited the origin of religion in a cunning imposition of socially coercive doctrines by an educated and sophisticated lawgiver on a simple people" (22). Greenblatt calls this "coercive power" and points out that "as Machiavelli understood, physical compulsion is essential but never sufficient; the survival of the rulers depends upon a supplement of coercive belief" (23). Here in Virginia, Thomas Harriot uses the "Machiavellian anthropology" of the "coercive power" of "belief" to the advantage of the English colonial enterprise, even as he becomes privy to a "disturbing vista" of its fraudulence (28). This, then, is what Greenblatt then turns to map onto Shakespeare: "Shakespeare's Henry plays, like Harriot in the New World, can be seen to confirm the Machiavellian hypothesis of the origin of princely power in force and fraud even as they draw their audience irresistibly toward the celebration of that power," he writes (20). From the unlikely literary homology between Harriot and Shakespeare, Greenblatt derives ideology. In a key passage about Harriot's and the English colonists' rationalizations of the "marvelous accident" of the indigenous peoples' deaths, Greenblatt writes:

The problem with these assertions is not that they are self-consciously wicked (in the manner of Richard III or Iago) but that they are highly moral and logically coherent; or rather, what is unsettling is one's experience of them, the nasty sense that they are at once irrefutable ethical propositions and pious humbugs designed to conceal from the English themselves the rapacity and aggression that is implicit in their very presence (28).

Greenblatt calls this exemplary hypocrisy a "strange paradox" and says it has "all the wonderful self-validating circularity that characterizes virtually all powerful constructions of reality" (23, 25-6).

In this phrase of Greenblatt's—"self-validating circularity"—we see both an answer to Porter's criticism that Greenblatt's historicism is formalism dressed up in historicism's clothing, and a verification of it. That is to say, even though Greenblatt's reading of Harriot's *Briefe and True Report* in relation to Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V* militates against the unwitting "hypocrisy" of a mode of textual analysis that is "logically coherent" but "self-validating" and therefore thoroughly domesticated by the structures of authority, his further inter-textual analysis serves to make history into its own "self-validating... reality." Of *Henry V*, he writes: "...In the wake of full-scale ironic readings and at a time in which it no longer seems to matter very much, it is not at all clear that Henry V can be successfully performed as subversive"; and he attests that,

The audience's tension then enhances its attention; prodded by constant reminders of a gap between real and ideal, facts and values, the spectators are induced to make up the difference, to invest in the illusion of magnificence, to be dazzled by their own imaginary identification with the conqueror (43).

When Claudia Rankine tries to think about the few seconds preceding and up to Zinedine Zidane's foul on Marco Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup game, she is also thinking about the "audience's tension" and "their imaginary identification," and the simultaneous urgency and

limits of historicism. In her poem, Rankine wants to respect the explosiveness and novelty of Zidane's headbutt, even as she also wants to grasp what has led to it: she wants to bring history to bear on it reading it as the self-fulfillment of history.

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In his 1953 *Natural Right and History*, Leo Strauss accuses "radical historicists" of abandoning the objective moral values at the core of humanism. (Strauss first delivered *Natural Right and History* as a series of lectures at the University of Chicago in 1949; he edited them for publication in 1953.) He attacks R.G. Collingwood by name, and asserts that the "modern" conception of history that assume it to be an ever-mutable and ever-reinterpretable succession of events requiring re-interpretation in the present moment s no better than "a tale told by an idiot" (18). He furthermore claims that modern historiography is "self-contradictory" in that its relentless changeability comprises its own kind of fixity, a meaningless universal. Strauss accuses historicists of a treacherous relativism, and refers them the Greek and Roman classics for applicable universals of justice and ethics.

Here, I want to historicize Strauss' attack on "radical historicism" as a reaction against a specifically twentieth-century mode of historicism which is itself tied to—indeed, which serves as a compliment to—close reading. This twentieth-century mode of historicism treats history as texts, texts as artifacts whose most pronounced feature is their limitation, and historical context as the means to multiplying limitation into trans-historical fixity. To understand the persistence of trans-historicity in literary historicism, I am going to unspool the thread of "radical historicism" that Strauss identifies. Its proponents come from historiography, philosophy, and critical theory: Collingwood's *Idea of History*, Immanuel Kant's *Idea for a Universal History from the Cosmopolitan Point of View*, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. I will also make a brief and illuminating foray into a parallel world of poetry theory with Kenneth Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives*.

In *The Idea of History*, Collingwood identifies "re-enactment" as the historian's specifically "humanistic," as distinct from scientific, task: to "re-enact the past in his own mind" by putting her/himself on the "inside" of a historical event to grasp the "thought in the mind of the person by whose agency that event came about" (18, 213–5, 282). (Collingwood began the book as a series of lectures in 1936, amended in 1939, and revised in 1940; it was later assembled and posthumously published in 1946.) For Collingwood, this effort at "re-thinking" is what distinguishes history from natural science: the historian's endeavor is concerned not with "mere events," but with what humans have wrought—our motivations and "thought" (215). Collingwood's idea emphasizes history's immersion in artifice, as opposed to the idea that history reveals the laws of nature in the past. *The Idea of History* consists of two parts, a historiographical survey of Western civilization from Aristotle to Benedetto Croce, and a series of connected essays with abstract summation. In the survey, Collingwood credits Giambattista Vico for having first recognized that history's proper subject is human artifice, and cites Vico's "verum-factum principle": "that history, which is emphatically something made by the human mind, is especially adapted to be an object of human knowledge" (64-5). Collingwood locates this insight in Vico's break with Descartes' assertion of radical doubt, which seemed to leave only the self-knowledge of what is self-evident as grounding for historical knowledge. Collingwood writes,

He [Vico] attacked the Cartesian principle that the criterion of truth is the clear and distinct idea. He pointed out that in effect this was only a subjective or a psychological criterion. The fact that I think my ideas clear and distinct only proves that I believe them, not that they are true. In saying this, Vico is substantially agreeing with Hume, that belief is nothing but the vivacity of our perceptions. Any idea, says Vico, however false, may convince us by its seeming self-evidence, and nothing is easier than to think our beliefs self-evident when in fact they are baseless fictions reached by a sophistical argument... What we need, Vico contends, is a principle by which to distinguish what can be known from what cannot; a doctrine of the necessary limits of human knowledge.

Vico finds this principle in the doctrine that *verum et factum convertuntur*: that is, the condition of being able to know anything truly, to understand it as opposed to merely perceiving it, is that the knower himself should have made it. On this principle nature is intelligible only to God, but mathematics is intelligible to man, because the objects of mathematical thought are fictions or hypotheses which the mathematician has constructed. Any piece of mathematical thinking begins with a *fiat*: *let ABC be a triangle and let AB = AC*. It is because of this act of will the mathematician makes the triangle, because it is his *factum*, that he can have true knowledge of it (64).

“Here we reach for the first time a truly modern idea of what the subject-matter of history is,” Collingwood writes: that history is not the name for the ferreting out of fixities, but an account of perpetual change. Collingwood does not so much use Vico to assail Descartes’ yearning for truth as he re-defines historical truth, which is now to be found not in “the category of substance” but the efforts of a self-consciously second-hand re-creation (again, a “re-enactment”) of past lives.

Early in *The Idea of History*, Collingwood defines “re-enactment” against what he takes to be the “chief defect” of “Greco-Roman historiography:” its “substantialism,” by which he means the emphasis on “objective forms” or ideals, and which comes out in both Plato and Aristotle. Collingwood writes that,

A substantialistic metaphysics implies a theory of knowledge according to which only what is unchanging is knowable. What is historical is the transitory event. The substance to which an event happens, or from whose nature it proceeds, is nothing to the historian. Hence the attempt to think historically and the attempt to think in terms of substance were incompatible (42).

For Collingwood, “substance” or fixity and history are “incompatible,” and this is because history is not only “transitory” but historiographical—i.e., made of the history that preceded it. Collingwood affiliates his own historiography with that of the skeptics and moderns, writing (in a section on Locke) that “the conception of innate ideas is an anti-historical conception,” and then quoting Hume’s 1739 *Treatise of Human Nature*:

We believe that Caesar was killed in the senate-house on the Ides of March; and that because this fact is established on the unanimous testimony of historians, who agree to assign this precise time and place to that event. Here are certain characters and letters present either to our memory or senses; which characters we likewise remember to have been used as the signs of certain ideas; and these ideas were either in the minds of such as were immediately present at that action, and received the ideas directly from its existence; or they were derived from the testimony of others, and that again from another testimony, by a visible gradation, till we arrive at those who were eye-witnesses and spectators of the event. ‘Tis obvious all this chain of argument or connexion of causes and effect, is at first founded on those characters or letters, which are seen or

remembered, and that without the authority either of the memory or sense our whole reasoning would be chimerical and without foundation (74).

In Hume's playful undermining of the validity of the "fact" of the assassination of Caesar, Collingwood sees both the "*verum-factum*" principle's "necessary limits" and its historiographical potentiality: Caesar's actual assassination may be inaccessible, but what are bounteously available are historical accounts of it. Collingwood sees in the compounding of artifice the nature of history.

In another section, Collingwood takes on an opposite idea of nature: Kant's hedgehog. Collingwood points out that Kant's historiography builds necessarily on the idea contained in Hume's statement (from *The Study of History*) that "To see all the human race, from the beginning of time, pass, as it were, in review before us... what spectacle can be imagined so magnificent, so various, so interesting?" (97) That is to say: Kant took it as a given that history was both a "spectacle" and an inexorable progression. Kant tries to read the "spectacle" or staging of history for the continuity contained therein. Collingwood describes the description that Kant offers of "a plan of nature, which man fulfills without understanding it," in the 1784 *An Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (94). Because this "plan" is by definition difficult to grasp—"according to Kant, the idea that nature has purposes is an idea which we cannot indeed prove or disprove by scientific inquiry, but it is an idea without which we cannot understand nature at all"—Collingwood turns to a section of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* about a hedgehog (94). Collingwood points out that,

A species of plants or animals looks to us as if it had been ingeniously designed to maintain itself individually by nutrition and self-defence and collectively by reproduction. For example, we see a hedgehog when frightened roll itself into a prickly ball. We do not think this is due to the individual cleverness of this particular hedgehog; all hedgehogs do it, and do it by nature; it is as if nature had endowed the hedgehog with that particular defensive mechanism in order to protect it against carnivorous enemies (95).

