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Lyric Spaces: Past Tense Speakers in Late Twentieth-Century Poetry

By

Mark Bauer

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Committee in charge:
Professor Eric Falci, Chair
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Abstract

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In extended readings of Robert Lowell, Seamus Heaney, Elizabeth Bishop, and Ted Hughes, *Lyric Spaces* troubles the formal resemblance between the lyric ‘I’ and the autobiographical ‘I’ in autobiographical poetry written after the Second World War. I argue that while a work like Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* announces itself as being drawn from the poet’s own life, the poems themselves frequently critique and ironize that connection. My project’s first goal is to conceptualize these critiques and ironies as what I call self-forgetful autobiography—a reticent, distanced mode of writing a self that is as attentive to writing’s limitations as it is to its possibilities. For Lowell, this mode is visible in his simultaneous, yet divergent, concern for poetic authenticity and factual accuracy in *Life Studies*; for Heaney, it appears as the desire in *Death of a Naturalist* to be both autobiographical and anonymous; for Bishop, it emerges through efforts of recollection that critique the very possibility of writing about memory; for Hughes, it is legible in *Moortown Diary* in the struggle to assert poetry’s personal, mnemonic valences over its more impersonal, aesthetic qualities. For all of these poets, resisting the direct equation of speaker and poet turns on the multiple spaces of poetic experience that stems from the use of a subgenre whose use they have in common: the past tense lyric.

Indeed, my project’s second goal is to theorize this little-discussed past tense, first person lyric in an attempt to overturn critical assumptions about lyric as a fundamentally present tense genre. To be sure, the vast majority of lyric poems are anchored in the present, but if twenty-five percent of the poems in Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist* are wholly in the past tense, that emphasis on the present needs to be refocused to note the poems’ emphasis on the events they present rather than their relevance to the speaker’s present. These past tense poems carve out separate spaces of experience by dividing the figure of the speaker into two positions: one who participates in the events that the poem describes, and another who readers might infer is responsible for generating the poem’s language. By separating these two figures, Heaney and these other poets reshape what seem to be poems of personal experience into recitations of events that are unconnected to the life of either the narrating speaker or the poet. My treatment of this separation as a rhetorical choice rather than a mere happenstance of storytelling reveals a deliberate distancing between these two figures, reigniting the longstanding debate about

whether a lyric 'I' is also an autobiographical 'I.' In light of these formal interventions, poetic autobiography becomes a poetics of caveats and loopholes, of both greater intimacy and greater irony than it initially seems. A recognition of this sophisticated dialectic of self-exposure and self-concealment reformulates this poetry's naïve retention of Romantic subjecthood as, instead, a form of postmodern play with subjectivity of the type that comes to define the work of Ashbery, Muldoon, and others in this period. By illustrating the ways in which these poets push the boundaries of genre to their breaking point, my formalist approach to these highly canonical works offers another way to take up New Lyric Studies' historicist challenge to redefine our notions of the lyric genre.

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Introduction

In “Personal Helicon,” Seamus Heaney writes, “I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (20). The poem, the last in his first volume, *Death of a Naturalist*, is often read as his *ars poetica*—a statement of his faith in the self-generating and self-renewing powers of poetry. Indeed, poetry here—rhyme—is figured as both a mode of creative agency and a mode of reflecting a self that already exists. Heaney, then, founds his myth of poetry as a route to and reflection of the self quite early in his career, and in many ways this poem merely reinforces the other portraits of the speaker’s early life that precede it in *Death of a Naturalist*.

This is the conventional reading, anyway. What Heaney also does in these lines, however, is to point to the shifting points of contact between poetic figuration and selfhood by offering a statement of purpose that itself relies on a highly poetic activation of synaesthesia. After all, rhyming—an auditory, not a visual, phenomenon—cannot allow the speaker to see anything. Likewise, echoes cannot illuminate a darkness, but can only make it louder. If “see” means something more like “understand,” what the speaker comprehends here is “myself,” which is a product of echoing darkness. The image suggests not a movement toward insight, but a flight into sound. Is Heaney suggesting that selfhood is merely the meaningless repetition of an echo? Is it this meaninglessness that the speaker comprehends more fully through rhyme’s well-wall repetitions? “Myself” becomes both the point of this rhyming and its casualty, lost among poetry’s overpowering echoes.

These lines activate a very old question in lyric studies: what exactly is meant by terms like “I” and “myself” when they appear in a poem—do they refer to the poet, a dramatic construct like a speaker, a performative space for readers to inhabit as they give breath to the language, or some combination of the three? By extension, they also raise the question of whether language acts more as a barrier or a conduit between life and literature. The lines further signal the spectrum of hermeneutic options that, at one extreme, accept poetic self-reference as a reality and, at the other, proscribe that reality absolutely. Few readers are actually interested in the question of where on that spectrum their readings should fall, however, because it is technical and pedantic, and it destroys utterly the illusion of immediacy on which lyric is built. Nonetheless, readers of lyric are tasked with deciding what to emphasize in a form that at once encourages them to think of the ‘I’ as an extension of the poet while reminding them continually of the linguistic effects that make the poem into something other than any real-world utterance or experience could be—in other words, the elements that present the poem as the product of voice and personal experience, as well as the elements that exceed them both.

This choice is never easy, and it becomes especially difficult in works of poetic autobiography. For readers who choose to connect utterance with poet, poetry is inherently autobiographical. At a generic level, however, poetic autobiography refers to works that announce their origins in the poet’s life either overtly (as in Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*) or more indirectly by referring to family members (as in the work of Elizabeth Bishop) or by figuring the self as a child (as in Seamus Heaney’s early poems). Sometimes, merely saying that something occurred in the speaker’s past is enough to activate an autobiographical framework for readers. However, allowing this framework to take shape as a matter of implication is problematic because of the two genres’ often differing orientations to factual truth.

Autobiography's founding conceit is that the 'I' on the page is the author's 'I,' and that the events recorded are more or less those of the author's life. Lyric, by contrast, makes no such guarantees: the presence of an author or speaker is merely inferred from the presence of the lyric voice. Lyric autobiography, then, poses an unresolvable set of questions: does the poem depict the life of the poet because, as autobiography, that is what it claims to do, or do readers merely think the poems depict the poet because the lyric 'I' looks like the autobiographical 'I,' even though it lacks autobiography's authority?

These problems are, of course, mainly theoretical. Sitting down with *Life Studies*, readers are unlikely to ask whether Lowell is telling the literal truth (or what it might mean to do so), and they are far more likely to be swept up in the richness of the collection's many portraits of what Lowell presents as himself and his family. However, despite the smoothness of these surfaces, Lowell, like Bishop, Heaney, and Ted Hughes in his *Moortown Diary*, employs a form that keeps questions of authorial connection at the fore: he writes an unusually large number of first person poems that are wholly in the past tense. This combination of features sounds unremarkable, but in a lyric context, it is radical: nearly all lyric refers in one form or another to its moment of utterance. Not to do so—to suggest a self-contained diegetic world into which the language-generating figure of the speaker or poet cannot penetrate—is unusual indeed. In deciding to employ the exclusive past tense in the context of what otherwise seem to be autobiographical poems, these four poets argue for a new kind of life writing, one that offers self-portraits only to reveal the uncertainty surrounding those portraits' subjects. Attending to this formal choice reveals the poets' awareness of lyric's limitations in capturing their lives, and it also highlights their own investigation into the generic boundaries of lyric and autobiography. As I argue in this dissertation, these poets are not simply writing anecdotes about their childhoods or other remembered experiences; they are writing poems whose very generic ambiguity is designed to plunge them into a perpetual state of unresolvable reference, pointing simultaneously to an autobiographical 'I' that is the poet and a lyric 'I' that cannot be. The past tense is the most visible symptom of their inquiry, and, as such, I will be focusing on these poets' use of this tense within their larger generic investigations.

This project, then, has two goals. The first is to add a counterweight to a longstanding convention of reading these poets' work as autobiography in an attempt to reconstruct their early lives and larger psychological inclinations—this despite the fact that none of these poets ever made any secret about the inventedness of their subjects, with Lowell comparing his 'I' in *Life Studies* to a character in a novel and Bishop frequently mentioning her misrememberings in her later work. By contrast, I propose to read these poems as lyrics first and foremost, with all of the ambiguity about speakerly reference and truth claims that that term implies, so as to allow their exercises in self-creation and -decreation to come through fully without merely turning them into commentary about the poet's life. I will perform this reading through the lens of the past tense, first person lyric, the study of which constitutes the project's second goal. Attention to this subgenre broadens lyric's more traditional concern with the present, offering in its place an enlarged sense of lyric's possibilities while situating these unorthodox poems within the more established parameters of the genre. For these poets, writing about the self, whatever that may mean, is also a way of writing about genre's limitations and assumptions; as a result, they not only redefine autobiography for themselves, but they also find a way to make lyric into

something new to suit their purposes.

In the pages that follow, I will first outline some of the expectations surrounding these genres—lyric, autobiography, and the hybrid that becomes lyric autobiography—with particular attention to the question of lyric temporality and the rhetorical weight of the past tense in the genre. Having established the significance of the past tense, I will then return to these poets and the literary context within which they are working to illustrate how radical their seemingly modest poetics of self-reference really is.

Lyric and Autobiography: Terms and Reading Practices

The project's governing terms, lyric and autobiography, are capacious in the kinds of writing they reference, and, perhaps as a result, both are marked by critical disagreements. Lyric is notoriously hard to define, but, in its broadest strokes, it is reasonably short; it features a strong awareness of its linguistic effects (as manifested sonically in meter and assonance/dissonance, and more conceptually in its reliance on figurative language like metaphor, prosopopoeia, and other devices, often as a structural element rather than as ornamentation); and it is often centered on a subject's perceptions of both him- or herself and the surrounding world. This latter feature is an expressly Romantic and post-Romantic way of thinking about both observer and observed; and while it might be argued that pre-Romantic lyric tends to say more about culture and literary tradition than it does about idiosyncratic observation, twenty-first-century readers in particular are likely to treat all lyric as if it were Romantic lyric. As a result, in many circles, this subject-centered lyric has much in common with autobiography as both genres are preeminently about the utterance of a self, even if the lyric self may be heavily invented.

The historical specificity of these views is important, however, because, as proponents of what has become known as the New Lyric Studies would point out, lyric is as much a reading practice as it is a compendium of constitutive traits. Virginia Jackson is particularly vocal in arguing that lyric as we know it is a twentieth-century construct.¹ As Jonathan Culler points out in *Theory of the Lyric*, the resulting view of lyric as a version of dramatic monologue, in which a character/speaker needs to be deduced from the information provided by his or her observations so as to better understand the emotional dramas of both speaker and scene, is very different from models of lyric that take poem as utterance—not as the representation of utterance, but an utterance in itself, albeit not necessarily from an individuated speaker. These models include ancient understandings of lyric, in which the poem is a performance, perhaps even part of a song (thus drawing on ancient Greek practices of accompanying these words with a lyre or other instrument), such that language is not merely representation, but the object of its own self-aware presentation (just as the point of a song is the sound of the music it presents).²

The complexities of these competing models mean that one of readers' most fundamental tasks when confronted with a particular poem lies in ascertaining which model or models of lyric

¹ For more on this, see her monograph, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, in which Jackson attends to the contexts of Dickinson's poems (their inclusion in letters, for example) to trouble such modern assumptions as lyric's timelessness and lack of specific audience.

² An awareness of the importance of lyric's sonic qualities is of course hardly exclusive to classical readings of the genre: it constitutes a cornerstone of New Critical readings as well, as in Cleanth Brooks' readings of Keats.

reading will work best for the poem. This decision-making process is complicated by the fact that, as David Perkins argues, what we know to be true about lyric on a conceptual level does not always make its way into our experiences of poems. He points to an instance in which the allure of this fiction is simply too strong to ignore, citing a reviewer of Wordsworth's River Duddon sonnets, who writes that the poems "made us believe they must have been the easy effusions of the moment on the very spot; it was willingly imagined that the turn of the stream, a rustic bridge, a village steeple, or a waterfall might have actually called forth the various tones of feeling with which those objects were associated." Perkins goes on to note that "the reviewer's phrasing—the sonnets 'made us believe,' 'it was willingly imagined'—signals both an understanding that the sonnets were not literally 'the easy effusions of the moment on the spot' and also a decision to read them as though they were." What initially looks like a naïve reading is revealed actually to be a sophisticated balancing of contradictory awarenesses of constructedness and reconstructedness—the poem as representation, but also the poem as recreation of real events by a real speaker.

The question is simply how aware this reviewer actually is of the contradictions of his demand for reality and the degree of constructedness required to present it (to say nothing of the degree of his own willful participation as a reader in overlooking the clues of these reconstructions), and, equally important, whether this awareness informs his reading in the moment, or whether it is only present in retrospect. Perkins speaks of the preference for reading the poems as "easy effusions of the moment on the very spot"—as taking the poems as face-value utterances—as a decision, but it may not be as conscious an act as the term suggests. The fiction of a *propria persona* speaker is a powerful one whose very success depends in some degree on overwhelming the awareness of that speaker's constructedness.

This exact problem is built into autobiography as a genre. On one hand, autobiography is based on what Philippe LeJeune calls an autobiographical pact between reader and author, in which the name on the book's cover is also that referred to in the text of the work itself, and in which readers should be able to expect that the events read about in the work correspond to those that occurred in that author's life (11). The work is not, in short, fictional or fictionalized, and readers should not approach the work with the primary assumption that it is anything but a straightforward account of the author's life. This is very much akin to the mode of lyric reading that listens for the real thoughts of a real 'I' in a real act of enunciation.

The problem is, however, that the authorial subject that autobiography is supposed to reference exists independently of the text as a real person in the real world. Once an author attempts to translate his or her subjectivity into language, the very fact of language's function as mediator between the real world and the written one necessarily creates a different subject to occupy that textual world. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson go so far as to speak of a narrating 'I' and a narrated 'I,' both of which exist in language and are separate from the real 'I' whose picture might appear on a book jacket, and whose life acts as the source for this linguistic representation of it. Paul de Man goes even further, arguing in "Autobiography as De-Facement" that autobiography is in fact produced by the textual subject and the autobiographer reading each other. He explains,

The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual

reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding. . . . (921-2)

This is to say that a schism occurs in the autobiographical subject as soon as the act of writing begins because of the need for a figure of the author to appear in the written, representational world of the text. Following this assertion that autobiography creates an alternate sphere of representation that is different from both the experiences recorded and the subject who records them, de Man argues that autobiography effectively replaces both the lived experience and the subject whose life it is supposed to recount. It is, after all, a linguistic representation, not the actual experience. However, the representation's status as autobiography, the mode that announces and depends on a direct connection to its author's life, masks this replacement. This motion of effacing and replacing allows him to conclude, "Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause" (930). For de Man, the attempt to bring life into language is inherently an act of vandalism, with language and literary convention defacing the less easily codified realities of lived experience.