Collingwood thinks that in this discussion of "nature," Kant backs into a way of "showing why there should be such a thing as history." "It is, he shows, because man is a rational being, and the full development of his potentialities therefore requires an historical process," and: "Man is an animal that has the peculiar faculty of profiting by the experience of others" (95). Much as with the individual hedgehog, historicity is not to be found in one man, or achieved in one lifetime. "Consequently the purpose of nature for the development of man's reason is a purpose that can be fully realized only in the history of the human race and not in an individual life," Collingwood writes (95). But Kant turns the progress narrative implied by the idea of man's historical nature (and expressed by analogy to the hedgehog) on its head. Collingwood mentions that "neither Locke nor Kant, nor I think any one else of their age, regarded the state of nature as only an abstract possibility"; he quotes Hobbes' *Leviathan* that "the savage people in many places of America, except the government of small families the concord whereof dependeth on naturall lust, have no government at all" (100). For Kant, according to Collingwood, "human history is in the main a spectacle of human folly, ambition, greed, and wickedness," and man's "peculiar faculty of profiting by the experience of others" is counter-balanced by a nature to the contrary. Hence, Kant reads the "spectacle" of history for a principle or moral that transcends that history. Collingwood rejects this idea as "too rigid"—a dismissal I find strikingly weak. Yet in Collingwood's relating of Kant's "plan of nature" to history—that the historian has an "idea [about nature or history] without which cannot understand nature [or history] at all"—I find a

pre-conception of the idea that Hans-Georg Gadamer takes from Martin Heidegger to adapt for the purposes of a historically sensitive hermeneutics. Namely, that the hedgehog-like historian is not apart from, but a part of the history about which he writes.

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In his “Essay on Cultural Criticism and Society” (from *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber, published 1967), Theodor Adorno writes:

The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today (34).

Like Walter Benjamin, who writes even more famously in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that “There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” Adorno draws “barbarism” here from Kant, who used it in reference to the “state of nature” as it appears in eighteenth-century political theory and philosophy. In other words, Adorno alludes to the contrast that Kant sets up (in *Critique of Judgment*) to explain disinterestedness in aesthetic judgment:

If any one asks me if I find that palace beautiful which I see before me, I may answer... like that Iroquois *sachem* who was pleased in Paris by nothing more than by the cook-shops.... Every one must admit that a judgement about beauty, in which the least interest mingles, is very partial and is not a pure judgement of taste (47).

The Iroquois sachem in Paris cannot ascertain the sheer “satisfaction” that the palace provides; he is, rather, impressed only with the restaurants which meets his needs. Kant contrasts higher-order cognitive faculties like disinterestedness with the lower-order sensory ones (like hunger), which are compromised by mere “interest.” Later, Kant also equates those lower-order primitive sensory faculties with feeling, and writes that: “That taste is still barbaric which needs a mixture of *charms* and *emotions* in order that there may be satisfaction, and still more so if it make these the measure of its assent” (72). Later still (in the “Process of Civilization” chapter of *Critique of Judgment*), Kant will tell a story in which the higher-order functions come after the lower-order or more “primitive” physiological and emotional functions. He writes:

In the beginning only those things which attracted the senses, *e.g.* colours for painting oneself (roucou among the Carabs and cinnabar among the Iroquois), flowers, mussel shells, beautiful feathers, etc., ...which bring with them no gratification, or satisfaction of enjoyment—were important in society (175).

Here we see a presaging of Adorno’s much-maligned judgment of jazz as a “primitive” artform in his 1936 essay “Über Jazz”: his conviction that music and art in general—like history for Vico, Hume, and Kant—are “special faculties” of man that are built on the shoulders of (previous) history. I want to consider the possibility that twenty-first-century Anglophone poetry like Claudia Rankine’s and Bhanu Kapil’s is self-consciously barbaric as a way of re-tracing the philosophical account of the relationship of poetry and history. In this way, twenty-first-century poetry registers its diametrical opposition to an axis of history’s universal nature.

For Collingwood, our human hedgehog-like nature is our historiographical aptitude, which is also an innate aesthetic sense. Collingwood’s theory of historiography rebuts the notion—he would flag it, I think, as unreflective—that the historian strives after an objective, unbiased, or factual account of the past. Instead, for Collingwood, the historian’s task is to figure out why a particular historical agent acted as she/he did in a given situation—the historian

doesn't so much ask "Why did Brutus Stab Caesar?" so much as "What did Brutus think which made him decide to Stab Caesar?" (214) Collingwood calls this the "historical imagination," and emphasizes that it is tied to an aesthetic sense above and beyond the scientific. Indeed, he ends the first half of his book with an extensive reading of Benedetto Croce, focusing particularly on Croce's yoking of history and art. At times, Collingwood explicitly connects this special historical faculty to literature. In a lengthy section beginning with a sub-chapter called "Who Killed John Doe?," Collingwood spells out an entire murder mystery (believe it or not) to suggest that the historian's task, not unlike Sherlock Holmes', is to sift through a surfeit of information to find that which is most germane, because it can help her/her establish a motive (266). And beyond just the detective in the novel, Collingwood links the historian to the novelist. Of the historian and the novelist, he writes,

Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibitions of motives, analysis of characters. Each aims at making his picture a coherent whole, where every character in this situation cannot but act in this way, and we cannot imagine him acting as acting otherwise. The novel and the history must both of them make sense; nothing is admissible in either except what is necessary, and the judge of this necessity is in both cases the imagination. Both the novel and the history are self-explanatory, self-justifying, the product of an autonomous or self-authorizing activity; and in both cases this activity is the *a priori* imagination (245).

I want to point out three things about this passage. First, that Collingwood says that the historian and the writer create separate worlds—"autonomous," "coherent," and "self-justifying"—which have to follow their own rules to "make sense" or attain credibility. Second, that elsewhere Collingwood carefully explains that the "*a priori* imagination" he mentions here is Kantian in the sense that it both precedes and is revised by its encounter with history (240). Collingwood's aesthetically-oriented idea of history is present-minded, or presentist. So, third, it follows that that for Collingwood the "imaginative reconstruction aims.... to use the entire perceptible here-and-now as evidence for the entire past through whose process it has come into being" (247).

Collingwood brings up novels, but I would note here the striking resemblance to poetry criticism, particularly Kenneth Burke's idea of "identification" from his 1950 *Rhetoric of Motives*—the idea that the poetry reader or critic's task is not to test the validity or facticity or craft of the poem so much as to try to imaginatively identify with or take the place of the person of the poem, whether that be the poet or a first-person in it. For Burke as for Collingwood, the efficacy of this imaginative identification—this putting-oneself-in-the-shoes-of, or vicariousness—is that it helps open up the reader's (critic's, historian's) world-view to new perspectives and normative values. In other words, the efficacy of the poem, like that of history in Collingwood's account, derives entirely from what it does to revise the reader's perspective of his/her present world. Even though Burke was somewhat of an outlier in the critical tradition, he was one of the early proponents and promulgators of close reading. Both Burke's close reading and Collingwood's historicism emphasize the exceptional status of the texts they evaluate—their place above and beyond the mass of cultural artifacts from the past. Both disciplines then seek to validate their enterprises not by reference to direct efficacy, but vicarious or second-hand identification. And in the end, both Collingwood's and Burke's performative and trans-historical models for reading texts modestly attempt to situate the value of their efforts in present-day terms.

This staking of value takes place as a result of the historian's self-conscious staging of past historical events in her/his mind—and presumably in the writing. History, Collingwood tells us at the beginning of *The Idea of History*, is “self-revelatory,” in that it “exists in order to tell man what man is by telling him what man has done” (18). This telling takes place in a setting—uncannily like a combination of I.A. Richards' experiment in *Practical Criticism* and Cleanth Brooks' “dramatic context”—that Collingwood calls a “relatively isolated condition.” “First, the philosophy of history will have to be worked out,” he writes, “not, indeed, in a watertight compartment, for there are none in philosophy, but in a relatively isolated condition, regarded as a special study of a special problem” (6). Still, there's something that differentiates history from literature and/or literary criticism. “The historian's picture stands in a peculiar relation to something called evidence,” Collingwood writes, and

The only way in which the historian or any one else can judge, even tentatively, of its truth is by considering this relation; and, in practice, what we mean by asking whether an historical statement is true is whether it can be justified by an appeal to the evidence: for a truth unable to be so justified is to the historian a thing of no interest (246).

Later, he will mention that “the present” is one of ways this evidence can be vouchsafed: “Historical thinking is that activity by which we endeavor to provide this innate idea with detailed content. And this we do by using the present as evidence for its own past” (247). But even in this passage it is evident that “the present,” is only verifiable by reference to an “innate idea.” He explains the idea: “That criterion is the idea of history itself: the idea of an imaginary picture of the past. That idea is, in Cartesian language, innate; in Kantian language, *a priori*” (248). He also writes that

However fragmentary and faulty the results of his [the historian's] work may be, the idea which governed its course is clear, rational, and universal. It is the idea of the historical imagination as a self-dependent, self-determining, and self-justifying form of thought (249).

That is to say, for Collingwood, history is verifiable by reference to “the idea of history”—the title of his book the “evidence” for what he demonstrates *via* Vico, Hume, and Croce is an ever-fleeting, historiographical, artificial thing.

Strauss puts his finger on the vertiginous tautology of Collingwood's historicism—that historicism is justified by reference to an idea of history, which is defined by its historiographical layered-ness. In calling history “self-justifying,” Collingwood effectively separates it out from everything except its own disciplinary practice: historicization becomes merely a means of finding a historicizable and trans-historical element in a text. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss bemoans the incapacity of such “radical historicism” for the inquiry into ethics and values. And Strauss could just as well have leveled the same charge against Burke's poetry criticism: “identification” shades easily into the formal exercise of identifying the features of the text that enable identification. But what I think Strauss misses is the *humility* of what he calls “radical historicism.” Collingwood's “re-enactment” and Burke's “identification” both bracket normative questions to allow for the interpreter's—their own—unwitting biases. It is not so much that “radical historici[sts]” have given up on all moral and ethical values, so much as that they are willing to test them to expand them.

In his 1960 *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer tries to put this testing and expanding into words: for Gadamer, meaning grows out of from an intersubjective interaction, one in which the perceiver's biases become a part of total meaning. Gadamer was a student of

Martin Heidegger's, and he builds his hermeneutics off of his teacher's description of the hermeneutic circle, and idea of ontology, which he quotes (from *Being and Time*):

It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves (153).

The problem of the hermeneutic circle is that the reader cannot be certain that what she or he sees inheres in the object or in her or his own mind; but Heidegger rejects the idea that an object is perceivable as a thing separate from the perceiver, since both share in a wholeness of being. Gadamer extends this to suggest that the hermeneutic circle "possesses an ontologically positive significance," because it holds the secret of this larger conception of being (236). He writes that "the circle of the whole and the part is not dissolved in perfect understanding but, on the contrary, is most fully realised" (261). He re-phrases this assertion with a brief crossing-over into dramaturgical language, to adapt the concept it to the encounter with a text, writing:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always performing an act of projecting. He projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the latter emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working out of this fore-project, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there (236).