In the face of both Smith and Watson's narratological assertions and de Man's insistence that an autobiographical author is little more than a reader of his or her own text, LeJeune's proposition begins to seem very naïve indeed.³ However, rather than simply acting as an overly simplistic straw man, LeJeune's pact makes a valid point: without some sense of an autobiographical pact, there would seem to be little difference between an autobiography and an avowedly fictional first-person bildungsroman. His assertions signal the possibility of multiple entry points in trying to define the autobiographical genre. Lejeune approaches autobiography from the position of a reader, while Smith and Watson and de Man attempt to characterize the genre using its texts' internal workings. My readings align much more closely with these text-based hermeneutic strategies than with Lejeune's appeal to origin, but throughout, I attempt to find a place for these statements of origin alongside what are often contradictory textual analyses. As these readings show, autobiography is not a matter of either/or debate, but an enactment of a paradoxical truth: autobiographies are true, but they necessarily lie by rewriting, overwriting, or defacing the very lives they attempt to record.

Or, in Smith and Watson's much more productive framing of the problem, those "lies," whether at the level of language or in the misrepresentation of selves, characters, or events, all still can be made into reflections of the author and his or her desires for the text and his or her own self-presentation. While de Man and Smith and Watson all speak of the divides between intra- and extratextual selves, de Man's characterization of autobiography as a mutually constituting act between these figures indicates that while a technical or even ontological divide may be possible, the two figures are always linked, if not at the level of reference (with the intratextual self perfectly mirroring the extratextual self), then in some other, less easily defined way. In this view, an autobiography is always truthful, but maybe not in the direct ways that most readers (or Lejeune) would expect it to be.

³ De Man makes clear his view of Lejeune's pact, calling it legalistic and contractual in a domain that, in de Man's analysis, is principally specular and tropological (922-3).

As a result of these competing truths, autobiography can be seen both as a form of rhetoric and a reading practice. Works in the genre profess to tell ‘the truth’ about an author’s life by recording facts and his or her experiences as they happened (or as they are remembered, which can be a very different thing), but savvy readers know that this access to real events and reactions to them might be less straightforward than it initially seems, with the work often providing instead some combination of retrospection, reframing, and above all a reworking of the events for maximum literary effect—the telling of the story as it should have been rather than as it really was. There is nonetheless a collective decision to read autobiography in such a way as to look for that broader truth of experience, including experience that has been inflected by the vagaries of memory, and not merely to succumb to the multitude of alterations small and large that mark the telling of a life.

As the combination of two already fraught genres, lyric autobiography occupies even more contingent ground than either genre alone. Autobiographical poems are often identified largely through their content rather than through overt authorial statement. There is no autobiographical pact in this case; rather, readers can identify similarities between the poem’s terrain and events and infer that the poem is about the author’s life, meaning that autobiography in this case is at least partly a matter of encouraging certain kinds of reading practice. A work like Lowell’s *Life Studies* is a good example: the title implies that the life being studied is the poet’s own, but that title’s ambiguities, along with its reference to a genre of painting, equally justify approaching the volume as a series of character sketches that may or may not be related to the poet’s direct experience. Really, though, the connection between a poet’s life and the poem’s events is cemented by that attractive fiction observed above—the poems’ ability to “ma[k]e us believe they must have been the easy effusions of the moment on the very spot.” That is, if lurking in the soul of lyric is the desire to convince readers that they are having an immediate connection with the poet, that same desire would very easily be translated into an implied autobiographical pact. Readers already want to believe that poets are talking about themselves and their own lives; all the poets have to do is not give them reason to doubt the veracity of the poems’ accounts.

Lyric and autobiography’s respective representations of an ‘I’ talking about him- or herself allow the two genres to seem to do very similar work at first glance. However, because the two genres employ completely opposite structures of authorial connection (with autobiography generating its text from the author’s life, and lyric inducing its sense of an author from the text itself), mistaking lyric for autobiography can create the impression of a text that is far more referential than it really is. This does not mean that a text cannot be read both lyrically and autobiographically, but trying to do both at the same time leads to a false impression of stability in these lyrics (just as de Man’s turning of his attention to autobiography’s tropes and figures as if it were lyric overturns utterly the genre’s conceit of extratextual reference).⁴

⁴ Despite this reading, it is worth noting de Man’s “Autobiography as De-Facement” never actually reads autobiographical text. The essay’s first half makes a number of pronouncements about how autobiography works, and the more closely-read second half takes as its primary text Wordsworth’s *Essays on Epitaphs*, considering both Wordsworth’s remarks and his selective reprintings of lines from Milton and Gray. This attention means that de Man derives his remarks on autobiography’s foundational trope of prosopopoeia from Wordsworth’s essayistic readings of elegies, not from autobiography itself. If

Bishop and Lowell in particular anticipate and mobilize readers' misapplication of these genres' divergent reading practices to reveal the gulf between them, a gulf that is ultimately the product of the various options that are available to readers of these 'I'-centered texts. Even as these poets seem to write about their own lives, both of them flaunt openly the inventions characteristic of lyric. Indeed, the convention of poetic license would suggest that poets are always stretching that truth for the sake of improving a story or producing a sharper scene; Lowell even goes so far as to say outright, "Poetry lies" (Letters 577). Bishop goes even further by thematizing the problem in "A Drunkard": "All I'm telling you may be a lie" (47). The statement suggests some kind of fidelity to a sense of factual, empirical truth, especially its desire to make clear that the poem may be lying. However, that truth is hollow when it is part of a discourse that admits its own mendacity ("*All . . . may be a lie*"), and it is made even hollow when even that untruth is uncertain—it only "*may be a lie*"—such that even the truthful admission of an untruth is rendered only as a mere possibility rather than a fact. The only discernible truth of that utterance is to be found in the ontological status of the utterance itself: the speaker has made this statement, and whether readers accept its content or not, its existence is incontrovertible. Whether this 'I' is an invented speaker, the poet herself, or a kind of scripted position of experience is beside the point: what matters is the presence of that script.

Autobiographical poetry, then, is primarily an effect of a series of interweaving assumptions that readers make about the genres of both autobiography and lyric, merely amplifying readers' inclinations to read the poet in the poem. This complex generic interplay allows these poets to conduct sophisticated inquiries into selfhood and even represented consciousness under the guise of life writing, and it falls to readers to adopt a sufficiently flexible understanding of subjecthood to recognize these efforts. This dissertation offers an attempt to formulate precisely such a theory of genre and subjectivity in its charting of these poets' nuanced statements about poetry's possibilities for representing a life.

Lyric Temporality and Rhetorics of Pastness

The challenge in reading these texts is that, even with theories about the distance between the poet and both the autobiographical and lyric subjects in mind, it is very difficult to read a poem like "A Drunkard" and not think that the poet is describing his or her actual memories. After all, the shift in attention to events that happened before the moment of utterance does not erase the speaker's presence, and the storytelling is still about him or her. When the content of these stories connects easily to biographical information about the poet, it is only a small leap to connecting the speaker with the poet, even when the speaker is only minimally present as a figure in the poem. Indeed, it is very difficult to erase the sense of a speaker from a poem entirely: most lyrics encourage readers to retain an impression of the speaker by explicitly anchoring the poem in the present, framing it with language like, "I remember when . . ." or,

de Man faults LeJeune for applying an inappropriate framework to autobiography, surely the same allegation could be made toward de Man in trying to use non-autobiographical work to explain the workings of autobiography. This is not necessarily to say that he is mistaken, but that his conclusions are almost certainly aided by the fact that he is reading poetry and criticism about poetry: if one reads autobiography as if it were lyric, one is highly likely to discover that autobiography looks very much like lyric because that is what one's hermeneutic is calibrated to find.

after the anecdote, to say, “now . . .” and proceed to illustrate how the situation has changed. A pithy example of this shift from past to present comes in part eight of W. D. Snodgrass’ “Heart’s Needle”: “The first June in your yard / like some squat Nero at a feast / you sat and chewed on a white, sweet clover. / That is over” (7-10). The poem goes on to present more scenes from the speaker’s child’s past before arriving again at the speaker’s present moment: “This Hallowe’en you come one week. . . / my neighbors must forget and ask / whose child you are” (41; 49-50). This litany of past recollections serves to set up the difficulties of the present, meaning that the poem never really turns its focus away from the present moment, however much reminiscing it may seem to do. Memory in this kind of poem is an exercise in comparison, presenting an anecdote about previous situations as a point of contrast.

However, poems that seem to do nothing but remember require a different set of expectations. These poems are only anecdotes, and they make no move to connect to their speakers’ present using the usual deictic markers. These are the past tense, first person lyrics that this project is devoted to: poems that employ only past tense verbs and feature an ‘I.’⁵ This use of tense is extremely rare in modern lyric: in the two-volume *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, only five percent of the poems that employ a first person speaker are wholly in the past tense and not obviously dramatic monologues. Far more common is the simple present tense, which is indeed so common that George T. Wright calls it the lyric present. However, he also goes on to note the strangeness of the simple present, which often appears in cases where real-world speakers would use the present progressive, meaning that the tense would in fact be ungrammatical if lyric were a speech act. His example is Yeats’ “I walk through the long school-room questioning” as opposed to the more common “I am walking” (563). The simple present gives the sense of habituality or iterability, but also a sense of limitless duration: Yeats’ ‘I’ walks in the way Rodin’s “The Thinker” thinks—as a fundamental condition of its being.

By contrast, the past tense is more commonly associated with narrative forms. As Jonathan Culler observes, “The past tense is a narrative tense and provokes the desire to know what happens next” (277). Suzanne Fleischman agrees, identifying the past tense in literature as the default tense of storytelling, and adding, moreover, that in narrative contexts the past tense is actually experienced like a present (5). Käte Hämberger corroborates these findings, noting that narrative indicates its past events using pluperfect constructions that would never occur in spoken language: “Tomorrow was Christmas” is a standard statement of the present, combining a future adverb with a past tense verb, while “Yesterday had been Christmas” combines a past adverb with a pluperfect verb to indicate the past tense (73). All of this is acceptable despite being ungrammatical in other contexts because it occurs within explicitly declared narrative discourse.

Taken together, Wright’s observations about the simple present in lyric and Hämberger’s observations about narrative’s grammatical exceptions indicate that tense in literature frequently says less about a speaker’s orientation toward time than it does about the utterance’s context.

⁵ To clarify, by “verbs” I mean conjugated verbs, not participles, infinitives, and other verb forms. These forms function independently of tense, so it is not a problem to have present participles appear in past tense narration, for example.

That is, tense in these cases is not only symptomatic of particular discursive spaces, each of which carries its own grammatical permissions, but it also helps to establish a discursively lyric or narrative sphere. A lyric poem that only uses the past tense, then, seems to announce itself as something other than an ordinary lyric. It is too short to be a narrative poem proper, but expectations about the timelessness of permanently present actions often do not transfer well to this new space where one might legitimately ask with Culler, what happened next? Neither narrative conventions connecting pastness with action nor lyric conventions of stasis can fully accommodate these poems, so a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between tense and genre is needed.

The best solution to the problem lies in this notion of discursive spheres. It is not that a past tense lyric stages a conflict between narrative action and lyric stasis, but rather that it invents a nested structure in which narrative action is taken as a whole, as a kind of composite event, by a speaker who is removed from it. Theodore Roethke's "Moss-Gathering" illustrates this separation well. The poem begins with an extended explanation of how one physically gathers moss, but then turns halfway through to considering that gathering's effects on the speaker:

But something always went out of me when I dug loose those carpets
Of green, or plunged to my elbows in the spongy yellowish moss of the marshes:
And afterwards I always felt mean, jogging back over the logging road,
As if I had broken the natural order of things in that swampland;
Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast importance,
By pulling off flesh from the living planet;
As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of life, a desecration (7-13).

It is notable that feeling in these lines becomes a completed action: "something always went out of me"; "I always felt mean." The "always" suggests that these are habitual feelings, which indicates that this poem's temporal scope is much broader than in most lyrics: it is not presenting a scene or moment, but the experience associated with a repeated event. The poem is invested in communicating the speaker's reactions to moss-gathering, but these reactions are also habitual and completed. Because the poem places such emphasis on both past events and the speaker's past reactions to them, the degree to which the speaker might still feel what he felt then remains ambiguous. The feelings are now just part of the story (such as it is; narrative is not really the point here); whether they refer to the speaker's (or the poet's) present moment is left open.

Instead of the very typical then/now structure that a poem might adopt, which would make explicit how events in the past affect the speaker in the present, "Moss-Gathering" effectively quarantines those effects in its diegetic sphere. If this were a novel, that observation would be the end of the discussion: a first person narrator tells a story about himself in the past tense, and any connection between that story and the narrator's present moment is neither expressed nor implied. However, if one reads this as a lyric as opposed to a narrative poetic form like a ballad, that present moment becomes the center of the poem's attention, if only because lyric is so concerned with its own linguistic enactment, whether through formal features like rhyme, meter, and cadence, or through the fundamental act of giving voice to it by means of the implied figure of the speaker or a literal and embodied person who reads the poem aloud. As a result, even when a poem like "Moss-Gathering" expresses no interest whatsoever in describing

its speaker or his present moment, that speaker is still detectable as a matter of inference: if there is utterance, there must be a speaker. This utterance, then, points to an extra-diegetic sphere for the poem, in which an implied speaker gives form to the language in an implied moment that is disconnected from those depicted in the poem's diegetic sphere.