For Gadamer, as Heidegger, the trick is to understand that we are a part of that which we hope to perceive. But this entails a reflexive self-consciousness which is acutely necessitated by historical self-consciousness. Gadamer works this out by adding to Heidegger's "hermeneutic circle" and "ontology" an aspect of subjective historical imagination: he (unfortunately) calls it "prejudice." He says that the problem with the Enlightenment was that it was prejudiced against its own prejudices, and tries to reclaim "prejudice" as a "positive condition" of "fore-knowledge" that is indispensable to understanding the totality of being. Gadamer uses the word "prejudices" in a positive valence to describe the set of expectations or "fore-knowledge" that the reader brings to the text; he asserts "prejudice"—which is historically-specific bias—that helps us as readers break out of the vicious circle of the hermeneutic circle. He identifies

the naive assumption of historicism, namely that we must set ourselves within the spirit of the age, and think with its ideas and thoughts, not our own, and thus advance towards historical objectivity. In fact the important thing is to recognize the distance in time as a positive and productive possibility of understanding. It is not a yawning abyss (264).

In a review of *Truth and Method*, Jürgen Habermas points out the problem with "prejudice" as a way of the hermeneutic circle: we cannot be sure as perceivers whether our prejudice is due to the historical discrepancy between our moment and that of the text's production, or if it grows out of ideology. That is to say, the problem with prejudice—even with a rigorous, critical, hermeneutic, and historically sophisticated reading—is that we cannot be sure if it persists, unwitting. Gadamer calls this the "tyranny of hidden prejudices" and suggests that our interaction with the object can help us break it down. I think the only way to guard against this tyranny is a more radical historicism, one that sets altogether sets aside the notion of history's nature.

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Bhanu Kapil's 2009 book *Humanimal* is her record of her journey to the city of Midnapore in West Bengal, and the village of Godamuri, about 75 miles west of Midnapore. Kapil goes there to re-construct the story of Amala and Kamala, two girls raised by wolves and captured by a Christian missionary named Joseph (J.A.L.) Singh in 1921. Singh writes about Amala and Kamala in his extraordinary *Diary of the Wolf-Children of Midnapore*, which American anthropologist Robert Zingg first printed in his 1939 book *Wolf-Children and Feral Man*, and Kapil comes to the girls by way of this latter text. In the text that Kapil then writes in response to Amala and Kamala's story, *Humanimal*, we come across blocks of prose in serif and sans-serif typefaces; the former are enumerated with letters A–O, the latter with numbers 1–60. When Kapil uses the serif typeface, she seems to most often be writing as if in the voice of one of the girls; when she uses the sans-serif type, she seems to be writing about her own writing process.

Kapil describes her poetic engagement with the library in a passage at the end of the book. This passage reaches forward to connect Kapil's book to Lisa Robertson's "Face/" through the medium of the archive. On page 59 of her 65-page-long book, she describes how she came to write about the wolf-children of Midnapore:

Seven years ago, I walked to the University of Colorado from my rented apartment on Goss. There, in the dark library, I closed my eyes and let my right hand drift over the stacks. Where my hand stopped, I opened my eyes, chose a book at random and read this: 'October 17 Captured; Oct. 28 Leave Godamuri....'

In this passage, Kapil reveals that her engagement with Kamala and Amala is entirely unmotivated: her impetus to pursue this story grows not out of any affiliation or connection with West Bengal, but merely from having randomly touched Zingg's book in the stacks.

The chance encounter Kapil describes seems uncanny or incredible. Kapil is a British writer of Indian descent interested in the juncture of monstrosity, ethnicity, and the body and who was living in Denver. It seems either serendipitous or unlikely—that she just *happened* upon a book by an early-twentieth-century anthropologist from Denver about India. The uncanny-ness of Kapil's chance encounter is reflected a series of weird pun-like similarities in the names in this multi-layered story: Robert Zingg came across Joseph Singh's story of the wolf-girls, who Singh named Kamala and Amala. Amala died soon after being brought to Singh's orphanage; only after her feral sister's death did Kamala began to acquire human behaviors. It makes sense that Kapil would play on these phonemic resonances with her title, *Humanimal*—a fusing of human and animal natures, or at least names.

Details of Singh's story such as the girls' names strain the bounds of credibility: the nature of the girls' story seems almost *too* perfect. In "The Reality Effect," Roland Barthes writes about the "superfluous" details (his example is a self-consciously over-descriptive clause of Flaubert's in his "Un Coeur Simple"—"an old piano supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons") that create the "reality effect" that makes it possible for readers to suspend their incredulity and buy into the modern novel (141). What Barthes writes is that "such notations are scandalous (from the point of view of structure)." In other words, the way Singh's story so readily fits our prior expectations for a story about wolf-children makes us feel suspicious of both Singh's account *and* our own sense of the nature of such stories.

In fact, Kapil's *Humanimal* is not only her account of her own creative research into the wolf-children's' stories, it is also an account of the French company Mona Lisa Productions'

filming of her journey. (As far as I can tell, Mona Lisa has not as of yet released the film.) Emphatically, then, *Humanimal* is about the myriad layers of representations of the real historical event or moment—Kamala and Amala’s lives—which is shrouded in mystery, uncertainty, and doubt. Kamala and Amala come to us by way of Rev. Singh’s *Diary*, which comes to us by way of Zingg’s *Wolf-Children*, which comes to us through *Humanimal*. This historiographical chain both increases the plausibility of the now-amply-documented story of the wolf-children of Midnapore *and* undercuts that plausibility by putting the girls’ lives at further and further remove. I think that Kapil went to Midnapore and the village of Godamuri to write *Humanimal* in part to plunge through those depths of representation and experience first-hand what the place—the jungle, red-soiled thick with *sal* trees—actually feels like. But, to get back to Barthes’ statement, what makes such inassimilable details “scandalous” is that they are unplaceable in the overarching idea of “nature” which a structuralist reading would draw out of—or graph onto—the text. Indeed, Amala and Kamala’s story is so intriguing because they baffle our sense of the natural.

Actually, Kapil’s account of the wolf-girls does not merely blur a line or confuse a boundary—the story is explosive in much the same way that Ben Lerner’s poem on the back cover of *Angle of Yaw* stages a scene of violence in order to draw up the house lights on the staging of “dramatic reading.” On the first-page spread of *Humanimal*, which constitutes the beginning of a preface, Kapil has made a blown-up photograph of the girls the background for the text. The background photo bleeds off the edge of the pages, and in a white-blocked rectangle that bleeds off the bottom of the page, we read:

There are two spaces in which I took notes for feral childhood. I am not sure if childhood is the correct word. The first space was a blue sky fiction, imagining a future for a child who died. The second space was real in different ways: a double envelope, fluid digits, scary. I was frightened and so I stopped. There were two kiosks like hard bubbles selling tickets to the show. A feral child is freakish. With all my strength, I pushed the glass doors shut, ignoring the screams of the vendors inside, with a click. I clicked the spaces closed and then, because I had to, because the glass broke, I wrote this (1).

There are several similarities between this passage of Kapil’s and the back-cover poem from Ben Lerner’s *Angle of Yaw*. Lerner’s poem is in prose, as is Kapil’s: both poems come inside frames—Lerner’s in a box, and Kapil’s on the white space over the grey of the blown-up photo. Lerner’s poem (“READING IS IMPORTANT...”) is about reading, and Kapil’s begins with an account (“I took notes”) of her own writing process. Lerner’s poem moves from a private scene to a public one; Kapil’s moves, likewise, to “the show” that is the wolf-girls’ story. Finally, Lerner’s and Kapil’s poems both end with broken glass—an illusion shattered.

Two other passages or stanzas from *Humanimal* elucidate the meaning of “the glass br[eaking]” in the above passage. The first of the two is about Kapil’s father, an illiterate goatherd from India who immigrated to England and eventually went on to become a school’s headmaster. It is a scrap of the sans-serif typeface writing—the writing that’s mostly Kapil’s own writing notes—about her father’s life story.

A twelve-year-old, illiterate boy, my father was standing in a field when he had a vision. He said: ‘I suddenly knew that when I grew up I would be a teacher in England. I said, “I will go to England and teach English to the English.”’ And he did. He dragged himself out of the field and into the sky (38).

The passage that follows this is one of the serif typeface passages, and it reads:

“Ud. Ashud/Medicine. Doo: Dudh, Milk. Bha: Bhat/Rice. Moor: Muri/Parched Rice....—Kamala’s words, with Bengali equivalents and english equivalents, as recorded by Joseph on December 1924 when he wrote, observing her during a bout of fever and dysentery: ‘One peculiarity was especially noticed during this illness: her tongue became active, and she commenced talking in a fashion that amazed us all immensely. Though the words were broken, yet she expressed herself in a wonderful way (38-39).

Kapil’s juxtaposition of these passages indicates the way the wolf-girls of Midnapore become blank spaces onto which we—writers, readers—can project our idea of animal nature. We could say: history is meant to reveal nature; historiography indulges a fantasy of stepping back and outside of that nature; that too is an artifice.

In *Humanimal*, Kapil often writes about own writing process—her sans serif sections read like journal entries that foreground process while deferring product. And when she isn’t writing about her own process, Kapil is often quoting other texts, like Singh’s *Diary*. Among the chunks of writing in Kapil’s book which are not either auto-critical or reproduced source-text material, we find serif-type blocks in the projected voice of Kamala or Amala. This creates a tension in the text between the perception of a superabundance of first-person authorial voice in the text—because Kapil writes extensively about her own writing process—and an absence of it, because she doesn’t seem to then provide much in the way of product. I think that this is a deliberate choice on her part; it is a refusal to adopt an un-critical voice, to suspend her own disbelief about her ability to generate a transparent poetic account of the wolf-children.

Humanimal is about Kapil’s search for the poetic narrative of Kamala and Amala’s captivity, but it also seems to continually re-direct the reader’s focus and attention. It is as if there were a secret lurking between the multiple source-texts and sites—Singh’s *Diary*, Zingg’s *Wolf-Children*, Kapil’s father, the photos Kapil finds in Midnapore of Kamala and Amala. And as if Kapil were trying to gather all of these materials together to help us draw the connections between them. Kapil is trying to get at something that cannot be described outright, something at the edge of communicability. It is not so much that there’s an infinitely deferred incommunicable core of the real at the heart of Kapil’s (or anybody else’s) account. No: it is more that there’s something prevailing over and above the local-level details of the story that she’s trying to get at. There’s an as-yet-untold story at the heart of the historiography of Kamala and Amala that Bhanu Kapil can’t pretend to just project—it will take a more deliberate and considered re-thinking of the framework. On page 13, Kapil writes, referring primarily to Singh’s *Diary*: “Chronologies only record the bad days, the attempted escapes.”

In this way, Kapil’s *Humanimal* has something in common with “Situation #1.” Rankine writes about two moments, really. The first is an effect: Zidane’s headbutt, right into Materazzi’s sternum. But Rankine also focuses on Materazzi’s statement to Zidane, which causes him to erupt into violence. Even though millions of people witnessed Materazzi’s utterance, it remains inexplicable. Both Rankine and Kapil worry at an explanation of inexplicability in their texts. This is meta-history or historiography, because it is about a problem that cuts across the entire history of the writing of history; it is what we do when we try to then historicize “Situation #1” and *Humanimal*, which are both, in themselves, historicizations of a sort. Both question whether there is a “nature” beyond historiography; neither would step outside it.