This doubling of discursive spheres within what seems to be a straightforward depiction of events from an 'I's experience causes that 'I' to refer to two separate figures: the one whom the poem is nominally about, who in this case gathers moss and regrets it, and the other, implied speaker who generates the poem's language.⁶ Sometimes, as in this poem, that language-generating 'I' is not referred to at all, but there are other cases in which s/he takes a more active role and truly does demand that the 'I' refer in two directions at once. This observation is key because it means that when a past tense lyric seems to depict a figure who exists across multiple moments—in both the diegetic past and the enunciatory present—it is doing so only because readers allow it to do so. On a fundamental, formal level, the poem presents two figures who are represented by the same pronoun, but have little to do with each other.

As a result, a term like "self" becomes very difficult to pin down: it refers to both the real person of the poet and the fiction of consciousness represented within the text itself by the text's language. Autobiographical readings attempt to connect these two figures, and so frequently in the pages that follow, the distinction between them is elided, often in response to a particular critic or set of critics' use of the term, or sometimes as a shorthand for the general project of life writing. However, my goal in this dissertation is to clarify the boundaries between author and written subject, so whenever possible, my own readings of the poems as lyrics employ the terms diegetic subject (the figure referred to by the 'I') and speaker (the implied author figure visible through the poem's language, but not necessarily referred to directly in the poem). I also sometimes refer to a persona or character; these are the fictional selves that the speaker and diegetic subject work together to create, as in the sense of Robert Lowell as he takes shape in

⁶ This division of figures is reminiscent of that between the subject of enunciation and subject of the enounced. While the diegetic 'I' is indeed very similar to the subject of the enounced, the subject of enunciation, in Antony Easthope's gloss of it, is very different from the implied speaker that I am proposing here. For Easthope, anyone who gives voice to the poem is the subject of enunciation, whether that is the author or a reader who simply reads the poem out loud. As he explains, "As I sit here typing 'She was there yesterday,' I am placed as subject of the enunciation. But you, gentle reader . . . when you read this 'She was there yesterday,' *you* take the position of subject of the enunciation because you produce the meaning. Whether as speaker/hearer/reader/writer, for every discourse, for every poem, there must be a speaking subject who occupies the place of subject of enunciation" (emphasis in original, 42-3). Easthope's example text is not literary, so perhaps it is unrepresentative, but it is problematic because it makes no space for the fictional consciousness that is usually inferred from a lyric speaker: the circuit of language is between the writer and his or her audience, which means that a poem's speaker would have to be the poet. I propose to attach the poem's language to the fictional figure of the implied speaker, which is appropriate to these past tense poems because, however much that figure is obscured by the poem's refusal to refer to him or her, there is still a strong sense of a consciousness behind the poem's language, a consciousness that, because it is often inferred from the language itself, it is not entirely responsible to connect to the poet him- or herself. As Bishop says, "Sometimes a poem makes its own demands," which may shape feeling, opinion, or even perception in ways that depart from—or, as the Hughes chapter illustrates, displaces—the poet's actual thoughts (Wehr 42).

Life Studies as opposed to the Robert Lowell who as a real person is necessarily more complex and resistant to literary troping than the character he creates.

All of these figures exist in relation to each other—how is an implied speaker discernible if not through his or her characterization of the diegetic ‘I?’—but, in an effort to understand how these poems actually carry out their autobiographical projects, I often speak of them as though they were easily partitioned from one another. This oversimplification is necessary to chart the differences between the raw information that the poem provides about events and actions, the attitudes with which that information is conveyed, and the assumptions that readers might make about those elements based on context, prior information, or other factors that may not be found strictly in the text. Without this attempt at anatomization, the distinctions between the poet and the figure who appears in the poem remain invisible, with the poem’s linguistically-derived fiction of a self referring directly to the real, physical poet, all of which masks the poems’ sophisticated inquiries into the nature and limits of translating the (real) self into language.

While all of these valences of ‘self’ and ‘I’ and the discursive spheres to which they are attached should be seen as equally important, in practice, it is the sphere of enunciation that is given the most theoretical weight. This preference aligns most closely to thinking about more conventional lyrics, which very much focus on the speaker’s present moment of uttering the poem. In fact, the primacy of the present moment in lyric has been so well established by theorists like Sharon Cameron and Paul De Man that surprisingly little has been written about the past tense in lyric at all. Jonathan Culler’s recent *Theory of the Lyric* provides the most sustained attention to the lyric past tense, but even that discussion occupies a mere eight pages. While he acknowledges the importance of the past tense and the narrative it implies, that narrative goes on to be “subordinated to a meaning in the lyric present” (278). Even though the poem makes no effort to suggest that the present is of any interest at all, Culler infers from the fact of the narrative’s telling that it still has some kind of bearing on the present moment, whether that is a speaker’s present or an enunciator’s present. As a result, he notes that these poems tend to become allegories, narratives that mean much more than themselves.

But even beyond the events presented, Culler finds meaning in the poems’ articulation as such. In looking at the late twentieth-century’s “pointless anecdotes,” to use Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s phrase, Culler concludes, “It may be that the apparently trivial event is not so much rendered important in itself as marked as an occasion for poetic power. There often seems a movement from the claims of experience to the claims of writing: the poem can make a poetic event out of an insignificant experience” (283). This is, in some ways, an assimilation of these poems into Culler’s overarching theory of lyric, which manifests itself most famously in his work on apostrophe: lyric, no matter what its contents or whom it addresses, is an affirmation above all of a subject’s linguistic and vocal power.⁷ Anecdote in this view is merely one more mode of affirming this power.

Culler is right, of course: a past tense lyric is still a lyric, and there is no escaping the present of utterance. What his readings do not quite explain, however, is why this apparent turn to narrative is valuable—and it should be noted that not all past tense poems are narratives, as

⁷ Culler explains that apostrophe, which seems to create a relationship between self and other, “can in fact be read as an act of radical interiorization and solipsism, which either parcels out the self to fill the world . . . or else internalizes what might have been thought external things” (“Apostrophe” 67).

“Moss-Gathering” illustrates. Perhaps more importantly, his readings do not address why a poem would want to draw attention away from its moment of utterance. After all, lots of poems tell stories either employing a present tense frame or by bracketing the past tense with present tense commentary. The significance of past tense lyric is not its orientation toward narrative, but its orientation away from speakerly self-reference. A poem may speak of an ‘I,’ but very often, that ‘I’ occupies a position that is very different from that from which the implied speaker gives utterance to the poem. For example, both Bishop and Lowell frequently write about dreams in the past tense (as in “The Weed”), and both poets employ the past tense in the majority of their poems about childhood, as does Seamus Heaney. Overwhelmingly, the poems depict spaces and experiences that are no longer available to their present speakers. Sometimes the diegetic ‘I’ is a way into a scene that would otherwise be unrecoverable (as in Lowell’s “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow”), while in others, the presence of an adult consciousness would delegitimize the poem’s conflict (as in several of Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist* poems); in these cases, the past tense functions as a kind of insulation, keeping the speaker out rather than letting him into the world he describes.

The innovation of a past tense lyric, then, lies in its ability to mobilize two divergent approaches to the lyric subject at once. It is entirely possible to read the poems as straightforward recollections from the poet, but the use of the past tense reveals that doing so will miss the poems’ suspicions about the legitimacy of that exact reading practice. In creating their doubled speakers, these poets’ past tense poems break from centuries of lyric convention surrounding the use of the simple present tense, and they provide access to an ‘I’ only to heavily circumscribe it within a diegetic sphere that is often not even accessible to its speaking subject. As a result, this exclusive use of the past tense can be read as a rhetorical posture as much as anything else: because of longstanding theoretical presuppositions about the primacy of the speaker, readers approaching a poem as lyric take as given that there is a consciousness behind the poem’s language. It is not that the poem succeeds in banishing that figure; it simply chooses to draw attention away from that figure and onto the poem’s diegetic subject—to make the poem nominally about the ‘I’ who performs various actions in the past rather than the ‘I’ who speaks. It is this focus that defines the past tense lyric as much as the tense itself, and its presence raises questions about both where this usage comes from and what sort of autobiography this mode of writing might want to create.

Self-Forgetful Autobiography

This project grows out of a quantitative observation that Lowell, Heaney, Bishop, and Hughes have a higher than average number of past tense, first person poems, either in their overall corpus or in a particular volume, than the other poets in the Jahan Ramazani-edited, two-volume *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, which I used to conduct a broad survey of the past tense in twentieth-century lyric in English. The poems I was looking for contain an ‘I,’ are wholly in the past tense, and are not obviously dramatic monologues. Once I had identified poets with one or more of these poems, I then began a more targeted investigation into their collected poems. The results are clear: approximately five percent of the poems in the anthology are entirely in the past tense and employ a first person speaker. By contrast, nearly twenty-five percent of the poems in Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist* meet these formal

requirements. In most cases, these numbers are not supported throughout the entirety of a poet's collected works, but one or two volumes will contain a notably high proportion of past tense, first person lyrics. Ted Hughes' collected poems, for example, is composed of approximately ten percent of these poems, but nearly a third of the poems in *Moortown Diary* are of this type. Likewise, nearly a third of *Life Studies*' poems are past tense and first person, and nearly all of them appear in the "Life Studies I" sequence. This particular grouping suggests that there is something formally significant about what the past tense can provide a first person perspective, given that the majority of the book is about reflections on Lowell's life in one way or another, and given that the present-framed prose of "91 Revere Street" treats similar territory using different formal methods. Elizabeth Bishop is an exception to this trend, with two or three past tense, first person lyrics appearing in each of her collections. This distribution suggests that, for Bishop, the past tense is more useful for marking out a certain kind of perspective than it is for carrying out a specific kind of project; it is a formal method for her more than it is an indication of a certain kind of memory poem or a declared relationship to the past.

Overall, the findings are significant: if the anthology can be thought of as offering perhaps the most canonical and comprehensive sample of twentieth-century poetry in English available, then discovering that four of the most mainstream, even the most iconic poets of the latter half of the century can be grouped together on the basis of their use of this form is startling.⁸ More surprising still, the aggregate five percent can be seen as a significant subset of the ten percent that Jonathan Culler observed in the more general, less period-specific *Norton Anthology of Poetry*.⁹ On the basis of Culler's numbers, these four poets employ the past tense, first person lyric not only more frequently or with greater density per volume than other major

⁸ Other poets whose work could also be included here are William Stafford (11%), the above-mentioned Roethke (14%), Stanley Kunitz (11%), Carl Sandburg (11%), and Michael Longley for his later works, *Gorse Fires* and *Ghost Orchid* (14% and 11%, respectively). While these poets support the claim that the past tense, first person lyric is a significant form, their numbers are only slightly higher than Culler's findings in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* (see below), meaning that they are broadly in keeping with the larger average. More importantly, though, the form simply does not appear in their work with the density that characterizes the poets this dissertation examines. *Death of a Naturalist* would be a very different volume without its past tenses, while Stafford's or Kunitz's work might not be impacted to the same degree. This study looks not just at raw numbers, but at how the poets use the form to reinforce other poetic goals, and that connection between form and goal can be harder to discern in these other poets' works.

⁹ Culler notes that 123 of 1,266 poems in the *Norton* are in the past tense, twenty-one of which are ballads. He further explains, "I count as in the past tense a poem without present tense or future tense verbs, except in subordinated positions" (379). My method allows for no present tenses at all in the poems (including the present perfect), only present participles, which function independently of tense. Further, Culler says nothing about whether the poem features an 'I,' which is one of my criteria; indeed, he does not explain how a ballad differs from a past tense poem. I imagine that Culler would actually find even fewer poems in the *Norton* in the past tense using my more specific criteria. Intriguingly, Culler goes on to note that Vendler's *Poems, Poets, Poetry* "provides an anthology with 194 poems in the present against 43 in past tenses," or nearly a quarter of the volume in the past (379). That number is substantially higher than that in either the *Norton* or the Ramazani *Modern and Contemporary* anthologies I used, but it is unclear what other features accompany these past tenses.

poets of the twentieth century, but more frequently than the major poets in the entirety of the English poetic canon. The very prominence of these poets offers an argument for the need to understand the use of the exclusive past tense in lyric: it is not merely an exception to the rule of lyric presentness, but an important form within the larger parameters of the genre.

This quantitative grouping also brings together poets who are not generally thought of as carrying out the same aesthetic project. To be sure, pairing Bishop and Lowell or Hughes and Heaney is fairly standard practice: the aesthetic and personal connections between Bishop and Lowell are well known, and Heaney and Hughes, besides being close friends, paired themselves publicly by co-editing a pair of anthologies, *The Rattle Bag* and *The School Bag*. Linking all four poets together is far less commonplace, especially since there is no evidence to suggest that Hughes and Bishop ever even met. The four poets share an approach to autobiographical writing, however, that seems to understand the represented life as something always disconnected from the speaker, as if s/he were describing someone else even when speaking of the 'I.' Heaney and Bishop both speak of the importance of self-forgetfulness in lyric; and while neither defines that self-forgetfulness especially clearly, the idea offers an interesting lens for thinking of this autobiographical work, which readers would expect to be entirely about the self.¹⁰ Taking a cue from this shared aesthetic emphasis, then, I call these past tense, first person lyrics "self-forgetful autobiography," and the quartet of poets who write them self-forgetful autobiographers.

To be sure, these poets are not the first to have written this kind of work, but they do practice it in a more sustained manner than their precursors. The Roethke poem I quoted earlier is from 1948's *The Lost Son*, but 1941's *Open House* also includes self-forgetful autobiography. "Mid-Country Blow" centers on the phrase, "I could think," thereby establishing a knowing counterfactuality that also characterizes Hughes' much later "Roe-Deer." "Moss-Gathering's" focus on what the speaker "always" felt links it to Heaney's "Blackberry-Picking," which announces, "I always felt like crying" (22). "My Papa's Waltz," from the same volume, combines the cavalier tone of some of Lowell's *Life Studies* childhood poems with the ironic singsong verse of Bishop's "Manners."

Roethke's past tense poems in turn have their antecedents in a vein of what might be called a poetry of reportage that crops up sporadically in American lyric from at least the mid-nineteenth century. The most recent example (for Roethke) is Carl Sandburg, who specializes in a subgenre of anecdote that focuses on a speaker's account of events or information he sees personally. In "Happiness," the speaker "asked professors" and "famous executives" to tell him what happiness is, but "They all shook their heads . . . as though I was trying to fool with them" (1-3). The sense of indirect discourse is strong and central in these poems, as though the speaker is really there only to pass on to his audience what he has seen or heard.

This speaker's position is very similar to Whitman's "When I Heard the Learned Astronomer," in which the speaker also goes to hear a professor speak (this time about stars instead of happiness), only to find that his knowledge is sickening. To find a cure, the speaker

¹⁰ Bishop offers the oft-cited prescription that art should be "a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration" (Stevenson 66), while Heaney notes, "The one simple requirement—definition even—of lyric writing is self-forgetfulness" (O'Driscoll 88).

“wander’d off by [him]self, / In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time, / Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars” (6-8). The poem not only structures itself to report the speaker’s direct experience with the astronomer, but champions direct experience itself (of the stars rather than an audience with the astronomer) as a remedy for the maladies attendant to academic abstractions. Both of these versions of directness depend on an ‘I’ who can not only hear, but can feel sick and comment on the effects of contrasting forms of experience. As much as anything else, the ‘I’ is a fixed point around which the poem’s parable turns. Taken together, these poems are not autobiographical projects, but offer the lyric ‘I’ as a kind of man-on-the-street observer that emphasizes reporting what he sees over the performance of critiquing it.

By contrast, the self-forgetful autobiographers’ poems take as their enabling fiction that they are about the authors themselves. And although this rhetorical grounding in the personal would seem merely to extend the Romantic reading practices Perkins describes, which as a matter of convention link speaker and ‘I,’ it is, in the context of the mid-twentieth century, a significant poetic innovation. Specifically, this innovation takes the form of a naïve, sympathetic connection between reader and poet that is undercut by New Critical readings of the lyric ‘I’ as merely another form of dramatic monologue. As John Crowe Ransom writes, the lyric poem “may be said to be a dramatic monologue . . . Browning only literalized and made readier for the platform or the concert hall the thing that had always been the poem’s lawful form” (265).¹¹ These writers, then, are able to produce autobiographical work that mobilizes two totally different relationships to its reading audience: on one hand, the poems can be read for enjoyment in a way that gives readers “the real Robert Lowell,” the impression of which Lowell is keen to emphasize even as he explains in interviews how he has altered events to make them more literary. On the other hand, the poems can also be read as dispatches from a figure irrevocably separate from the poet. If Ransom is to be believed, lyric autobiography is intrinsically an exercise in ironic feigning that only becomes more ironic the more it claims to link the poem’s scenes with the poet’s experience. But, instead of attempting an overt continuation of Modernist estrangement between self and experience, these autobiographers choose to embrace the fiction of their own rhetoric—not out of naïvety or ignorance, but because it allows them to present a life and critique that presentation at the same time. The Robert Lowell of *Life Studies* is groomed and exaggerated, but he is nonetheless meant to stand in for the poet himself.

¹¹ It should be said that Ransom was an early mentor of Lowell’s at Kenyon College and printed some of Lowell’s first poems in the *Kenyon Review* (Mariani 72). I am not suggesting that Lowell is writing a made-to-order poetry to illustrate Ransom’s dictates, but Lowell does acknowledge his influence by saying, “The kind of poet I am was largely determined by the fact that I grew up in the heyday of the New Criticism” (in Mariani 68). Lowell may simply be referring to the emphasis that Ransom placed on the classical knowledge that poems like *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* made a precondition to their understanding, but it is equally noteworthy that Ransom’s approach to poetry offers a real freedom to those wishing to write about themselves. If a speaker can only ever possibly be a persona, then even self-referentiality is limited in its ability to refer outside the poem. A poet can be totally self-revealing and self-referential and yet never fully succeed in talking about him- or herself because of the conventions of New Critical lyric reading that demand that the ‘I’ always be treated as a character who is at a remove from the poet.

What I want to emphasize, however, is that the poems can and should still be read with that distance between speaker and poet in mind—not in an effort to recuperate Ransom, but because the poets’ awareness of that distance offers the best explanation for the preponderance of past tense lyrics in their work. The immediacy of an ‘I’ speaking about his or her own life is strong enough to overwhelm any sense that the ‘I’ might be a fictional construct, but when a poem that is entirely in the past tense appears, the distance between diegetic ‘I’ and the perspective giving voice to that ‘I’ makes that distance not only legible but a fundamental condition of the poem. A work like *Life Studies* may embrace the rhetoric of autobiography, but it also uses the past tense as a counter-rhetoric that undoes the very connections that autobiography is meant to forge. As a result, the poems allow their authors to have it both ways: to be focused on a self, but also to communicate the impossibility of writing that self.

My focus on that impossibility is not, then, a symptom of an aggressively formalist or suspicious hermeneutic that wants to keep the poem a self-contained machine or a walled garden, but rather an effort to listen to the other half of what the poems are saying. I acknowledge that this focus is in some ways an overcompensation, but significant weight is needed to pull against the substantial body of critical work that has read primarily the side of the poems that connects to the author. This is not to say that no one has ever found evidence of alienation in these poems before, but the autobiographical lens has been strong enough to make alienation just another way for the poet to encode his or her present views about childhood (for example) in the poem. This trend is especially well established in Bishop and Lowell criticism, such that the point of reading the poem is largely to learn more about its author.¹² The goal of these readings is to read the author through the poem rather than to read the poem itself, and while that critical mode serves to complement the works’ implied connection to the author’s world, it can also take that connection too much on faith. If biographically charged criticism (often including psychoanalytic criticism in the case of these authors) asks what the poems say about the author, I propose to offer a counterreading of these poems by asking what they say about their author’s understanding of whether poetry can say anything about its author at all.

That these poems should depict a complex relationship between speaking and represented selves should come as no surprise given the broader context of the mid-century poetry world, especially in the United States, by which time poetics of self-conscious, even performative subjecthood were nothing new. *Life Studies* may be the work that prompted M. L. Rosenthal to coin “confessional” as a term to describe an autobiographical poetics taking shape in the period, but by the mid-1950s Allen Ginsberg had already written “Howl,” another poem that responds to the tradition of reportage, and Frank O’Hara was writing his lunch poems, in which the ‘I’ is composed by all it encounters on the streets of New York. What Lowell’s work does differently from that of these poets is to focus on the poem’s scene rather than the poem’s ‘I,’ which becomes malleable according to the scene’s descriptive demands. A brief reading of work from

¹² Among Lowell critics, this biographical/psychoanalytic strain is represented by Steven Gould Axelrod, Terri Witek, Katherine Wallingford, and many others. Among Bishop’s critics, Laurie Goldensohn, David Kalstone, and Susan McCabe provide examples of this surpassing concern for the poet, but biographical reading is so well established as a convention of Bishop criticism that even a formally-minded critic like Bonnie Costello refers to the speakers of Bishop’s poems as “the poet” throughout her seminal monograph, *Questions of Mastery*.

each of these three poets will clarify the ways in which Lowell's writing and method of positioning his subject within the poem differs from these other writers.

It would be easy to lose sight of the speaker in "Howl" because of its lengthy catalogues of observations, but part I is actually one long sentence governed by a claim of personal experience—"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed . . ."—which then launches into the anaphoric series of subordinate clauses that comprise the rest of the section, all of them headed by "who." Although the poem is clearly set on describing the many permutations of the destruction of the best minds of the speaker's generation, the very vastness of this list also acts as a testament to the range of the speaker's experience. One of the ways it in fact works to elevate the speaker above his description is through the move toward aggregation. Each "who" provides a new scene and a new set of details, but it also serves to deindividuate the very people it describes. This strain between individuation and aggregation becomes most legible in the impossible series, "who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who came back to Denver and waited in vain" (17). Surely one person did not die in Denver and subsequently return, but the collectivizing "who" forces an erasure of the separations between these individuals. Indeed, the poem's tendency toward aggregation leads it to focus on large movements rather than on particulars—movements that do more to reinforce the centrality of the speaker's observation than they do to communicate the experiences of these destroyed minds. Even when the poem abandons its rhetoric of aggregation to focus on a specific person, Carl Solomon, in part III, everything he does is bracketed by the speaker's assertion, "I am with you," which begins every line of this section. Ultimately, while the poem is a lament for Carl Solomon and all the other great minds the speaker has seen destroyed, it, like all elegy, is at least as much about affirming the presence of a speaker who can make such a lament as it is about memorializing the people who are the poem's ostensible subjects.

By contrast, while O'Hara's 'I' is composed of observations about the world around him, he refuses to aggregate anything. Indeed, the speed of the speaker's shifts between those observations is such that the sense of accumulated history that constitutes "Howl's" speaker is rendered impossible. In "The Day Lady Died," times and places are hyper-specific:

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
three days after Bastille day, yes
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
and I don't know the people who will feed me. (1-6)

This subject's life seems to be composed of clocks and train schedules: indeed, the times of events are far more precise than the events themselves, with dinner offering merely an abstraction that lacks the detail of the social occasion that it obviously is. The speaker does not know who will feed him, and so the anticipation of the event lies in the logistics of his getting there rather than in an excitement about seeing particular people.

Stranger still, as specific as the speaker is in triangulating himself in time and space, there is very little sense of where he actually is—that is, little sense of the experience of the space. This tendency becomes stronger when he goes to a place called the Golden Griffin, which one can infer is a bookstore because he "get[s] a little Verlaine / for Patsy" there (13-14). However,

rather than provide more detail about the Golden Griffin, the speaker instead launches into a list of titles that he considers instead: Lattimore's translation of Hesiod, or "Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres*. . ." (15-16). Any sense of the Golden Griffin is now thoroughly lost, and the titles become merely another version of the train times listed in the first stanza. These metonymic lists make location and scene almost irrelevant: if the speaker is in one place, he could just as easily be in another, so why bother providing sensory detail about where he is? It is less that he is absorbed by this constantly shifting landscape and more that he rides this glut of details like a wave. While Ginsberg's speaker uses his observations to build a sense of authority and to remake the observed world as something he can master by retelling it, O'Hara's speaker demonstrates his mastery by knowing how to navigate his world's flood of factual information while not actually being absorbed into it. The poem emphasizes the speaker's cultural and even logistical authority at the expense of the sort of poetic authority that Ginsberg's speaker's almost vatic command exercises over his cumulative experience.

By contrast to both of these poems, Lowell's *Life Studies* poems anchor themselves in places and scenes, and the 'I' becomes an outgrowth of them. Simply scanning the volume's table of contents emphasizes the degree to which this is true, with a sampling including "Beyond the Alps," "91 Revere Street," "Dunbarton," and "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms." "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" describes a single scene with intense attention both to the details in front of the poem's 'I' and to the history that makes the scene meaningful to the speaker. There is a way in which Lowell represents a middle path between Ginsberg's and O'Hara's respective poetics. Ginsberg is devoted to making meaning from his observations by yoking them to a larger, removed retelling, but he does not necessarily provide a great deal of detail about the particulars of those observations. O'Hara, on the other hand, refuses to say what anything means, but he heaps his poem full of details and observations. Lowell, however, finds a way in this past tense, first person poem to offer a great deal of detail while remaining focused on the background information that makes the details meaningful.¹³ He accomplishes this balancing of information by sacrificing the fixity of his speaker—or rather, of the poem's 'I,' who is a child, and as a result is actually a different figure from the poem's adult speaker. Indeed, when the 'I' does appear, he is transfigured in such a way as to be swallowed by the larger dramatic situation. In observing an argument between his Uncle and his grandfather, the speaker explains,

I wasn't a child at all—
 unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina
 in the Golden House of Nero
 Near me was the white measuring-door
 my Grandfather had pencilled with my Uncle's heights.

¹³ I have not to this point considered questions of tense in the poems. "Howl's" first part is predominantly in the past tense, but sections two and three are explanatory and descriptive (in the present). "The Day Lady Died" is predominantly in the present until the last few lines, when the speaker recollects having seen Billie Holliday perform at the 5 Spot. Memory, then, is a factor in all of these poems, although it obviously shapes "Howl" much more than "The Day Lady Died." As will become clear, Lowell makes memory, or the dramatization of it, perhaps the primary factor in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," so much so as never to leave the scene of that afternoon.

In 1911, he had stopped growing at just six feet. (ellipses in original, 130-135) The ‘I’ here obviously becomes a focus, but he also is completely absorbed in his environment: indeed, the very situation of his observation is enough to transform the speaker into the mother of a Roman emperor. There is little other logic to explain this transformation, except that the child’s situation allows the speaker to indulge in this small flight of associative fancy. In the lines that follow, the associations of childhood growth serve to realign the child with Uncle Devereux, as the remainder of the poem will do through both characters’ blue and white clothing. Above all, however, even though this ‘I’ occupies a fixed physical position in the poem, he himself is anything but fixed. If O’Hara’s speaker were subject to the same kinds of scenic variations, there would be no ‘I’ left to serve as an observational focal point; it would simply become whatever figure would be most like what he momentarily describes. And yet while O’Hara makes a show of the elements that inundate his speaker, Lowell’s attention returns to the same scene or set of characters so frequently that it is easy to look past his radical alterations to his ‘I.’ “My Last Afternoon” seems to be an adult’s recollection of himself on a porch as a child, but in fact, it illustrates the provisionality of subjective identity in the space of poetic description.

As a result of this concern for characters and scene, Lowell’s past tense, first person poetry ends up enacting a self-effacement by obscuring its present speaker even as the poem seems to be about that ‘I.’ As a result, the ‘I’ in self-forgetful autobiography often seems merely an entry point, less the focus than a keyhole through which to view the apparent past, unlike “Howl’s” speaker, which uses his past to constitute his present, and, indeed, to create a sense of authority for the poem’s many indictments. This use of observation to create the speaker is also present in “The Day Lady Died,” which shows its speaker not only navigating New York City through his tastes and priorities, but also constructing the city through the selectiveness of his attention. Both Ginsberg and O’Hara write poems that privilege the ‘I’; Lowell, by contrast, offers his ‘I’ almost as a sacrifice to the larger scene.