Chapter Four

Lyric's Dream

In November of 2010, I went to the Contemporary Literature collection in Special Collections at the Simon Fraser University library in Burnaby, BC (just outside of Vancouver) to learn more about Canadian poet Lisa Robertson's exercise in self-reading. In late 2002 or early 2003, as she gathered her papers together before submitting them to the archivists at SFU, Robertson began to transcribe a list of clauses—mostly first-person sentences—from her notebooks and reading journals. This list would grow into her 2004 poem "Face/." I went into the archives at SFU to reproduce her experiment—to look over her shoulder while she was reading, so to speak.

In his 1954 *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Structure of Meaning*, W.K. Wimsatt writes that,

In what is called the 'tone' of the poem, even the most universalized audience has to be taken into account. The actual reader of a poem is something like a reader over another reader's shoulder; he reads through the dramatic reader, the person to whom the full tone of the poem is addressed in the fictional situation. This is the truth behind that often quoted statement by J.S. Mill that 'Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*' (xv).

Here, Wimsatt addresses the problem of the vicissitudes of taste that I.A. Richards tries to solve by subtracting "actual" poems' readers' idiosyncrasies from the scene of the poem's reading. He takes Cleanth Brooks' injunction to read a poem as if it were in "dramatic context" one step further and has readers project a "dramatic reader" as the on-stage recipient of the "full tone" of the poem's address. In Wimsatt's dramaturgical metaphor, poem and reader make up a tableau that is both "fictional" and "universalized." A close reader takes this scene in by projecting and apprehending a version of the poem's reading in which all accidents—textual, material, circumstantial—have fallen away to leave behind pure "structure." As Wimsatt writes:

Both speaker and dramatic audience are assimilated into the implicit structure of the poem's meaning. At the fully cognitive level of appreciation we unite in our own minds both speaker and audience. This principle... is actually that by which the various levels of the poem's meaning are integrated. The means-end situation of style and content becomes, in the dramatic focus, itself a terminal fact of structure. The appreciation of this structure is that total experience or total knowledge of which the critics speak (xvi).

Wimsatt's version of close reading requires credulity and a baseline fluency with the genre of lyric poetry—which he flags, in part, by citing John Stuart Mill's lyric touchstone, that "poetry is *overheard*." This kind of close reading also controverts a widespread notion of close reading: in Wimsatt's version, the close reader's focus is not on empirical but performative fact. In other words, the poem's concrete particulars serve an ideal totality of the poem. When it works, the poem is vested with the full latitude that performance offers: on-stage—that is, within the bounds of the "implicit structure" of the "means-end situation" whose "terminal fact" is its own "meaning"—the poem can exploit the reader's credulity to be anything it wants. For the "actual reader," however, this is less liberating: she/he is given the very difficult task of "fully" "appreciating" what it would be like to be a participant in a "fictional" and "universal" scene that plays itself out *ad infinitum*, indifferent to him/her. Success in this venture would be "total experience or total knowledge." In "Face/," Robertson gets a step ahead of Wimsatt by integrating reading into her poem, and making it a *mise en abîme* of reading: the close reader

“reads over... [the] shoulder” of a “dramatic reader” who him/herself reads Robertson as she reads her own “I.” The on-stage “reader” of “Face/” observes a reading which mimics the reader’s projected performance—a scene of reading, redoubled. In so *overdramatizing* “dramatic reading,” Robertson turns reading back on itself, so that in reading “Face/,” we find ourselves reading our own reading.

I learned about Robertson’s self-reading in “Face/” from her, at a Contemporary Poetry and Poetics Working Group event at UC Berkeley in November of 2005 called “Poetry and the Archive.” Otherwise, there is no indication in the text of the provenance of the poem’s source-text or the means of its composition. Still, the poem’s push back against its reading is palpable. The self-consciousness that “Face/” elicits in its readers grows out of the discrepancy between the poem’s being and doing, and knowing the poem’s means of composition solidifies the reader’s sense of this discrepancy. In an essay that I published in *Open Letter* in the Spring of 2011, I claimed that Robertson’s poem presses her readers to re-examine the way we read; I responded to the challenge of her work in my essay by interspersing my sentences with lines from “Face/.” Her lines, alternating with my sentences, could variously agree, refute, and re-direct my observations and assertions. (During the preparation of my *Open Letter* piece, Robertson graciously authorized my access to her archives at SFU, and also provided the approximate date-range—late 2002 or early 2003—of her composition of “Face/.”) In this chapter-length reading of “Face/,” I will respond to Robertson’s anticipation of my own reading by quoting all of her poem in sustained (20 to 24 line) blocks. I will do so for five reasons. I want to give my readers a sense of how the poem’s lines work aggregately, make it possible to dig deeper between block quotations into Robertson’s intra- and contra-texts, open up the possibility that other readers will read her poem differently, and forthrightly own up to my own efforts as a reader of “Face/.” Finally, I will quote Robertson’s poem at length because of a demand it places on the reader: I hold that “Face/” necessitates a form of reading that encounters it not as fixed object, but as a volatile act.

I will begin with some concrete observations and a physical description of the text, using the poem’s first 21 lines:

A man’s muteness runs through this riot that is my sentence.

I am concerned here with the face and hands and snout.

All surfaces stream dark circumstance of utterance.

What can I escape?

Am I also trying to return?

Not the private bucket, not the 7,000 griefs in the bucket of each cold clammy word.

But just as strongly I willed myself towards this neutrality.

I have not loved enough or worked.

What I want to do here is infiltrate sincerity.

I must speak of what actually happens.

Could it be terrible then?

I find abstraction in monotony, only an object, falling.

Gradually the tree came to speak to me.

I heard two centuries of assonance, and then rhyme.

Had I the choice again, I’d enter whole climates superbly indifferent to abstraction.

I saw amazing systems that immediately buckled.

Here I make delicate reference to the Italian goddess Cardea who shuts what is open and opens what is shut.

I conceived of an organ slightly larger than skin, a structure of inhuman love minus nostalgia or time.

Honeysuckle, elder, moss, followed one another like a sequence of phrases in a sentence, distinct, yet contributing successively to an ambience that for the sake of convenience I will call the present.

I experienced a transitive sensation to the left of my mind.

I am concerned here with the face and hands and snout.

First, every one of the first twenty lines of “Face/” is an independent clause that ends with a period or question mark. Only two lines in “Face/” (#103, 169) do not end with sentence-ending punctuation. Second, most of the first twenty lines—though not all (#1, 3, 6, 11, 13)—are first-person sentences, as are most of the lines of the entire poem. In this way, Robertson’s poem announces its engagement with what poet Elizabeth Willis has recently, in an essay called “Lyric Dissent,” called the “dissenting” lyric, a lyric which “hangs everything on the presence and engagement of its audience” and whose “articulations are in, with, to, and sometimes for a social context of which the writer is a part” (230). Third, all lines of “Face/” end after the end-stop punctuation and at the end of the sentence or clause. In other words, there are neither enjambed lines nor line breaks—only what are called, in the parlance of word processing programs, “hard returns.” Fourth, “Face/” is double-spaced throughout, with no extra spaces between lines (and this will not be evident with the spacing format required to upload this dissertation to ProQuest / UMI). Later, I will read more into these spaces between the individual lines of “Face/,” which are the formal equivalent of an open question that Robertson poses to her readers. Fifth, the poem is consistently left-justified. In the 2004 version of the poem in Robertson’s chapbook *Rousseau’s Boat* (published by Nomados Press), there is no hanging indent to indicate when a line spills over the width of a page; in the 2010 version in the book *R’s Boat* (University of California Press) there is a one-fourth-of-an-inch hanging indent. Sixth, the lines of Robertson’s poem alternate between roman type and italics. This type variation creates an effect of bi- or multi-vocality in “Face/”: the italicized lines read as a tone shift—a whisper, gloss, or retort—to their roman-type counterparts. For example, in lines #10 and 11, “I must speak of what actually happens. / *Could it be terrible then?*,” the latter reads as a response to the first. Seventh: this may not be apparent from just 20 lines, but the italicized lines of “Face/” are alphabetized. They begin with “*A man’s muteness...*” and go all the way to “*Such is passivity.*” There are exceptions: line #9, for one, “*What I want to do here is infiltrate sincerity,*” does not fall in alphabetical order. Another fact that is may not be obvious from just the first twenty lines is that many of the italicized lines mirror plain-type lines. Line #21, for example, is “*I am concerned here with the face and hands and snout,*” a repeat of line #2. I will say more about the pattern-without-meaning that organizes the echoing effects in “Face/”—a pattern which Adorno might dismiss, in a turn of phrase from his “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” as a “consecrated abracadabra”—later in the chapter. For now, at least, it seems like Robertson took her list of mostly first-person sentences, copied it, italicized and alphabetized the copy, and then wove the copy back into the original list. Nevertheless, there are differences between the roman-type and italics rosters: only 120 of the 184 lines are repeats, meaning there are 64 stand-alone lines. Finally, “Face/” is long. “Face/” varies slightly between different published versions: the 2004 Nomados-published version is 190 lines long, over 12 pages; the 2010 University of California version, which I will consistently use in this reading, is 184 lines over 10 pages.

Even before a close reader can make anything of “Face/,” the presence of features atypical to lyric (length, left justification) and lack of recognizable poetic features (line breaks, etc.) in

this inventory begs two preliminary questions: Is “Face/” a lyric? Is it (even) a poem? Leaving aside whether “Face/” is or is not a lyric poem—and I do think these are pertinent questions—I want to first point out that the categories into which they would (or would not) put the text reveal something about the readerly demands we put on poems. As Virginia Jackson points out in her book *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, these two questions collapse into one in the context of twentieth and twenty-first-century poetry criticism, in which all poems become lyrics, and all lyrics are read as the “voice” of personhood abstracted. To be able to ask whether a text is a lyric poem, we first have to have a type with or against which a poem can be read, and if the poem does not sufficiently correspond to that type, we can assume that it will not respond to—and maybe not merit—the special mode of reading available for the language of lyric poetry. I read Robertson’s poetic self-reading in “Face/” as a preemption of these questions, and a lyric that works to reclaim lyric, even as it dismantles it. Her first line—“*A man’s muteness runs through this riot that is my sentence*”—explicitly anticipates her own lyricization: in “*muteness*” she evokes an academic poetry critical idiom that figures the “I” of the poem as “blind,” “cut-off,” emasculated, disempowered, impotent, and/or “mute.” This encounter is not triumphant: Robertson’s fourth and fifth lines, “What can I escape?” and “*Am I also trying to return?*,” register a reflexive self-questioning *vis à vis* lyricization. Nevertheless, she has ambitious stakes: the re-fashioning of the rhetoric of the poem’s “I,” which she points to in line #9: “*What I want to do here is infiltrate sincerity.*”

Indeed, Robertson preempts and “*infiltrates*” lyric reading in “Face/.” In line #9—which re-appears later in the poem as line #132, “But what I want to do here is infiltrate sincerity”—Robertson echoes the project of her 2001 book *The Weather*. In *The Weather*, Robertson mines the history of meteorology to find and re-present rich anomalies in the language of amateur weather observers (“low creeping mists”) who wrote before the terminology for cloud categorization was standardized (“cumulus,” “cirrostratus,” etc.). *The Weather* is a historical project that undermines the ostensible neutrality and transparency of cloud-jargon. In the essay “The Weather: A Report on Sincerity,” Robertson suggests that this historical-rhetorical project to make opaque what seems transparent in language has further implications for the rhetoric of self-presentation. “Here is what I want to say,” she writes: “Sincerity has a rhetorical history. The history of the description of weather parallels the history of sincerity as a rhetorical value. The delimitation or purification of diction is common to both.” “Face/” is a similar “infiltrat[ion]” of reading, inasmuch as that Robertson acts out a lyric reading of her own “I”: she gets inside lyricization to turn it against itself. In “Face/,” Robertson does not merely disclose the lyric “I”’s linguistic constructed-ness, she insinuates that the “I” overflows that “structure.”