While this focus on the scene can be read as a way to see Lowell’s poetic as a reconciliation of the extremities of Ginsberg and O’Hara’s divergent poetics, Lowell’s use of this technique—as well as Bishop’s—can be viewed as merely an outgrowth of each poet’s pre-existing tendencies to focus on relatively impersonal observation. When an ‘I’ appears in Lowell’s early work, it is generally to animate a historical theme, or, as in his second volume, to create a persona through dramatic monologues. Likewise, Bishop’s first two volumes in particular are known for their descriptions and observations; if there is an ‘I,’ it is usually mentioned only in passing. Both poets’ autobiographical works seem like logical extensions of these styles: in Bishop’s case, she simply stops describing coastlines and begins describing memories of herself (or scenes that have the appearance of being from her childhood). Lowell’s interest in personae is turned to character as such as he presents in *Life Studies* not just versions of himself, but of his father and mother, grandfather, and other family members. While *Life Studies* is hailed as a defining turn in Lowell’s poetics, the volume’s real innovation lies merely in recognizing the similarities between the ‘I’ of a dramatic monologue and the ‘I’ of a lyric poem, a similarity that Ransom had been preaching for years.

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, Heaney had already absorbed the possibilities of both incarnations of Lowell’s poetics by the time he was assembling the poems that would become

Death of a Naturalist. Lowell's older, formalist poetic resonated most in Northern Ireland, and in the UK in general, as the poetry scene was heavily motivated by the quest for the well-made poem. Larkin's tight metrics offered a version of this pursuit, as did Hughes' early work, but Heaney also speaks of his "devotion" to John Crowe Ransom's poetry (as opposed to his criticism) in this period (O'Driscoll 75). However, Heaney's early work emerges at a time of transition in UK poetics: the British Poetry Revival was still a few years off, but the tight forms of the Movement were starting to be tempered by the looser approaches of early confessional poetry. Heaney spoke to Dennis O'Driscoll of the prominence of Lowell's 1960s work in this formative period: "All through the sixties I was reading him, constantly—*Life Studies*, *Imitations*, *For the Union Dead*—books that were just part of the air we breathed. And Lowell was often favoured at The Group: Philip Hobsbaum inclined in particular to *Life Studies* and *Imitations* . . ." (217). As a result, Heaney's early work can be seen as a kind of synthesis of formalist and confessional aesthetics, largely retaining rhyme and meter, but employing a speaker who both is and is not attached to the scenes he narrates much in the way that Lowell's speaker is ambiguously connected to what he describes. Lowell's methods allow Heaney's speakers to be both present and absent in his early poems, a position that helps to explain many reviewers' initial impression of Heaney's work as reticent (a term often applied to Bishop, too) and reserved.¹⁴

Like Lowell, Ted Hughes famously occupies an important role in Heaney's early reading (famous in part because of Heaney's characterization of him in his essay, "Englands of the Mind"), but the diary poems that will be examined here appear far too late to have had much influence on Heaney's early career. Indeed, by the time Hughes was writing his Moortown poems in the early 1970s, the poetic landscape had changed substantially from that of the decade before. Confessionalism was very much a mainstream trend: not only had Lowell's former students, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, gained significant fame, but some poets whose earlier work had been rigorously formalist, like Adrienne Rich, had abandoned that style for a looser, more performatively introspective poetic. It would have been hard for Hughes not to be aware of the possibilities of both the past tense and life writing, but, ever the contrarian, Hughes notes, "After all the campaigns to make it new you're stuck with the fact that some of the Scots Border ballads still cut a deeper groove than anything written in the last forty years" (Faas 202). Indeed, balladry is an abiding form throughout Hughes' work; most of it, however, employs a third person narrator, as in the *Crow* poems. For Hughes, a ballad's narrative is often less interesting than its characters and situation, and his diary poems reflect that loose relationship to narrative: while many of the past tense poems are comprised of a before/after arc, they are much less invested in storytelling as such than a proper ballad might be. Still, it is easy enough to see how this interest in ballads might be translated into a poetics of the completed moment, and, as with Bishop and Lowell, how that third person ballad protagonist could be reoriented to become a first person observer.

With the exception of Heaney, then, who seems to have emerged with a fully formed sense of the possibilities of the past tense, all of these poets' self-forgetful autobiographies can

¹⁴ For more on this reticence, see Neil Corcoran and Blake Morrison's monographs on Heaney, as well as Desmond Fennell's acerbic *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1*.

be seen as a reorientation of pre-existing stylistic attributes. Perhaps because of these longstanding practices, these poets' renderings of what seem to be their own experiences bear strong resemblance to the less overtly personal poetry that precedes it, whether that be so-called observational poetry, dramatic monologue, or balladesque narrative. As a result, their "personal" poetry (in all its forms: autobiographical, confessional, or, in Hughes' case, diaristic) is cut from the same cloth as their previously "impersonal" work, and possessed of the same ironic understandings of the 'I' that it had always been. They might write about an 'I,' but their retention of their earlier techniques equally call into question whether that 'I' can ever really refer directly to themselves.

The chapters that follow illustrate this doubled position. The first chapter charts more clearly the forms that the past tense lyric's doubled 'I' can assume by examining its various incarnations in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, where the ironic distance between speaker and diegetic subject creates a textual Lowell who is differentiated from the living poet. This insularity enables the character to participate in the volume's metonymic transferences between characters, which serve to immerse the character of Lowell among the many other figures who people the collection. The next chapter, on Seamus Heaney, turns its attention more fully to the paradox of self-forgetful autobiography by illustrating the ways in which the past tense's distance between speaker and subject mirrors Heaney's understanding of the self in language to be a hybridized figure that is neither simply a product of language nor a direct transubstantiation of the poet outside of it. Unlike Lowell or Heaney, who each have one collection in which past tense lyrics appear more frequently than in others, Elizabeth Bishop uses the form in each of her collections. In this chapter, I broaden the discussion to take in larger trends in her work relating to writing about memory, noting in particular that her early claims to record "what really happened" broadens in the later work to allow her to countenance the role of imagination in memory, a role that is facilitated by the insulations of the past tense lyric.

Finally, I turn to Ted Hughes' *Moortown Diary*, which can be read as a complicating limit case for the kinds of past tense writing I have examined in the previous three chapters. While Lowell, Heaney, and Bishop all write work that can be taken as autobiography, usually about events that occurred in their childhoods or some years before the writing, Hughes instead writes poems about events immediately after they have happened, and he does so in a form that is declaratively a diary, thereby removing autobiography's stated aims of writing for an audience. The past tense poems retain the insulating qualities that obtain for the other poets, but, as a diary, they are also instrumentalized. As Hughes explains in the volume's preface, they retain what he calls a souvenir bloom of his own experience, which he values so much as to refuse to edit the poems further. This claim suggests that the value of these poems lies more in their ability to function mnemonically than in their ability to be art objects, functioning primarily as reminders to the author about his own experience rather than as an effort to recreate a scene for readers who encounter it for the first time in poetic language. This final chapter extends this dissertation's investigation into the relationship between poetry and the life that gives rise to it by charting Hughes' understandings of poetry's effects on his own understandings of personal experience, and the ways in which writing can at once deface and monumentalize that experience for the author himself.

Collectively, these self-forgetful autobiographers draw on their earlier writing practices to

forge a poetics that presents a lyric 'I' only to question the possibility of presenting an autobiographical 'I,' and nowhere is that project more visible than in their past tense lyrics. Indeed, their use of the past tense elevates the form from a minor aberration in lyric practice to a poetics in its own right. In so doing, these poets illustrate lyric's inability to represent anything besides its own fiction of voice, despite its appearance of offering autobiographical truth. As a result of these reorientations, this strand of late twentieth-century poetry comes to appear not as a collective movement toward more personal, freer writing, but as a poetry ever more aware of the permissions granted by own constructedness. Confessionalism in this view becomes a poetics of caveats and loopholes, of both greater intimacy and greater irony, and, as the chapters to come make clear, it achieves this doubleness in part through a reexamination of the possibilities and rhetorics of the lyric past tense.

1: “Lost / in the Mob”: *Life Studies* and “The Real Robert Lowell”

Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* is a landmark of American poetry because of the personal poetics it inaugurates. It is the volume that prompted M. L. Rosenthal to apply the term “confession” to poetry (despite the fact that Snodgrass and Ginsberg, and even Bishop, in her way, discover various kinds of personal poetics before Lowell), and it inspired countless imitators in the decades to follow. However, it is easy to miss that *Life Studies* is about far more than just Lowell himself, or his own personal past. It is also about the vexed relationship between self and language, or maybe more specifically, self and literature. As this chapter illustrates, Lowell is at pains to write a literary life, which is to say a life that is understandable within a literary context. The problem that plagues the volume is the question of what kind of literary self it asks readers to identify the ‘I’ as: lyric ‘I’s and autobiographical ‘I’s are obvious candidates, but at times, so are the novelistic and historiographical subjects that Lowell cites as models. This generic slippage is foundational to *Life Studies*, and it shows that reading the volume as a document of Lowell’s past misses the degree to which Lowell places his ‘I’ alongside the literary and historical characters whose rendering he so admires.

Far from simply telling one person’s life story, *Life Studies* seeks to accomplish a two-part conversion of it: first, to make a lived self into an artifact of literature and language; and then, to class that literary life among a group of similar literary and historical figures so as to raise trope and archetype above autobiographical particulars. One of the major tools Lowell employs in presenting this literary life is the past tense lyric, which enables him to create a diegetic world in which a written persona can exist separately from the living, extratextual author. This chapter charts the details of that separation before making the case for considering the primacy of trope and character type in the volume even over and above the presentation of personal history.

By offering a volume full of characters, not just views of himself, Lowell effectively creates a field of figures into which he can blend. As Lowell’s speaker observes in “Commander Lowell,” “Father was once successful enough to be lost / in the mob of ruling-class Bostonians” (64). In *Life Studies*, Lowell also creates a mob of people who are similar to himself, and he loses himself within it. As such, he writes a self-forgetful autobiography by blurring the lines between these figures and his literary self, effectively questioning not just the boundaries of selfhood, but also the importance of adhering to an individual life story when that story can so easily be made to resemble larger, archetypal dramas. Lowell offers his literary persona as a mode of access to these dramas, making the task of autobiography secondary to achieving these broader tropological connections.

Making “Robert Lowell” Real

The caving-in of generic boundaries in Lowell’s writing is overtly visible in a Paris Review interview that Lowell gives in 1961, two years after *Life Studies*’ publication. Here, he addresses the foundational assumption of autobiographical writing—that it is factual, and that its authority stems from the author’s own first-hand experiences. Lowell upends that location of authority in the author’s experience, instead shifting it to the decidedly less stable ground of audience expectation. As he explains,

There’s a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this

and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems. Yet there's this thing: if the poem is autobiographical—and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing—you want the reader to say, This is true. In something like Macaulay's *History of England*, you think you're really getting William III. That's as good as a good plot in a novel. And so there was always the standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry—the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell. (CProse 246-7)

That autobiographers sometimes depart from the unvarnished facts of their lives should perhaps not come as a great surprise, but there is at least a foundational expectation that they speak the truth of their own experiences, even if that truth adheres more closely to what they feel is true than to factual truth (a standard that licenses some exaggeration). Lowell, however, suggests that his own standard of truth as an autobiographer lies not in subjective experience, or in his working through the inherent flaws of his own memory, or, generally, with himself at all. Instead, it lies with his readers' feelings about the truth of the character, in much the same way that the virtues of Macaulay's *History of England* are not to be found in the author's handling of historical fact, but in his ability to render a rounded, fleshed-out William III. And so, just as Lowell seems to be invoking the careful methods of historiography and biography to offer a touchstone for his own autobiographical enterprise, he instead feints to literary authority, making Macaulay's history "as good as a good plot in a novel." Fiction and its believability outweigh factuality, and "the real Robert Lowell" is put on par with a character in a good plot.

This realignment of authority is a radical departure from fundamental assumptions about both the lyric and the autobiographical genres. Lyric in Mill's durable formulation of "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude" is supposed to be the private utterance of a speaker, but now that speaker is avowedly fictionalized, removed from the poet himself, who crafts his own persona to use as a mask (348).¹⁵ This view is at once completely in keeping with critical receptions of the volume and a radical break from them. Rosenthal in his early review of the work claims, "Lowell removes the mask," and Stephen Gould Axelrod embroiders on that claim by saying that Lowell "abandons the personae, masks, and anonymity of Modernism in order to reestablish the self as a realm of primary literary interest" (64; 111). This reading of masklessness is no wishful exaggeration; it draws its authority from Lowell's own statements

¹⁵ Despite the fact that this characterization is among those most frequently cited when attempting to define lyric, it is worth noting that Mill never actually uses the word "lyric" in this section of "Thoughts on Poetry," preferring instead the binary of poetry vs. eloquence. Mill famously goes on to liken poetic utterance to that of a soliloquy in a play, which even he acknowledges is a problematic comparison, but he clarifies that the difference between poetry and eloquence boils down to intent: "When [the poet] turns round, and addresses himself to another person; when the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end,—viz., by the feelings he himself expresses, to work upon the feelings, or upon the belief or the will of another; when the expression of his emotions, or of his thoughts tinged by his emotions, is tinged also by that purpose, by that desire of making an impression upon another mind,—then it ceases to be poetry, and becomes eloquence" (349).

about the importance of poetry's need to accomplish a "breakthrough back into life" and his assertion that he "couldn't get [his] experience into tight metrical forms"—not just poetic experience, but his own, lived experience (CProse 244). The myth of *Life Studies* as a document of the poet's past is not simply the product of a set of reading practices, but the result of Lowell's own extratextual framing of the volume.

However, as the interview excerpt above reveals, that framing oscillates wildly: indeed, both the imperative to break back into life and to create the "real Robert Lowell" appear in the same interview. Unsurprisingly, critics have had to find a way to accommodate both sides of this framing. Even as Axelrod claims that Lowell abandons the mask of Modernism, he acknowledges that "like many autobiographers Lowell admits to having 'invented facts' in order to give the whole a greater coherence—but the seeming factual precision gives the poem the *impression* of being true. At the very least, one may say that the necessary fiction of *Life Studies* is that it is nonfictional" (112). These claims are paradoxical, if not outright contradictory: Lowell does not use a mask to disguise his experience in the writing, but neither is his writing entirely faithful to that experience, which would suggest that *something* is being masked if not Lowell himself. Marjorie Perloff is afflicted by a similar cognitive dissonance when she cites the Paris Review excerpt above that emphasizes the impression of truth-telling, and then says of "Life Studies II's" "Man and Wife," "I suppose the most obvious thing to say about this poem is that it marks a return to the romantic mode in which the 'I,' clearly designated as the poet himself, undergoes a highly personal experience" (83). Both Perloff and Axelrod's observations attest that the problems that surround the reading of *Life Studies* as factual autobiography are longstanding, but consistently overlooked.