The trouble with lyric that Robertson comes up against—with both the critical idiom for reading lyric poetry, and the lyric itself—is that it even while it frames the “I” as “affective,” “expressive,” and “sympathetic,” it frames the “I” as *only* that: an “I” who is “cut-off” from society, whose place is “ambiguous,” whose speech is “mute[d],” whose statements are “solipsistic,” whose role is “paradox[ically]” and “ironic[ally]” futile—an “I” who is “blind,” “blocked” and “failed” (and quotations here are from Eliot, Frye, Abrams, Johnson, Tate, Empson, Brooks, Tate again, Wimsatt, Blackmur, and DeMan’s “Autobiography”). The flip-side of this figure has also come to be true, as both “lyric” and “poetic” have become code-words for the way the “I” stands apart from, and merely embellishes or enriches the *grands récits* driven by the real engines—economic and political—of world history. (Wimsatt, Brooks, Ransome) The quiescence of the “I” of lyric enables its antipode, an ideology of the “social” so all-encompassing and total as to be an equivalent of “nature.” What Brooks and others see as the

“paradox” fundamental to lyric poetry—the inviolability and invalidity of the poem’s first-person—Robertson sees as a contradiction. In cutting off the “I” of the poem, lyric reading divests it of agency. In “Form and Intent in American New Criticism,” Paul DeMan writes that, “Poetry is the foreknowledge of criticism. Far from changing or distorting it, criticism merely discloses poetry for what it is” (32). In a break from DeMan’s idea of the “foreknowledge of criticism,” twenty-first-century poetry’s “foreknowledge” is self-conscious, and Robertson’s poem (for one) inverts DeMan’s pronouncement: it discloses *criticism* for “what it is.”

The strategy Robertson deploys for evading lyricization to interpellate the critical idiom in “Face/” is rebarbativity: wherever “Face/” is intractable, unassimilable, or ungraspable it pushes readers to re-think the way they construe the “I” in the poem. At first blush, “Face/” is not a difficult poem: the short, simple, mostly grasp-able, jargon-less, and evenly spaced sentences are easy to read. The poem becomes puzzling as the reader tries to make something of the clauses of the poem. In a catalogue of concrete statements about “Face/,” few apply uniformly: the poem is made up of mostly but not entirely first-person clauses, which are mostly but not exclusively sentences, which often but not always appear twice. The italicized lines are alphabetical, except when they are not. Nearly every general statement a reader can offer about “Face/” requires exception, qualification, or modification. The poem’s length makes it hard to grasp in its totality; “Face/” seem to neither evolve, nor develop, nor cohere. It is a writing of the self that refuses to be constituted into a coherent autobiographical narrative: the first-person voice in “Face/” is multiple, unplaceable, variable, and volatile. By re-presenting her own first-persons in “Face/,” Robertson takes her “I” in language and history out of context and makes it into an object—dense, inexpressive, immobile. As a project, Robertson’s “Face/” re-presents her first-person through the archive, in language, and over time. As an artifact, “Face/” is this “I” de-contextualized through a self-reading that hyperbolically self-reifies: Robertson makes her “I” into so much of an object for reading that she throws the still un-objectifiable part of her “I,” her own un-lyricizability, into stark relief. Even as it evokes the formal precedent of lyric and its conventions, “Face/” frustrates lyric reading.

Which takes me back to the archives at SFU. As I looked through Robertson’s archives in November of 2010, I was struck by two things. First, I had expected—without really knowing I had expected—to find quotations, reading notes, and journal entries that Robertson had drawn from to compose “Face/.” In other words, I posited that some of the first-person lines from “Face/” were lifted from what she was reading—maybe Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Nicole Brossard, or Catullus. Instead, I found lines from what would eventually become “Face/” running like a thread through Robertson’s notebooks, as if she had been composing the poem over the course of many years while working on other projects. Robertson has never, it seems, kept a diary or first-person journal: the poetic sentences running through her notebooks constitute a kind of contra-text or simul-text to her notes and drafts.

*

Then, I came upon a notebook page that discloses what Paul DeMan would call an “intra-text” for Robertson’s poem. In one notebook—a Hilroy artist’s journal with a blank space on the top for sketches and a rubric of lines on the bottom for writing—Robertson has transcribed several quotations from Theodor Adorno’s 1957 “On Lyric Poetry and Society” on the top and written a first-person line of the species that would eventually grow into a line from “Face/” on the bottom. Before visiting the archives at SFU, I had had the sense that Robertson was grappling

with poetry criticism; Robertson's notebooks confirmed this suspicion, and indicated that her reading does often include works of literary criticism and theory. On this notebook page, I began to get a sense of the way that "Face/" is in dialogue with this background reading. I reproduce the image of the entire page below:

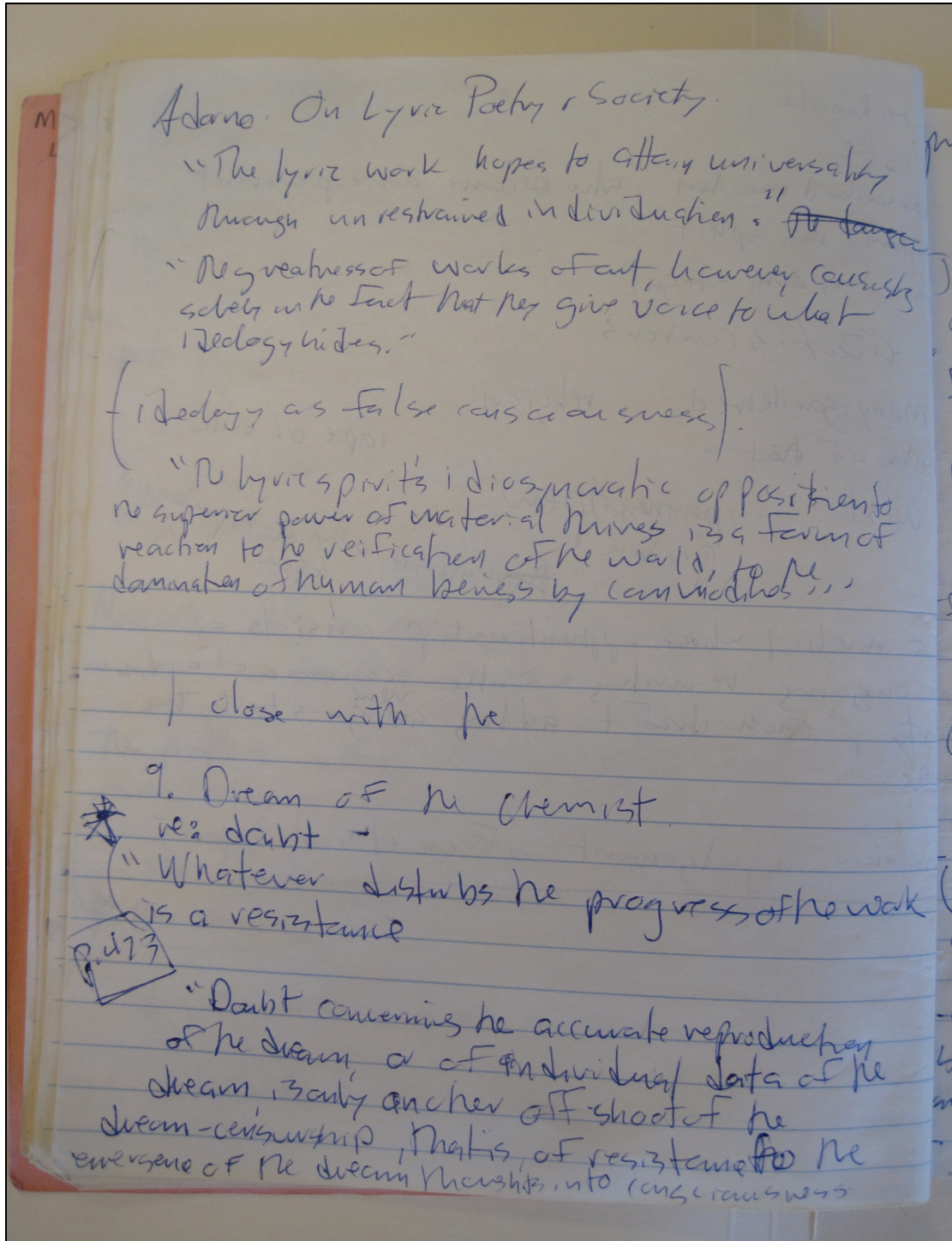


Fig. 6. From Lisa Robertson's Notebook "Rousseau / Blaser Conference" in the Contemporary Literature Collection at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC

The line of Robertson's below the Adorno quotations, "I close with me," does not find its way verbatim into "Face/," but the lines of "Face/" are in the same mold as this non-compound first person poetic clause, and line #57 of "Face/" is "*I endlessly close.*" Through her notebooks, we can see that Robertson began writing in confluence or conversation with her readings. What I want to focus in on in the notebook page that I have reproduced is the space—the 3/4 inch gap—between Adorno and Robertson, and the implicit tension between the two. As much as "I close with me" could be read as following on Adorno's sentences, Robertson's line, in contradistinction to Adorno's, also sounds blunt, flat, and frank. I read the tension between "I close with me" and the lines above it as an emblem for Robertson's lyric response to lyricization, a mode of lyric that works with and against Adorno's idea of lyric.

Likewise, I take the spaces between the lines of "Face/" as that poem's most important formal feature. In the gaps between these individual mostly first-person lines, I see sociability, the openness of a potential dialogue, an invitation from Robertson to her to readers to knit the poem's "I" together, and the challenge of intersubjectivity. Even as each line has continuity with the next—*via* the first-person, for one—no single line of "Face/" entirely follows the preceding. The poem's lines read contiguously, but never constitute a parse-able narrative or pattern. Lines 22-40:

Was I a plunderer then?
I am interested in whatever mobilizes and rescues the body.
 I saw the sentiment of my era, then published its correspondence.
I am satisfied with so little.
 I felt pampered by the austerity—it pushed my hip so I rolled.
I become the person who walks through the door.
 The air goes soft and I'm cushioned as by the skin of an animal.
I can only make a report.
 Womanliness knows nothing and laughs.
I can't live for trees, for grass, for animals.
 All surfaces stream dark circumstance of utterance.
I can't say any of these words.
 Gradually the tree came to speak to me.
I collaborated with my boredom.
 I write this ornament, yet I had not thought of time.
I come to you for information.
 Sometimes I'm just solid with anger and I am certain I will die from it.
*I conceived of an organ slightly larger than skin, a structure of inhuman love minus
 nostalgia or time.*
 If only I could achieve frankness.

The spaces between the lines of "Face/" create a structural ambiguity: since "Face/" is double-spaced throughout, the poem could be read as one long stanza or 184 separate single-line stanzas. This ambiguity pertains not just in the poem's dearth or overabundance of poetic units of sense. The combination of single-clause lines and sensible discontinuity in Robertson's poem leaves the reader's sense of the poem's totality in doubt. No number of "I"'s constitutes a coherent life's story (*I can't say any of these words. / Gradually the tree came to speak to me. / I collaborated with my boredom.*), nor, for that matter, do they read logically or expositively. In the meantime, the poem's "I" do carry over from line to line, and the predominance of the first-person in the

poem creates the effect of a silent “I” behind the sentences. There is something or *someone* behind “Face/,” but she is modified with every emendation. Thus, over the course of the poem, the reader grows increasingly conscious of his or her role in piecing the poem’s first person together. Robertson frames a relationship between her own self and the way it is going to be read in “Face/,” pushing back against her readers and asking them to make something of the gaps between the lines. If the “I” of “Face/” remains just out of reach, it is in part because reading’s framing of that “I” delimits her and empowers instead everything besides the “I”—society, culture, “nature.” I believe that Robertson is working to shift in the way we talk about poetry: rather than exploiting poetry’s autonomy, twenty-first-century poets like Robertson are thinking about ways that poetry’s rhetorical force can function in the world. But this is not yet worked out, and for that reason, I want to focus on tensions that build between poetic lines—Adorno’s, Robertson’s, the poet’s, the close reader’s. Robertson’s theme in “Face/” is the poem’s first person’s relationship to her infra-texts; the Adorno quotes find their way into Robertson’s poem because her poem has an inexplicit relationship with twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry criticism and theory that both makes her poem possible and circumscribes its effective possibilities. Robertson’s poem has to take on its own reading because the way we have to read a poem inevitably makes every poem into a dramatization of lyric’s failure.

It makes sense, then, that Robertson turns to Adorno, because “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” offers a model for “social” lyric as a strong alternative to a certain strain of lyricization. Adorno’s overriding idea is that the lyric repudiates what he calls the “*fait social*” with its strident individuality and autonomy. In this way the lyric is fundamentally social—anti-social, as it were—without having to be self-consciously or explicitly concerned with economics or politics. In his social model, the lyric has an integral “dream”: “The [lyric] work’s distance becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter,” Adorno writes. “In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different” (40). Despite the appeal of Adorno’s lyric theory—the way it gives lyric political import while retaining its imaginative autonomy—I read “Face/” as Robertson’s rejection of the Adornian lyric: in “Face/,” Robertson repudiates the repudiation of the social that Adorno ascribes to lyric poetry.

Adorno’s lyric theory enacts a turn away from its own sociality. In “On Lyric Poetry and Society” and elsewhere, most notably in his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno asserts that lyric’s sociality is based on a *prima facie* contradiction, a paradox of art’s objectivity. As he attests—somewhat tautologically—in his *Aesthetic Theory*, “Art’s double character as both autonomous and *fait social* is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy” (5). That is to say, an art absorbs materials that are necessarily social into its form and in so doing rescues these materials from society’s co-opting. Adorno often traces society’s deleterious effects to capitalism: art is of course part and parcel of the market, but it is also capable—by virtue of its aesthetic autonomy—of transcending the market. “Only by immersing its autonomy in society’s *imagerie*,” he writes, “can art surmount the heteronomous market” (21). This finds its homology in the lyric poem’s object-status—its “crystallization,” he calls it: the poem is resolutely an object, and yet not merely a commodity.

Critics must be sensitive to this formal fact, and read accordingly; he writes:

It [the social interpretation of lyric poetry] must discover the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it (38-39).

The poem has in it a germ of contrariness, of subversion, of resistance built into its form: its very objectivity resists bad reification. The lyric’s form thus encapsulates a contradiction, which is

itself a picture both of its society and of the way that the first-person of the lyric poem fits into that society. This contradiction is expressed by the fact that the poem is an object at the same time that it is more than an object. As he writes (in his *Aesthetic Theory*):

The concept of an artifact, from which ‘artwork’ is etymologically derived, does not fully comprise what an artwork is. . . . In art the difference between the thing made and its genesis—the making—is emphatic: Artworks are something made that has become more than something simply made (178-9, *AT*).

In a passage that Robertson transcribes into her notebook from “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” the making of “more than something simply made” in lyric poetry comes about only by way of “unrestrained individuation.”

One way we can see the lyric being more than “something simply made” is in the bare fact that lyric poetry is written in anticipation of its audience; the lyric is, therefore, social by design. As Adorno writes in “On Lyric Poetry and Society”:

If, by virtue of its subjectivity, the substance of the lyric can in fact be addressed as an objective substance—and otherwise one could not explain the very fact that grounds the possibility of the lyric as an artistic genre, its effect on people other than the poet speaking his monologue—then it is only because the lyric work of art’s withdrawal into itself, its self-absorption, its detachment from the social surface, is socially motivated behind the author’s back (43).

Art’s active autonomy is what gives it extraordinariness, effectivity, and the charge of social critique. In this way lyric’s auto-aestheticization becomes a force to rival socialization, which is only realized after the fact, in the lyric’s readers’ encounter with the poem.

Lyric’s “detachment,” which is only “motivated behind the author’s back,” is also marked by a turn away from society, and a turn inwards: a self-consciousness, self-awareness, and a willingness to exploit the rhetoric and resources of the self. Adorno writes:

It is commonly said that a perfect lyric poem must possess totality or universality, must provide the whole within the bounds of the poem and the infinite within the poem’s finitude. It is to be more than a platitude of aesthetics that is always ready to use the concept of the symbolic as a panacea, it indicates that in every lyric poem the historical relationship of the subject to objectivity, of the individual to society, must have found its precipitate in the medium of a subjective spirit thrown back upon itself (“Lyric,” 42).

According to Adorno, an element of self-consciousness resides necessarily in the object that is the lyric poem—a self-consciousness which inheres in the object.

In a way, Robertson follows Adorno to the letter: in “Face/,” she emphatically and “self-absorb[edly]” repeats the/her “I” in the poem, re-contextualizing it/her from her notebooks to make it/herself an aesthetic object, or an object of aesthetics. Likewise, Robertson’s poem *qua poem* generates its own social context, “crystallizing” the “fait social” with its antithesis and opening the possibility that “Face/” could transcend its mere made-ness. Lines 41-60:

I could be quiet enough to hear the culverts trickling.

I’m talking about weird morphing catalogues and fugitive glances.

I could have been wrong.

I subsist by these glances.

I desire nothing humble or abridged.

I’m using the words of humans to say what I want to know.

I did not sigh.

I confined my thievery to perishable items.
I do not want to speak partially.
 I loosened across landscape.
I doubt that I am original.
 I've been lucky and I'm thankful.
I dreamt I lied.
 I stole butter and I studied love.
Something delighted me.
 And if I am not cherished?
I endlessly close.
 But just as strongly I willed myself towards this neutrality.
I enjoyed that pleasure I now inhabit.
 I collaborated with my boredom.

In the above passage, Robertson's gives her self-reading poetic form to perform a self-reification, and lines like "*I desire nothing humble or abridged*" do not so much speak to the reader as sit waiting to be encountered. At the same time, Robertson's objectified "I" transcends its object status: the repeated recurrence of the first-person begins to create the sense of a real first person whose "I" in language both enables and betrays her. In this way, the "I" who "*endlessly close[s]*" in these passages, is "an internally contradictory unity." Furthermore, I would point out that when Robertson reads and transcribes her own "I" from her notebooks, in language, and in time, she draws history from within her own "I," immanently unfolding "the entirety of [her] society."

Nevertheless, Robertson's lines in "Face/" do not line up with Adorno's basic notion of lyric's autonomy. "*I could have been wrong*," Robertson writes, and "*I doubt that I am original*," "I collaborated with my boredom," and "*I endlessly close*." If each line of Robertson's poem carves out a distinctive first person, the ensuing lines' non-correspondence then generates a dissonance and tension with this distinctiveness. It remains to be seen whether Robertson's art grows out of a hypo-social impulse—or whether, instead, "Face/" comes down more on its own relationality.

The potential pitfall of the presupposition that the proper lyric self-consciously emulates that which it resists is that *all* lyrics then become subversive, and all the more so the less explicitly they are politically resistant. When Adorno ends "On Lyric Poetry and Society" with a reading of Stefan George's "*Im windes-weben*," he does so to recuperate George's ostensibly entirely individual poem as a refusal—in its resolute assertion of detached personhood—of its social context. Of George's poem, he says that,

The four lines "*Nun muss ich gar / Um dein aug und haar / Alle tage / In sehnen leben*," which I consider some of the most irresistible lines in German poetry, are like a quotation, but a quotation not from another poet but from something language has irrevocably failed to achieve (53).

Adorno's reading is a putting-into-quotation-marks much like Cleanth Brooks' reading of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Adorno lifts the George poem out of its immediate context to connect it with an idealized tradition of lyric resistance and a context of reading that and sets this tradition against the brute fact of history. The lyric "I" in Adorno's reading of George is perforce beleaguered; from this baseline position George's "I" becomes heroic and singular role by asserting his "I"'s existence, apart from the indignities of social lift. As Adorno writes in "On

Lyric Poetry and Society”: “In an age of incomprehensible horror, Hegel’s principle, which Brecht adopted as his motto, that truth is concrete, can perhaps only suffice for art” (18).

Adorno’s lyric theory as he applies it to George’s “*Im windes-weben*” both celebrates and belittles art, offering it the highest privilege of criticism and denying the exercise of it. The “I,” in this case, is ideally exercised in his or her assertion of a certain version of “I”-ness—in affect, sensory description, and isolation—as opposed, for example, to argumentative declaration. In fact, we wonder if Adorno’s ideals are all for the imposing—if any first-person poem could be rescued by a reading that would see in it the principle that poetry could be read as social if it is read as a repudiation of the social. If the poem does not do so, then it is not a properly lyric poem. But I think that Robertson’s poem shows the limits of this separating-out of lyric from the social.