It may be that both critics succumb to the limitations imposed by the prevailing poetic models when they were writing in the 1970s: the options seem to be a binary that consists of what Perloff characterizes as "the autonomous, 'impersonal' symbolist mode of Eliot, Pound, Stevens," et al., or the 'I' of Romantic lyric (83).¹⁶ And yet other models were available. Lowell's mentor, John Crowe Ransom, had long argued that lyric was just another kind of dramatic monologue, which is to say that impersonality and self-reference are not at all mutually exclusive, contrary to both Perloff and Axelrod's pitching of Modernism against Romanticism or autobiography; it is simply that the self referred to is a linguistically- and poetically-constructed figure and not the living person of the poet. Lowell's innovation is to present an 'I' who refers to multiple figures at once: to the figure who is the focus of the diegesis (a character or mask); to the language-generating principle who might be called a speaker; and, if the work is in fact autobiography, to the poet himself. In so doing, Lowell reveals the central role of readerly interaction in this work. In a stark departure from standard autobiographical practice, truth now

¹⁶ One might reasonably object that these claims are now nearly half a century old and surely no longer reflect the critical landscape. In fact, they prove surprisingly durable—Perloff and Axelrod themselves write at least six years apart, and Axelrod writes nearly twenty years after Rosenthal. As these critics show, the volume's reputation for being about the poet himself was well cemented by the 1970s, and it has never really changed. The interest in Lowell as a biographical figure is borne out by the fact that the only two major recent monographs on the poet both center on aspects of that biography: Jeffrey Meyers' *Robert Lowell in Love*, which focuses on his relationships, and Kay Redfield Jamison's *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire*, which considers his bipolar disorder's effect on his poetry.

is highly relativized, and so is the autobiographical subject. If something feels true, it is, partly because this is a work of literature, where what is factually true in an outside, “real” world is only slightly relevant to a reader for whom that world’s realness is dependent on the language through which it is represented. Lowell suggests that this representation trumps its referent: for something to be true in the real world, it must seem true in language first.

One of the ways in which these represented worlds come to seem real is via the mobilization of a richness of detail in the text. In an autobiographical context, one might assume these details are reflections of the author’s past experience, or, in the event that they are misremembered, that they at least speak to a truth about the author’s attitudes about his past. Those assumptions founder in the face of *Life Studies*, however, which places detail as such well ahead of that detail’s truth value. In discussing Lowell’s use and invention of details, Paul Mariani recounts,

The poet Daniel Hoffman, reading Lowell’s prose memoir, ‘91 Revere Street,’ when it was first published in *Partisan Review* in 1956, was struck by Lowell’s comment that as a boy he had cherished a friend’s ‘solid lead soldiers made to order in Dijon, France.’ Hoffman happened to be in Dijon at the time he read the memoir and sent several lead toy soldiers he found in a local shop to Lowell as a Christmas gift. When Lowell wrote back in mid-December to thank Hoffman, he confessed that he had ‘stuck the Dijon in blindly, on the Flaubertian principle of always being particular, as in the wonderful opening of the *Education* [*Sentimentale*]. And lo, there really are hand-molded lead Napoleonic soldiers from Dijon.’ (464)

In other words, the soldiers’ point of origin was invented simply because it sounded better to have it than not. Even one of the foremost facts of Lowell’s biography—that his mother’s name on her casket is spelled “Lovel” instead of “Lowell”—is fabricated. It is true that her name is misspelled, but as the poet tells Blair Clark in a 1954 letter, the name that is misspelled is her maiden, not married, surname: “Charlotte Winslow” is written “Charlotte Winslon” (Letters 214). Indeed, Terri Witek reveals that, in drafts of “Sailing Home from Rapallo,” “Lowell hesitates between ‘Lowel’ and ‘Lovel’ before choosing the more exotic spelling” (78). All of these choices—and indeed, that they are offered as choices at all rather than the unalterable facts that they are—indicate that autobiographical accuracy is simply not the goal in this text, but that literary richness very much is.

In light of Lowell’s identification of the “real Robert Lowell” as a perceived sense of authenticity rather than a direct connection to the facts of the author’s life, what exactly is meant by “Robert Lowell” becomes difficult to pin down. In fact, the name fractures into two figures: its literary valence—the character presented in *Life Studies*—and its autobiographical valence—the poet Lowell, who writes the character into the text. This division sounds roughly like Smith and Watson’s description of a narrating ‘I’—the figure of the storyteller—and a narrated ‘I’—the figure that appears as subject of those stories—with the difference that both narrating and narrated ‘I’s are products of language. Lowell the poet or author exists beyond the text; he is the subject whose existence in the world is presumed to anchor autobiography. However, given that Lowell is bent on creating a character whose success is measured by its ability to invoke readers’ sense of feeling real, this character needs no autobiographical anchor. Readers’ experience, not

the author's, validate this character. This relationship is much more like that which obtains between readers and a lyric 'I' than between readers and an autobiographical 'I,' who is presumed to preexist the text.

As the introduction makes clear, what exactly is referred to by a lyric 'I,' and that figure's relationship to readers, varies greatly from poem to poem, context to context, so it is impossible to say definitively that the lyric 'I' is one thing and the autobiographical 'I' another. However, given Lowell's close relationship to John Crowe Ransom, and given his own statements about the written figure's comparative autonomy from the lived figure, it is fair to say that in this context, a lyric 'I' is a textual phenomenon, a figure induced from the poem's language. This figure might be called "the real Robert Lowell" here: he is not the author, but he is clearly positioned as the dominant perspective and generator of the poems' language. It is largely unknowable how much this lyric 'I' diverges from the poet's autobiographical 'I' (with the few key exceptions that I discussed above), but it is all too easy to let the homonym, "Robert Lowell," collapse into one figure who is both within the writing and outside it.

Even inside the writing, the lyric 'I' is often split further along the lines that Smith and Watson suggest: the figure of the speaker and the figure of the 'I' who is the center of the poems' action. Smith and Watson use these figures to illuminate the ways in which autobiography is a far less straightforward account of a subject's life than it initially seems, but these divisions remain important in a poetic context, as well, especially in poems that are wholly in the past tense. Lowell presents his child self as a figure from whom he is nearly entirely disconnected, but who is invaluable for allowing the speaking 'I' to get closer to the scenes he presents. While the obvious autobiographical reading would connect speaker to child, and to explain the link as one made by memory, the speaking Lowell rarely allows the relationship to be that simple, signaling through his language the disconnects between these figures.

Indeed, these disconnects are well known; as I explore more fully below, Axelrod and Jahan Ramazani have both identified them, and Witek argues that the whole purpose of *Life Studies* is to stage the reunification of Lowell's psyche by first fracturing his identity into the work's many characters, including the child, and then realizing their unsuitability as avatars for the living poet (65). However, all of these critics connect "Lowell" to Lowell; Witek in particular emphasizes the volume's origins in therapy. As she writes, "The way back into life is through representation," adding, "Lowell tried to write his way into a style of poetry that was also a style of being, surely one of the most amazing self-help projects of twentieth-century literary history" (36, 7). Witek arrives at these proclamations via Lacanian notions that the subject finds expression through language, which suggest that if a subject can reinvent his style, or the way in which he expresses himself through language, he can also reinvent himself. As Witek explains, "In Lowell's case, the procedure suggests that the seductive and dictatorial figure of poesy can be subversively reshaped into an individual poet's own more mutable image and likeness" (13). For Witek, then, an attention to language is still an attention to the author who created it, even if that focus has now moved away from a diegetic or characterological 'I' and onto the language as such.

I begin with this discussion of ways to frame the subject(s) of *Life Studies* to illustrate the entrenched impasses in criticism of the volume, and to clarify the four 'I's of Lowell's writing: the poet/autobiographical 'I,' and the three 'I's that belong in and to the text: the lyric 'I,' which

is often divided into a speaking ‘I’ and a diegetic ‘I.’ My readings work to illustrate the relationships between these figures, and to show the importance of the past tense in creating a hermetically sealed world that becomes “finished . . . , enduring and perfect,” as the narrator of “91 Revere Street” says of his memories (122). Contrary to the usual inclination to read past Lowell’s invented details, I argue that attending to the permissions they grant both Lowell and his reader are actually key to understanding the volume, which emphasizes over and over through its form that what we think we know about Lowell from the text is really knowledge about “Lowell,” the figure who emerges as an intersection of diegetic facts, poetic language, and the demands of narrative teleology. The living Lowell who should be the focus of this autobiography remains out of reach, and the volume is constructed to enforce that isolation. Far from positioning *Life Studies* as a tool or path by which the poet makes his way back to a unified psyche, in this reading, the text actually obscures that psyche further through its adherence to Flaubertian principles of detail for detail’s sake and other aesthetic imperatives that obscure the basic truths of lived experience. We can have poetry, or we can have Lowell, but the work makes abundantly clear that we cannot have a poetry that is also Lowell.

The vehicle through which he makes this point most saliently is the past tense, and the majority of past tense poems in this volume appear in the “Life Studies I” sequence, which describes the major figures of Lowell’s extended family, as well as his mother and father. The sequence begins with Lowell as a five-year-old boy in “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” and closes with him as an adult who has recently returned from a stay in a mental hospital. These two personae—child and adult—offer very different kinds of perspectives, with the child able to allow an adult speaker access to scenes that would otherwise be unavailable. By contrast, the past tense poems that feature an adult speaker work to isolate their scenes from the currents of life and memory that would otherwise surround them. This separation of figure and scene into discrete units helps to characterize “Lowell,” who is truly a textual creation.

This breakage between the poet and the textual figure enables the volume to achieve a second, more structural goal. The sheer number of characters in the volume—“Lowell,” family members, fellow writers, fellow mental hospital patients, and even historical figures like Marie de Medici and Pope Pius XII—and the similarity of traits among them invites a view of subjectivity that centers on archetype rather than individual detail, which means that, *pace* the many critics who argue for the volume’s lack of masked personae, the volume is in fact structured around masks, presenting the same characters in many forms—the troubled writer, the domineering wife, the curtailed soldier, etc. “The real Robert Lowell” is one of these characters, appearing in a number of guises in the volume, and this exchangeability of character testifies to the success of creating a wholly textual figure of Lowell. By essentially losing this character in a crowd of doppelgängers, Lowell writes an autobiography that is both about himself and not, offering a self-portrait that is fundamentally metonymizable within the space of the text to make itself conversant with the larger archetypal dramas and conflicts that the volume presents.

Lowell and “Lowell”: The Past Tense Poems

The first step to creating this metonymizable figure, however, is to seal him within the bounds of a past tense poem, which is also to say, to sever his ties to the flesh-and-blood Robert Lowell. “Life Studies I” begins with the figure of a five-year-old Lowell, and it would be easy to

read the poem as an attempt to record Lowell's memory of himself. Indeed, the past tense is often the preferred tense of recollection, but it is also habitually the tense of narration in novels, an overlap that brings together Lowell's twin goals of presenting a life that is "as good as a plot in a good novel" and of presenting a sense of a subject with a history to flesh out the name of Robert Lowell. Like the 'I' itself, the use of the past tense presents readers with an interpretive choice: to what degree is the subject commenting on his own past, and to what degree is this narrative as such, with no necessary connection between author and diegetic subject?

Unsurprisingly, there is critical controversy surrounding these questions, and Lowell makes matters worse by highlighting in the poems themselves the places in which he cannot reinhabit his old self unproblematically, even asking at one point, "What in the world was I wishing?" ("My Last Afternoon" 92). Axelrod proposes that this disconnect is evidence of a personal psychological quest: "The goal is to find what he now seems to lack, a unified, enduring, and valuable 'I am,'" such that "part of the drama of the poem resides in the adult poet's attempt to enter into the imagination of the child, to envision him internally as well as externally" (114; 116). In this reading, moments of failing to connect only intensify the larger drama. However, that this reconnection should need to be attempted at all is significant. For Jahan Ramazani, the volume instead marks the insurmountable distance between the speaker and his former self, claiming that it shows "the mature Lowell [to] peer at the dead selves of his youth, not lovingly embraced but ironized, not incorporated but objectified" (235). This is the opposite position from Axelrod's, illustrating not an attempt to reconnect with or reanimate those dead selves, but an adoption of a position of observation in light of a felt inability to reanimate the dead past self.

Each of these critics has something to learn from the other: Axelrod is perhaps too sanguine in his assumption that the speaker can reunify himself through his depictions of the child, while Ramazani's lens of deadness leads him to overlook the interplay between imagining subject and reimagined child. In speaking of "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," Ramazani writes, "Elegizing his dead uncle, Lowell also elegizes moment-to-moment perceptions, each dead at the instant in which it was lived. . . . Painterly but also photographic, these poems approximate some of the harsh instantaneity of the 'snapshots' they allude to . . . , a vertical slice of time that mummifies the moment and declares the loss of contiguous duration" (236). Certainly, this is the mode of memory that Lowell champions in "91 Revere Street," with slices of time appearing mummified and cut off from surrounding moments:

Major Mordecai Myers' portrait has been mislaid past finding, but out of my memories I often come on it in the setting of our Revere Street house, a setting now fixed in the mind, where it survives all the distortions of fantasy, all the blank befogging of forgetfulness. There, the vast number of remembered *things* remains rocklike. Each is in its place, each has its function, its history, its drama. There, all is preserved by that motherly care that one either ignored or resented in his youth. The things and their owners come back urgent with life and meaning—because finished, they are enduring and perfect. (emphasis in original, CPoems 122)

Although this passage is bent on characterizing these moments' completedness, its language nonetheless grants the memories an unexpected degree of agency: they "come back," almost on

their own it seems, which is something no rock can do. This agency stems from the ambiguities of the diction, which result from the speaker's linguistic command over this retelling. To make himself a passive observer of these moments, he must first make himself an active framer of their very existence. They are not merely petrified (or, in Ramazani's terms, mummified), but open to subjective interaction.