Adorno’s essay was his response to a widespread notion of lyric as opposed to larger narratives like epic. This was a philological and philosophical framing of lyric. For example, Bruno Snell writes in “The Rise of the Individual in the Early Greek Lyric” from *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* (1946, translated 1953) that,

Perhaps the most striking difference between the two genres [epic and lyric] as regards the men behind the works, is the emergence of the poets as individuals. As compared with the grave problem of identity which the name of Homer continues to pose, the lyricists announce their own names; they speak about themselves and become recognizable as personalities (44).

Snell’s idea is that the lyric was the alternative to the epic, and Snell reads a historical shift into this, and the emergence of individual consciousness. For Snell, consciousness as we know it grows out of a historical development in language, in history, and between texts reciprocally. Individual consciousness is a realization, according to Snell: the writers came around to developing and inevitable self-consciousness, which was then brought to fruition in the later history of Western Europe—and that this subjectivity is universal, essential, inevitable. In gaining individuality, the lyric has to differentiate itself against the epic—the individual is pitted against the values of society, and lyric comes to be defined in these terms, as does literature in general. This opposition between lyric and epic persists, and poetry critics frame the lyric as subjective, which means delimiting it. The lyric has come to figure a relationship in which the individual consciousness, poetry, and art are all opposed to what Adorno calls “empirical reality”—a relationship in which the “I” is disinterested in politics, detached from civic life, and philosophically resigned to a circumscribed role in society.

*

In *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Virginia Jackson uses the word “lyricization” to describe the process by which texts—usually short, first-person, perhaps fragmented, often written by a woman—were read as lyrics, that is, poems that came to exemplify the “abstract[ly] personif[ied]” individual, as opposed to history (100). In twentieth-century poetry criticism, *all* poems were judged (often unfavorably) against an archetypal lyric, and this often necessitated acts of willful construal—in *Dickinson’s Misery*, Jackson tracks the transformation of Dickinson’s archives into lyric, which then were taken as speaking to the irreducible singularity and “alienation” of her person (95). New Critics were drawn to fragmented texts—like Dickinson’s—because they were subject to critical re-construction; Jackson goes back to attempt to restore Dickinson’s writing to its pre-lyricized state. For example,

Jackson cites Yvor Winters' 1938 essay "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment" for his praise of "My Cricket" as one of Dickinson's finest lyrics. Winters claims that the poem's merit derives from its reaching for the universal by referencing a non-present cricket, but Jackson finds that the poem was a letter of Dickinson's with the dead carcass of a cricket enclosed. To be a lyric, the Dickinson letter had to get cleaned up: it had to be converted to type, set like a poem, and the dead cricket fell away. More to the point, "My Cricket" had to be read as the utterance of a lyric "I" speaking to her status as individual, out of history and de-contextualized, rather than as a letter with a specific addressee. Lyric has to be universally applicable—in this way, lyric is imposed on it so that it can then be read for its lyricism. For Jackson, the trouble with lyricization is that it flattens the heterogeneity of genres, reading poems as so detached from politics as to be conservative and so ahistorical as to be reductive. This is stark with Dickinson because of course she published very little during her life, and what we have of hers has to be reconstructed. I think I want to underline that the model of personhood lyricization projects is not only restrictive on the way we read the poem's address, and not only restrictive on what we make of its history, but also restrictive on the way we imagine the poet acting through the poem: in lines 61-80, we can look at the proliferation of voice.

I experienced a transitive sensation to the left of my mind.

I stood in the horizontal and vertical cultures of words like a bar in a graph.

I feel like the city itself should confess.

With the guilt that I quietly believe anything, I dreamt I lied.

I felt pampered by the austerity—it pushed my hip so I rolled.

I desire nothing humble or abridged.

I find abstraction in monotony, only an object, falling.

Yet I enjoyed sex in the shortening seasons.

I had at my disposal my feet and my lungs and these slimnesses.

I am satisfied with so little.

I had insisted on my body's joy and little else.

I wish not to judge or to dawdle.

I had no plan but to advance into Saturday.

I had a sense that I'd strengthen, and speak less.

It was a chic ideal.

Look, I'm stupid and desperate and florid with it.

I have a figure of it.

Had I the choice again, I'd enter whole climates superbly indifferent to abstraction.

I have been like lyric.

I withdrew from all want and all knowledge.

I want to point out the way the poem alternates between roman and italic type. The effect is that the reader reads the italic as a different voice—a whisper—or a superegoic commentary. Indeed, the variability of "tone" among the lines—exclamations, propositions, questions, etc.—and the alternating italic and roman typeface undermines any perception that there might be a fixed "voice" in the poem. The reader *could* take every single line as the voice of a different speaker. All this serves to proliferate voice in the poem, a Bakhtinian polyphony, except that the line-to-line voice shift creates the impression of an infinite proliferation of voices. I think that that possibility of a radical pluralism co-exists uneasily with the readers' desire to come to terms with another consciousness that gathers together all of the lines of face. There's an operation of voice-proliferation happening in the poem—but I also think there's something counterbalancing that. If

we read a poem as a lyric, it discounts the possibility that the “I” of the poem is responding to a specific situation, and acting in a specific situation, and that we as readers can still feel that figure it out ascertain it and it can still effect us. We put it into one certain situation, a “dramatic context,” a lyric theater—and then we judge it by its ability to perform in that situation. Indeed, the problem with that context is that it can begin to seem all the more inefficacious.

In *Dickinson’s Misery*, Jackson focuses in the nineteenth and twentieth-century lyricization of Dickinson, and only glancingly discusses Adorno, but she does take up Paul DeMan’s “Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric” more explicitly. For Brooks and Wimsatt, “dramatic context” was a way of apprehending something that they held to be concrete. For DeMan, “dramatic context” only indicates just how it’s a figure or fiction or illusion—and a hedge against “death.” Another way of explaining this is to say that for the New Critics it was about real presence, while DeMan’s readings think about non-presence underlying language, trope, representation. In “Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric,” the figure is that of animating the inanimate in Autobiography. In another essay, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” DeMan makes of self-writing (his example is Wordsworth’s *Essays upon Epitaphs*) a figure for writing in general: “any book with a readable title page,” he writes, “is, to some extent, autobiographical” (70). This figure is not only general, but paradoxical, so that “just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be,” because, while autobiography depends on the “mutual reflexive substitution” of author and reader, the referent behind those substitutions, the “I” of self-writing, is absent (70). In a passage that seems to speak directly to Robertson’s “Face/,” DeMan names this paradoxical figure *prosopopeia*:

Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope’s name, *prosopon poiien*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*). Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one’s name... is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, figure, figuration and disfiguration (76).

For DeMan that “I” is the shoring up of name, voice, or language against the “deeper logical disturbance” of the referent’s endless receding (78). In the last paragraph of his essay, DeMan takes his reading to its analytical end-point: DeMan on “death”—

As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause (80-81).

Not only is it impossible to write the “I,” but it’s impossible to read it; in both Tate’s and DeMan’s formulations, reading, like self-writing, is preordained to come up against a failure preordained by a problem with the language of writing the “I.” And here, we can read LR’s “Face/” as a response to DeMan. To describe this impotence of the “I” (as well as poet, poem, and reader), it is worth noting that DeMan, like Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks, mobilizes figures of disability and gender: “mute[ness],” “blindness,” “deaf[ness].” Following on Tate’s and then later DeMan’s readings, the lyric poem, cut off from the objective social world and life, comes to the edge of an abyss—which is where Robertson’s poem begins.

In passages from “Face/,” the “I” of the poem becomes a multiple or product of the reader’s reading and the first person as-object in the poem. That is to say, “Face/” is a poem that elicits a reading which is itself a reciprocal consciousness-forming. Lines 81-100:

I have myself defined the form and the vulnerability of this empiricism.

I heard that death is the work of vocables towards silence.

I have no complaints.

I could have been wrong.

I have not loved enough or worked.

I have myself defined the form and the vulnerability of this empiricism.

I have nothing to say.

I come to you for information.

I burn, I blurt, I am sure to forget.

In the evening I walked through the terrific solidity of fragrance, not memory.

I heard that death is the work of vocables towards silence.

Honeysuckle, elder, moss, followed one another like a sequence of phrases in a sentence, contributing successively to an ambience that for the sake of convenience I will call the present.

I heard two centuries of assonance and then rhyme.

I may have been someone who was doing nothing more than studying the Norman flax bloom.

I let myself write these sentences.

I needed history in order to explain myself.

I loosened across landscape.

I raised my voice to say No!

I made my way to London.

I made my way to London.

Here, I read “*I heard that death is the work of vocables towards silence,*” as an evocation of DeManian “death.” What is significant about that is that I think there’s something to be said, despite the bleakness of the non-presence underlying poetic language that DeMan comes down on—that there’s something to be said for the co-creation of an I going on here between the poem and the reader. The reader organizes the “I” from what’s there, tends to find a story or construe an identity, a continuous presence—a consciousness. Indeed, between the “universalized” “dramatic reader”—there’s an unconscious, too—there are things that are anomalous, need to be overlooked, including the non-continuity of the “I.”

Plus, the lyric is a persistent category. In a talk called “Reading Sayings” (UC Berkeley, April, 2008) Virginia Jackson looks at a contemporary example of lyric in the public sphere: a work of art by Jenny Holzer in the lobby of the rebuilt World Trade Center 7 building consisting of an LED screen with text (by, among others, James Merrill). Jackson does also account for the persistence of the belief in the “critical fiction” of the lyric for twentieth and twenty-first-century poets and readers (212). Yet when Jackson visits the site to try to read the text, she notices (security guards eyeing her warily all the while) that nobody stops to read these lyrics: in all caps, zooming by, the text becomes a twenty-first-century iteration of Mill’s definition of lyric as “overheard” speech: a glimpsed aphorism. Turned on the vertical axis, magnified, and decontextualized, the text becomes unreadable, and Holzer’s piece—whatever her intent may have been—seems to demonstrate the contradiction inherent in the very idea of the “social” lyric. In Jackson’s frustrated or blocked reading of these lyrics, Jackson leaves several questions

unanswered: Is lyric reading a residual mode of attention, a remnant of the extinction of the lyric? Or is our perception of this absence merely nostalgia for an idealized subjectivity? With lines like “I can’t say any of these words” Robertson both registers this possibility, lyric’s dream, and speaks to its impossibility, its current state of not-yet being. Lines 101-120:

I must speak of our poverty in the poem.
I can’t live for leaves, for grass, for animals.
I must speak of what actually happens—
I’m a popstar and this is how I feel.
I only know one thing: I who allots her fickle rights.
I feel like the city itself should confess.
I only wanted to live on apples, in a meadow, with quiet.
I can only make a report.
I permit myself to be led into the other room.
I have nothing to say, I burn, I blurt, I am sure to forget.
I preserved solitude as if it were a style.
I am ignorant but I know.
I raised my voice to say No!
I was almost the absolute master.
I saw amazing systems that immediately buckled.
I enjoyed the pleasure I now inhabit.
I slept like these soft trees.
I’m wondering about the others, the dead I love.
I speak as if to you alone.
Am I also trying to return? (101-120)

The lyric dreams a possibility that may not be realizable—because of the ideal against which it sets itself, and this is lyric contra lyric. Robertson’s “Face/” is a lyrical re-imagining of the possibilities for lyric, over and against its lyricization. Robertson projects of a possible future reading of lyric and a possible future lyric.