As a result, "My Last Afternoon" shows neither rocklike deadness nor a speaker in total control of his personal past. The poem stages a series of attempts to reimagine experience from within the scene; and while these attempts sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, it is the failures that I find most interesting because they solidify the past tense's distance between narrating and narrated subjects, and because they allow Lowell to make his strongest rhetorical statements about the limitations of his autobiographical project. The poem eludes both Axelrod's and Ramazani's attempts to characterize it accurately: it does not merely stage an attempt to reinhabit the child, which the speaker's overarching control of the poem could easily achieve, but which the poem refuses; nor does the poem encapsulate a series of moment-to-moment perceptions because it is not only about perception, but about family and cultural history, with much of the poem dramatically exceeding what the child could plausibly perceive. Contrary to the title, the poem does not even present a single rocklike moment, but rather a series of reminiscences and perceptions that orbit the figure of the five-year-old Lowell. At times, the child also allows some reentry into the poem's scene, but those efforts at reentry often result in the poem's greatest points of dissonance, thereby staging Lowell's own inquiry into the limits of his method.

In this first poem of the "Life Studies I" sequence, five-year-old Robert Lowell is seated between a pile of earth and a pile of lime on his grandfather's porch. In the house are his grandparents, Aunt Sarah, and of course the eponymous Uncle Devereux, who the poem reveals is dying of Hodgkin's disease. The child never moves from this perch, but the speaker's eye wanders freely, ranging from the interior of the house to Aunt Sarah's upstairs bedroom to Uncle Devereux's hunting cabin, not all of which would actually be visible from the porch.

That this poem is more invested in the speaker's retelling of family history than in the child's momentary experience is clear from the outset—indeed, the child could not know this would be his last afternoon with Uncle Devereux, with whom, incidentally, the child hardly interacts. Instead, the child acts as an access point for this scene, anchoring the speaker's flights of memory and history. The speaker makes this function utterly and even parodically clear through the overdetermined anchor on the child's sailor blouse, which he "pick[s] with a clean finger nail," the very cleanliness of which is impossible given that he sits with his hands on piles of earth and lime (90). The child literally acts as an anchor for what might otherwise become a fairly unmoored series of movements around Lowell's grandfather's house and farm, and the stories those movements invoke.

What the child thinks or feels about this scene is fairly unimportant, however; all that really matters is that he give the speaker a vantage point from which to describe the scene, and a subjective position to which to return after a foray into the family's past, as with the tales of Aunt Sarah's jilting of an Astor and the piano recital at which she fails to appear. Indeed, the importance of observation becomes overtly troped when the speaker says, "I wasn't a child at all— / unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina / in the Golden House of Nero. . . ." (ellipsis in

original, 130-2). These lines not only unmake the child as a child, but they make clear that the adult is actually the poem's predominant perspective by introducing historical and associative knowledge that far exceeds that which the child would possess.

Why include the child at all, then, if his interiority is so unimportant, and why employ a past tense frame if the poem is really about the present, adult speaker? The child's most obvious function is to create a sense of immediacy, allowing the speaker to get closer to the action than if he had to continuously say things like, "I remember," or "Now I think," as so frequently happens in lyrics of recollection. However, despite the speaker's apparent attempt to place himself in this moment again, the great majority of the poem treats the child as a separate entity. The first lines—"I won't go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa! / That's how I threw cold water / on my Mother and Father's / watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner"—hear the child's language in quotation marks, casting it as something overheard rather than as utterance that could be absorbed into the speaker's own. Indeed, the phenomenon of overhearing or casually observing is foundational to the poem, not simply because it becomes a trope that finds fullest form in the transformation of the child into Agrippina listening from behind her curtain, but because, as I detail more fully below, the speaker occasionally treats the scene as something that exists independently of his retelling of it—something he can observe, but not interact with, let alone control. This approach is consistent with the idea of the past as rocklike and inert as described in "91 Revere Street," but it totally overlooks the fact that the poem is only ever the speaker's language.

Lowell was fond of saying that he wanted the *Life Studies* poems to be as "single-surfaced as a photograph," but in a poem, that surface is not what the photograph depicts—the scene or the people in it—but rather it is the language by which that scene is rendered and, by extension, the fiction of the consciousness that renders it (CProse 272). Whether this poem is in fact the product of Lowell's (the poet's) personal reminiscences matters very little, however; what matters is the poem's staging of what becomes a second-order experience, a retelling by a speaker that cannot actually take up his same position in the scene, but must retell it by always peering over his own shoulder. Thus, we receive the child's speech act as a phenomenon contained within the poem's larger representation of a speech act rather than as speech in its own right (after all, if the child could speak in this representation, the poem would simply give us his language instead of needing to specify that it quotes him). But, because the poem is only ever the speaker's perceptions and language, even this overheard protest is the speaker's own invention.

As a result, the poem presents the speaker at times as confident reteller and reshaper of this scene, and at other times as totally baffled by either the child's thoughts or the things he sees, as when he asks, "What were those sunflowers? Pumpkins floating shoulder-high?" (37). Readers might ask the same question, and indeed they are made to live with the ambiguity as the next lines explain little: "It was sunset, Sadie and Nellie / bearing pitchers of ice-tea" (38-9). Previous drafts of the poem make slightly clearer that the sunflowers and pumpkins are in fact prints on Sadie and Nellie's dresses, but the poem in its final form chooses this unmoored phenomenon for its own sake over an explanation, real or imagined, that the speaker could very

easily provide.¹⁷

The most overt divide between speaker and scene appears in an attempt to reinhabit the child's interior space. The speaker asks, "What in the world was I wishing?" apparently unable to say with any certainty (92). Then, he simply fills in the contents of those wishes: ". . . A sail-colored horse browsing in the bulrushes . . . / A fluff of the west wind puffing / my blouse, kiting me over our seven chimneys, / troubling the waters . . ." (ellipses in original, 93-6). If one were to grant that the speaker is really just the child plus time, these suggestions might indeed be read, as in Axelrod's drama of reconnection, as one of the poem's moments of success in the speaker's quest to recapture his past self and discover a unified identity through his persistence through time. That reading, however, requires a great many inferences and a subscription to a number of fictions. What the poem actually presents is a question and an answer, both of which must come from the speaker; and if the question is genuine, it and its answer are logically incompatible: either the speaker knows what he was wishing and need not ask, or the speaker does not know what he was wishing and must ask. If there is a reconnection between child and speaker, it happens only through and because of the speaker's language, where his speculations become the child's actual desires through the very single-surfacedness of poetic utterance. This is not a reclamation of his former self, but an outright paving-over of any distance between present and past, with the present simply removing the need for the past at all.

In "My Last Afternoon," then, the speaker uses the disconnects between child and adult as encoded in the near-exclusive use of the past tense to trouble an act of remembrance that is neither faithful to the scene nor a quest to reinhabit it. Rather, there are moments in the poem that suggest that any such effort to reinhabit it would be absurd and misplaced. The image of the child kiting over the house's chimneys is one of these, as is the ease with which he becomes Agrippina. Perhaps the most overt is a moment at which the child catches his reflection in a basin of water, and the speaker notes, "I was a stuffed toucan / with a bibulous, multicolored beak" (61-2). This moment is important in part for its play with the child's identity, which, despite his shirt's anchor, seems rootless here, truly able to sail off on the winds of the speaker's imagination.

It is also important as an index of Lowell the author's understanding of his project: in the original prose version of this episode, the child "*felt* like a stuffed toucan" (emphasis added, CProse 360). If Lowell had kept "felt," he would have created a connection between the speaker and the child such that the speaker could say what the child felt, and by extension suggest that a strong link still existed between the two figures along the axes of memory and subjectivity. Instead, he writes this link out, choosing observable perception over interiorized feeling: indeed, someone else could look at the child in the basin and also see him as a toucan, while no one else could verify that he felt like one. Moments like these indicate that Lowell is not trying to

¹⁷ A previous draft of the poem reads, "What were those sunflowers? Pumpkins floating sky high? / They were Sadie and Nellie," the maids, although this extra information did not make matters any clearer for Elizabeth Bishop, to name one reader: "I'm a bit confused about why the maids shd. look like sunflowers or pumpkins. Fat, in yellow dresses?" (*WIA* 246). Given the opportunity to clarify the likeness, Lowell seems instead to have opted for the more poetically interesting but far more ambiguous disembodiedness that appears in the poem's final form.

connect with his former self, but that instead, that self is a site for association and even imaginative play—some of it structural, as in the case of the many family anecdotes that his position allows the speaker to tell, but some of it is almost flamboyantly argumentative in the sense that it defies readers' desire to make the child's 'I' refer to the lyric speaker, and further to connect the lyric 'I' with the autobiographical 'I.'

A similar disconnect appears in the poem that follows it, "Dunbarton," in which the child becomes less an anchor than a cipher. As an exercise in social escape, "Dunbarton" capitalizes on the speaker's separateness from the poem's events to cycle the child through a series of personae. The first lines—"My grandfather found / his grandchild's fogbound solitudes / sweeter than human society"—place the child in an unusual position by being neither human nor social; likewise, if the grandchild is solitary, apparently despite his grandfather's company, the grandfather is also excluded from human society, an exclusion he relishes (1-3). And with good reason: this association (or lack thereof) seems to grant the grandfather both the status and virility of a much younger man. He is renamed as the child's father in the absence of his real father, away on sea-duty (5-9); he engages in youthful thrill-seeking by letting "his motor roller-coaster / out of control down each hill" (16-17); and strangest of all, he adopts his grandson as a "paramour" in his bed (58-9). For the grandson, these journeys provide an opportunity to try on an even wider array of roles: not just the paramour, cuddling in his grandfather's bed, but also the grandfather himself by taking up his cane—"more a weapon than a crutch"—with which he lances newts (49). Like the toucan in "My Last Afternoon," these newts offer an escape from the specifically human: "I saw myself as a young newt, / neurasthenic, scarlet / and wild in the wild coffee-colored water" (55-7). Whether the speaker means that he identifies with the newts or that he literally sees himself as a newt is unclear, but it is a curious moment of identification with a non-human other that is simultaneously a moment of alienation from himself.

This moment of connection with an element of the natural world is another way of connecting with his grandfather, who seems to become young again in the child's father's absence, much in the way that mature yellow newts lose their spots upon capture and are replaced in the child's perception by much younger, scarlet newts. However, this connection also returns to the purpose of this trip, which is to tend the graves in the family plot. Far from simply being a collection of headstones, the graveyard carries a profound connection to the living landscape, which is inextricable from the dead buried under it:

Failing as when Francis Winslow could count
them on his fingers,
the clump of virgin pine still stretched patchy ostrich necks
over the disused millpond's fragrantly woodstained water,
a reddish blur,
like the ever-blackening wine-dark coat
in our portrait of Edward Winslow . . . (26-32).

The pines may be described as necks formerly counted on Francis Winslow's fingers, but it is hard not to imagine them as a new figuration of those same fingers, just as the millpond takes on properties of Edward Winslow's coat and, in doing so, gives new form to Winslow himself. This trip to the graveyard may be a way of tending to the dead, but what it really shows is the degree to which the dead are merely transformed, still accessible to their living descendants, if only

those descendants know how to see them.

And yet the question is unavoidable: what is the child sacrificing in order to achieve this knowledge (and, perhaps more directly, does this knowledge belong to the child at all, or to the adult speaker)? The poem casts the child as fundamentally unmoored, able to take on whatever characteristics suit the speaker's poeticizing moment, even able to change fathers as the situation demands (indeed, the strangeness of his statement, "I was his son," testifies to the unusual provisionality of a family relationship that one would expect to be permanent: how does one stop being a son? [10]). There is even less interiority here than in "My Last Afternoon," making the child even more of a cipher. This writing of roles onto the child illustrates the continuities between living and dead nicely, but it calls into question the degree to which the child is really alive, or what it means to be alive in a context in which identity can be subsumed into the landscape. This is a point that the speaker can make most effectively by not really being present in that landscape himself. The child allows him this separation while still being able to afford him the same intimate access that he permits in "My Last Afternoon."

This access continues into the first half of "Commander Lowell," the last poem in which the child appears, but it does not continue to the poem's end, by which time the writing grows much more objective and detached. Indeed, the poem functions as a hinge, moving from a domestic scene featuring the child Lowell and his father and mother to a character sketch of Robert Lowell, Sr. near the end of his life. While young Lowell appears in this poem, he is not a focal point as he is in "My Last Afternoon" or "Dunbarton." Instead, he is one of a cast of characters, generally described from the outside rather than a source of subjective impressions. Those impressions instead stem from the adult speaker, who is able to continue the poem's editorializations long after the figure of young Lowell disappears from the poem. Indeed, the child is himself the focus of some of these editorializations, meaning that, far from the speaker's attempting to reclaim or reinhabit this moment, the poem above all stages a separation and ironization of this domestic life from the speaker's present circumstances.

Despite the title, the poem actually contains no mention of Commander Lowell at all in the opening verse paragraph, noting instead Charlotte Lowell's reading of "the Napoleon book" to the young Lowell and the latter's getting of "two hundred French generals by name" (6; 14). The child here is observed and commented on: "And I, bristling and manic, / skulked in the attic," but, left to his own devices in the attic, he hardly functions as a perspectival anchor in the way he does in "My Last Afternoon" (12-13). There is a brief attempt to capture his language, but it is tangled up in the speaker's language and ends up as free indirect discourse: Napoleon is observed to be "just my seven years tall!", which in context almost seems as much an attempt to sneak in the child's age as it does to gesture toward his thought (11). It is notable that, unlike in "My Last Afternoon," the speaker here incorporates the child's speech as part of the poem's primary discourse instead of setting it off as a quotation, but that seems more of a statement of the speaker's authority over this character than evidence of an explicit connection between them. It is equally worth noting that within fifteen lines, the poem presents over two hundred alter egos for young Lowell—not just the obvious choices of his mother and father, but also Napoleon and two hundred French generals. This may nominally be a poem about "Lowell's" father, but it is equally about figures and titles as such, and the anxiety that those titles may supplant individual identity.