DeMan leaves us an opening, “the possibility of a future hermeneutics.” As he writes, “The lyric is not a genre, but one name among several to designate the defensive motion of the understanding, the possibility of a future hermeneutics” (261). This some likeness to Adorno’s “dream of a world in which things would be different.”

The work’s distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different (40).

DeMan dangles out the “possibility” of reading. In the next lines, I want to attend to the propositions (not prepositions) in the poem—that is to say, the possibility that each line hazards a statement in a full context, beyond a projected “dramatic” or idealized context. Lines 121-140:

I stood in the horizontal and vertical cultures of words like a bar in a graph.
I can’t say any of these words.
I subsist by these glances.
Still I don’t know what memory is.
I think of it now as mine.
Here I make delicate reference to the Italian goddess Cardea who shuts what is open and opens what is shut.
I took part in large-scale erotic digressions.

The present has miscalculated me.
I want to mention the hammered fastenings in ordinary speech.
 I want to mention the hammered fastenings in ordinary speech.
I was willing to suppose that there existed nothing really.
 But what I want to do here is infiltrate sincerity.
I was wrong.
 I'm for the flickering effect in vernaculars.
I will construct men or women.
 I had insisted on my body's joy and little else.
I will not remember, only transcribe.
 This is the first time I've really wanted to be accurate.
I will write about time, patience, compromise, weather, breakage.
 I sleep like these soft tress in sleep are sweeping me.

The poem in lines like "I raised my voice to say No!" is clamoring for a reading. Every one of the first-person clauses in "Face/" can be read on its own as an utterance. Even out of context, in the poem, and spaced out so as to be unattributable, each line still has affective and/or semantic purchase. A handful of lines from the poem emphatically assert that purchase—#76, "Look, I'm stupid and desperate and florid with it." That said, quite a few are also negative propositions, which have purchase only in the speculative or projected counterfactual realm: they only don't say what is, but what is not and yet could be. And other lines are not logically parseable—they're deliberately and evidently poetic or lyrical, and can be parsed only with some further finagling, like #69, "*I had at my disposal my feet and my lungs and these slimnesses.*" In fact, also some of the lines can be read as meta-commentary, Robertson's own comment on her self-reading or the writing of the poem. Most especially, #79: "*I have been like lyric.*"

*

I also want to give some indication of the way the lyric can be close read for its extra-poetic consequences, and I will use Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of the *champs* or "field" to do so. In "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," Bourdieu observes that economic value seems to be inverted when it comes to literature, so that, for example, mass-market paperbacks are nowhere near as "literary" as books of avant-garde poetry. Bourdieu posits that these texts are poles at either end of a kind of *champs* or "field" of literature, which as a whole is engaged in a constant struggle for autonomy in relation—an inverse relation, in the case of literature and the economy—to other fields (30–40). I will reproduce a schematic of Bourdieu's below:

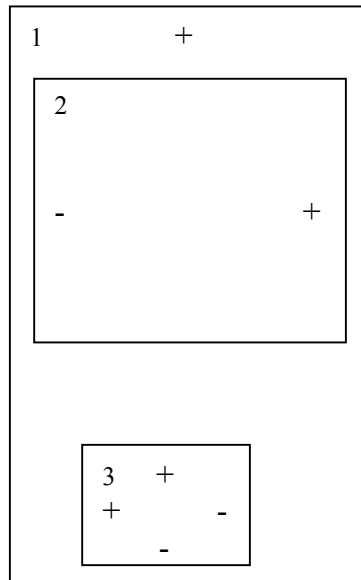


Fig 6. From *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, pg. 38

In the schematic, the field of literature (3) falls within that of power (2), which is itself within class (1); the symbols (+ and -) represent polarities within the fields. Notice that the values of literature and power are opposed, an opposition that enables the relative autonomy of the literary field. Thus, a poem—seemingly self-contained or “solipsistic,” and “cut-off” from “nature and society”—can be read for the strategic position it takes within the field, and the field’s relation to adjacent fields, such as politics or the economy. “Face/” is just one work in a constellation of contemporary lyrics that register dissatisfaction with the disconnection of the poem from all else but poetry. In various ways, these works are in the process of shifting the self-consciousness of lyric from radical to relative autonomy to reconfigure the lyric poem in relation to its extra-poetic contexts. What distinguishes “Face/” is that it is a self-reading, and therefore does the work of exaggerating, accelerating, amplifying, and breaking down the lyricization of the poem. Nevertheless, there are limits to Bourdieu’s schematic reading: it abstract or flattens the poem, making it into a *chit* (what John Guillory calls a “vector” in *Cultural Capital*) in a larger total system. The problem is that Bourdieu’s is a totalizing reading, and against that I would set the anomalies in the pattern of “Face/.” (141-160)

I wish not to judge or dawdle.

I took part in large-scale erotic digressions.

I wished to think about all that was false.

I’m really this classical man.

I withdrew from all want and all knowledge.

In the strange shops and streets I produce this sign of spoken equilibrium.

I write this ornament, yet I had not thought of rhyme.

This is emotional truth.

I’m crying love me more.

It’s landscapes are cemeteries.

I'm just a beam of light or something.
 I only know one thing: I, who allots her fickle rights.
I'm using the words of humans to say what I want to know.
 I did not sigh.
I'm wondering about the others, the dead I love.
 I only wanted to live on apples, in a meadow, with quiet.
If only I could achieve frankness.
 I had no plan but to advance into Saturday.
In the evening I walked through the terrific solidity of fragrance, not memory.
 Life appeared quite close to me.

As I said before, italicized lines—from “*A man’s muteness runs through this riot that is my sentence*” to the last line, “*Such is passivity*”—are alphabetized. In other words, it looks as if Robertson began with one list of phrases, then copied and pasted it into a new document, then italicized and alphabetized the latter, and then alternated lines from the former with lines from the latter. So there is a pattern running through the entirety of “Face/,” but one that offers little in the way of significance or clarification. And, again, some of the italicized lines repeat the roman-type lines. However, not all of them do, and sometimes they differ slightly: they serve as a kind of anti-mnemonic. As in the pattern of the italics, “Face/” is full of discrepancies, and un-fixable things which seem to ultimately resist readability. As the lines’ meanings thicken via interrelation, the reader’s onus is to begin to find the pattern in the entirety—the way all the lines add up to a total meaning of the “totality” of “Face/.” I think this is an important aspect of the poem: that the reader’s sense of the organizing consciousness hovers between the utterances of the “I” alone and the whole sense that forms from line to line of the “I” en masse. Bourdieu’s system helps us see how the relative autonomy of the lyric is positioned is acquired by its relationship to what’s around it, by a negative (privative) relationship, but it doesn’t provide much of a window for the poem’s ability to create new material.

Adorno first delivered his “On Lyric Poetry and Society” as a talk for RIAS (*Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor*), the American-sponsored radio station that broadcast from West Berlin into the communist or soviet-run East German state. We can thus imagine the way that Adorno’s audience would be listening in particular for a political agenda behind his talk. Adorno anticipates this hyper-sensitivity by choosing an apparently apolitical art form—the lyric—and rhetorically and somewhat stagily beginning by addressing his audience’s skepticism about his even taking up the topic of lyric: their gut feeling, that is, that lyric should be spared any reading that would put it in the service of a capitalist or communist agenda. Adorno implies that this reaction against reductive reading is admirable and overdeveloped. He writes of his audience’s “demand” on the lyric:

Let me take your own misgivings as a starting point. You experience lyric poetry as something opposed to society, something wholly individual. Your feelings insist that it remain so, that lyric expression, having escaped from the weight of material existence, evoke the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation. This demand, however, the demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature (39).

In “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” the lyric is (among other things) a mirror that reflects a social and cultural “demand” that lyric be—and Adorno’s tone here spotlights his bias—“virginal.” Instead, Adorno reads the lyric’s apoliticism as a repudiation of both deterministic *and* purely aestheticist readings of it. Even as he insists that lyric *is* “social,” Adorno also suggests that

society and politics are too narrowly construed—they are caricatures of what might be possible in the polis. In this way, “On Lyric Poetry and Society” constitutes a retort to two camps of reading: New Criticism and/or lyricization, and a social-realist or sociological variety of reading. By turning on the “demand” that audiences impose on the lyric—our expectations and presuppositions—Adorno highlights the way that the art-form agitates against its reading, which can itself be a political act. Still, I don’t think Adorno really supercedes the “demand” he identifies that the lyric be “virginal.”

“On Lyric Poetry and Society” is weirdly split in two. Adorno’s reading of Stefan George’s poem in particular implies the exemplarity of *any* lyric which articulates the lyric “I” over and against society. But Adorno’s anticipation of his audience’s tricky skepticism, and his championing of lyric poetry’s politically charged supercession of politics as it is—and as it was in 1957 in West Berlin—contradicts the essentialist tinge of his reading. The upshot of Adorno’s essay—that lyric is a repudiation of society, which is itself a essentially political move—comes close to becoming a universalist reading of lyric.

*

Robertson’s line—“I close with me”—lands with a thud under the lines from Adorno’s “On Lyric Poetry and Society” that she quotes. In its monotone delivery and brevity, Robertson’s first-person utterance—and her subject and object here are both her first person—both model and deflate the “unrestrained individuation” Adorno talks about. In the space between Adorno’s lines and hers, and in the spaces between the lines of “Face/,” I read an opportunity: Robertson invites her readers to notice *their* “demand” on the “I” of the poem.

In the strange shops and streets I produce this sign of spoken equilibrium.

I could be quiet enough to hear the culverts trickling.

In the year of my physical perfection I took everything literally.

Still, the problem was not my problem.

It was the period in which ordinary things became possible.

I am interested in whatever mobilizes and rescues the body.

Life appeared quite close to me.

I will construct men or women.

Limbs, animals, utensils, stars

I crave extension.

Look, I’m stupid and desperate and florid with it.

I do not want to speak partially.

My freedom was abridged.

I speak as if to you alone.

O, to quietly spend money.

I let myself write these sentences.

Of course later I will understand my misconceptions.

I doubt that I am original.

Sometimes I’m just solid with anger.

I have been like lyric.

Still, I don’t know what memory is.

I have a chic ideal.

Such is passivity.

I will not remember, only transcribe.

In its negative motion—its push back against its reading, its rebarbativity, its hyper-self-consciousness, and its self-reading self-reification—Robertson’s lyric leaves open the possibility of a spontaneous emergence: a new way of reading. At the beginning of the chapter, I quoted Wimsatt: “The actual reader of a poem is something like a reader over another reader’s shoulder; he reads through the dramatic reader, the person to whom the full tone of the poem is addressed in the fictional situation”: in “Face/” Robertson makes us, her readers, look over our own shoulders.

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