Indeed, the remainder of the poem offers a cautionary tale about what happens to a man who attempts to give up one title to assume another. The second verse paragraph's attention finally turns to the Commander, specifically in detailing his awkward position as a naval officer among a social set of well-heeled civilians, and his subsequent decision to leave the Navy for Lever Brothers. This change is observed through what seems to be the child's lens again, who provides both intimate domestic details—"“Anchors aweigh,’ Daddy boomed in his bathtub”—and also another title, “Daddy,” a name that the subsequent poems from later in “Lowell’s” life omit in favor of “Father,” or often, “my Father” (35). The child fills the power vacuum left by the Commander’s resignation by staging a brief coup over the poem’s perspective, first by taking part of his father’s uniform, then by standing in judgment over his mother’s actions: “I nagged for his dress sword with gold braid, / and cringed because Mother, new / caps on all her teeth, was born anew / at forty” (39-42). These attempts at authority are only posturing, though: he nags for the sword, but it is unclear whether he actually receives it, and while he disapproves of his mother’s cosmetic enhancements, his opinions do not seem to affect her actions. The poem’s language, too, is largely unaffected; it may dip into a child’s register with “Daddy,” but it quickly returns to an adult register with “seamanlike celerity,” and its loose couplets are retained throughout the verse paragraph (42).

This coup is so unsuccessful that the child drops away entirely after this point, not just in this poem, but for the remainder of the volume: the poems that follow focus squarely on the figures of his mother and father. At this point, the speaker’s continued editorialization emphasizes what was already apparent through the externalization of the child: the speaker is the dominant force in these poems, and the child was more useful in providing an alternate figure for the father than for the speaker.

As a practical matter, the poem is better able to conduct its overview of the years that follow by removing the figure of the child. While “Lowell” is presumably continuing to skulk, nag, and cringe in the background, the rest of “Commander Lowell” speeds through years, such that the child would quickly become an adolescent, which would likely create unnecessary challenges to his characterization.¹⁸ In the child’s absence, the speaker makes his presence felt through the particulars of the writing and its editorializations. Commander Lowell buys a “smarter” car whenever he leaves a job; Mother “grew more and more suspicious”; the Commander’s late-night lucubrations yield “piker speculations!” (48; 54; 60). This exclamation point turns what could be a straightforward statement about the Commander’s failings as a market analyst into a statement on par with cringing over Mother’s new teeth, meaning that while the ‘I’'s presence is diminished in the penultimate verse paragraph, the poem has not yet

¹⁸ The poem mentions that “in three years / [the Commander] squandered sixty thousand dollars,” so it covers at least that much temporal ground, but statements like, “whenever he left a job, / he bought a smarter car,” as well as the mention of “Father’s last employer” suggests that a great deal more than three years passes between the time he leaves the Navy and the time at which the poem ends (58-9; 45-7). The speaker’s removed position works greatly to his advantage here, allowing him to view these events as completed and more or less comparable to other completed events, as he suggests with his metaphor of memories as rocks in “91 Revere Street.” Exactly how much time passes is unclear. Arguably, however, the exact amount of time that passes is less important than the larger sense of an arc that that passing enables.

receded fully into an objective relaying of information.

However, the final verse paragraph does just that. Although it begins with a summarizing judgment, “Father was once successful enough to be lost / in the mob of ruling-class Bostonians,” the subsequent lines relay the kind of information one might expect to find in Cousin Cassie Bailey-Myers’ family history: that the Commander’s house was converted to oil as early as 1928 and was redecorated by a prominent architect; and that he was the youngest ensign in his class and served on a gunboat on the Yangtze (63-4). These final glimpses even quote other sources, although it is unclear what those sources are: the house’s drawing room is “longitudinal as Versailles”; the Commander is referred to as “the old man” of his Yangtze gunboat (69; 73). Whatever their sources, these quotations (or, as may be the case, pseudo-quotations) showcase a shift in genre, trading the particular domestic or autobiographical authority that characterizes the beginning and middle of the poem for externalized authority that is more appropriate to a third person biography by the poem’s end. It is not necessarily that Lowell the autobiographer could not speak from first-hand knowledge in these cases; when his father converted the house to oil, he would have been eleven and very much still living at home to reap the benefits.¹⁹ Instead, he chooses to take a wider, more public view of his father in this final stanza. This omission of the ‘I’ as a diegetic figure indicates that, while the ‘I’ is useful as a kind of scene-setting, the figure is not actually necessary to communicate information or experience about the poems’ characters. It also indicates that above all, these poems are about characters—the titular life studies—and that the poems function just as successfully by focusing on third person characters as by focusing on first person subjects.

Indeed, Lowell continues this third person writing in the next three poems—“Terminal Days at Beverly Farms,” “Father’s Bedroom,” and “For Sale”—which look more like the end of “Commander Lowell” than the beginning. These are primarily character sketches, and while none of the three poems ever refers to the speaker as ‘I,’ they do use relativizing family names, “father” and “mother,” in addition to “my,” all of which serve to keep the speaker visible as an editorializing figure. As with the later sections of “Commander Lowell,” the speaker chooses to omit explicit diegetic reference to himself in favor of a more implicit mode of self-characterization through the poem’s language choices, both in the commentary it implies and in the principles of selection that lie behind these moments of imported language.

Elsewhere, this decision would be unremarkable—many, many lyric poems do not refer overtly to their speaker—but in the “Life Studies” sequence, only these three poems from late in Lowell’s parents’ lives eschew the use of an ‘I’; even the poems treating Lowell’s hospitalization

¹⁹ Lowell would have moved out of his parents’ house to attend St. Mark’s preparatory school in September 1930, well after the conversion to oil (Mariani 39). Indeed, Commander Lowell retired from the Navy and went to work for Lever Brothers in 1927, meaning that Lowell would have been home to witness much of this transition from military to civilian life, although it is unclear from “Commander Lowell” if the three years during which the Commander squandered sixty thousand dollars were the first three after his move to Lever Brothers (37). While Lowell would have lived at St. Mark’s, the school is located in Boston, and he both could have gone home and received his parents as visitors, so even if he was not living at home, he still would have been in close contact with his family, as letters referencing his grandfather’s visits attest (40-1).

and the dramatic monologue, “To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage,” refer to an ‘I.’ This break from convention signals that these poems’ purpose differs from those that feature the child ‘I,’ which often plant the child as a lens through which to access the poem’s diegetic sphere. In these later poems, the goal seems to be the very opposite, working instead to distance the speaker from the scene, and more specifically to contain the scenes themselves in spaces outside of the larger flow of the speaker’s consciousness.

Indeed, these editorial perceptions seem imposed from the outside by an observer rather than a participant, as in the poems that feature a child ‘I.’ This is especially true in “For Sale,” which is rife with editorializations and the overt shapings of image choices: the poem’s first line consoles the house by nearly cooing to it, “Poor sheepish plaything.” The speaker continues, “Empty, open, intimate, / its town-house furniture / had an on tiptoe air / of waiting for the mover / on the heels of the undertaker” (6-10). The poem’s strongest subjective intervention is to refocus its commiserating tone from the house to the speaker’s mother:

Ready, afraid
of living alone till eighty,
Mother mooned in a window,
as if she had stayed on a train
one stop past her destination. (11-15)

“Ready, afraid” initially seems to refer to the house, but as the sentence unfolds, this reference becomes untenable except at a metonymic level: the speaker’s mother is described as being as displaced and out of her own control as the house. Clearly, this is not objective reporting, nor is it the mixture of the documentary and the characterological that appears at the end of “Commander Lowell.” Indeed, the speaker here seems to provide the control in the scene that both the house and his mother lack. That control may stem from the use of the past tense and the omission of an ‘I’ in the poem: the speaker effectively is able to cast the scene and characters as he likes without trapping himself (or a version of himself) in the poem. In this sense, these character sketches are perhaps the most overt attempts to produce the finished, endurable perfection that the narrator of “91 Revere Street” ascribes to his rocklike memories: they are meant to be looked *at*, but not looked *through* in the way a childhood scene like “My Last Afternoon” is.

This attempt to isolate experience continues in “Sailing Home from Rapallo,” but this time by including an ‘I’ in whose imagination the poem effectively loses itself. As a result, the poem represents a synthesis of the volume’s previous two uses of the past tense: it returns to “My Last Afternoon’s” planting of an ‘I’ within the scene, but, like “For Sale,” the poem is less centered on reaccessing that scene than it is on packaging and containing the experience it relates. The poem is noteworthy because its ‘I’ is an adult, presumably at a much smaller temporal remove from the speaker than the child ‘I’s; and while one might expect that this proximity would create favorable conditions for reinhabiting the poem’s scene, the speaker in fact uses it to perform work similar to the poems from which the ‘I’ is absent, making “Sailing Home” represent a third type of past tense poem in the volume that is at once able to access a scene and use that very access to seal the events off from the speaker’s present.

In “Sailing Home,” the ‘I’s imaginative projections effect a journey that is physically withheld in the poem. The diegetic subject is on a mission to retrieve his mother’s body from

Italy and bring it back to the family graveyard in Dunbarton, New Hampshire for burial. After a fairly lengthy description of the cemetery's graves, the speaker returns to a reflection on his mother's coffin and the fact that she is "wrapped like *panettone* in Italian tinfoil" inside it (38). It might be argued that her voyage to Dunbarton is a kind of homecoming, returning to her people and even to her husband who is buried there, but that homecoming is marked by difference, first in the bits of Italy that she cannot help but bring with her (the tinfoil), and perhaps more importantly in the misspelling of her name on the coffin (Lovel), the name that would offer her entry into this family plot.²⁰

This poem looks to perform a final laying to rest of the last of Lowell's family, then, but in actuality, it never leaves the steamer. While there is plenty of description of the Dunbarton graveyard, it is all speculative or remembered, arising from a comparison between its coldness and the boat's warmth:

While the passengers were tanning
on the Mediterranean in deck-chairs,
our family cemetery in Dunbarton
lay under the White Mountains
in the sub-zero weather. (14-18)

The description of the cemetery that follows has to be understood as the speaker's imaginative recollections of previous trips. Or, if we look beyond the poem's temporal scheme, the description is evidence of the speaker's having completed the journey and travelled to the graveyard, even though his diegetic subject never leaves the boat. The poem, then, is on a different journey from its diegetic subject: it takes readers to the cemetery, and it could leave them there. Instead, it is made to return to the subject's reality, in which the mother remains in her coffin in the hold, and it ends with an image of that coffin to remind readers that the poem depicts a process in a state of suspension rather than a task that has been completed.

The poem, then, is structured as a loop, and the use of the past tense helps to facilitate this circularity by curtailing the possibility of forward temporal movement from the point at which the poem ends. Indeed, the final image is one of containment, with the mother wrapped in her foil like *panettone*, as if to refer to the poem's own curtailments. The past tense's insularity here keeps the diegetic subject from having to embrace whatever might come next, which necessarily means having to move into a world in which his mother's death is a foundational fact of his existence. If this poem can be understood as a record of grief, as indeed the first lines suggest ("Your nurse could only speak Italian, / but after twenty minutes I could imagine your final week, / and tears ran down my cheeks"), the 'I' is perhaps not yet ready to move into any other space than that of the journey to the cemetery. Completing the journey and its funerary task would signal the need to resume some other sort of life beyond it, a life that necessarily does not

²⁰ It should be noted, however, that this is *her* family's graveyard, "twenty or thirty Winslows and Starks," not her husband's family's; as the poem makes clear, the Lowell family motto on his father's headstone "seemed too businesslike and pushing here" (33; 30). Misspelling or no, the Lowell name does not really belong at Dunbarton, and ironically, the coffin's actual, real-life misspelling, "Winslon," would mark its almost-but-not-quite belonging more clearly than Lowell's invented misspelling of his father's intrinsically alien family name.

include his buried mother. Far from preserving a particular scene or moment as in “For Sale,” this poem works to create a space of experience that is disconnected from other experiences so that it may be put aside, giving the experience its own space out of the speaker’s larger stream of experience, and, perhaps equally importantly, removing it so that the larger stream can be unimpeded by it.

Taken together, then, the exclusive use of the past tense performs three functions in this volume. First, it allows Lowell to create an alternate self that provides a subjective foothold into an otherwise inaccessible scene (the childhood poems, including “My Last Afternoon” and “Dunbarton”); second, it seals off a scene or subject by excluding self-reference, such that the poem becomes an externalized examination rather than a performed reinhabiting (“Terminal Days,” “Father’s Bedroom,” “For Sale”); and, finally, as a melding of the other two techniques, the exclusive use of the past tense both offers a route into a scene and subverts attempts to inhabit it, keeping it permanently unavailable to the speaker’s present reality (“Sailing Home from Rapallo”). All of these effects depend on an assumed distance between the speaker and the poem’s ‘I’; as the poems’ many editorializations make clear, the speaker is entirely capable of inserting himself into these poems with or without a declared persona. These insertions legitimize readings that would suggest that the speaker is writing from his own memory, as there is clearly a connection between scene and speaker. Where those readings go wrong, however, is in assuming a connection between the scene and a personal past. The link between speaker and scene may simply exist at the level of utterance; there is no way to know to what degree the contents of that utterance actually connect to the speaker’s (let alone Lowell’s) remembered experience. Contrary to appearances, then, the aim of *Life Studies* is not to convey the past of Robert Lowell, but a sense of the “real Robert Lowell”—a literary phenomenon that exists above all in the present moment of reading.

Overlooking this present allows readers to confuse the ‘I’ of poetic utterance, which is necessarily oriented to the present, with an autobiographical ‘I’ that is built on communicating its own pastness. As Smith and Watson have shown, even autobiographical utterance casts one eye to the present, but there is nonetheless an assumption that the present utterance somehow serves the past in conveying it (and inevitably shaping and reshaping it) for a reader. There is, in other words, a fidelity to the past that guides autobiography, but that is missing from *Life Studies*; it inverts autobiography’s values such that the volume’s sense of a past works chiefly to heighten the richness of its own present. If Axelrod is right that the central fiction of *Life Studies* is that it is non-fiction, this richness is what allows for the suspension of disbelief that underscores its success: the sense of a fully-fleshed world is strong enough that it is easy to forget the question of whether this detail points more to Lowell’s access to his memory or to his poetic craft. These many illustrations help to create the illusion of a “real” character with a rich, detailed past, but they are only ever illustrations: the collection is called *Life Studies*, not *My Life* or *My Personal History*. As such, the collection offers sketches, experiments, and exercises in subjectivity that offer a sense of the many lives they depict while stopping short of making explicit statements of connection between them and the author of the sort that would create an autobiographical pact.²¹

²¹ There are, of course, limits to these claims. “91 Revere Street,” with its extensive ruminations over Lowell family history, is clearly anchored in a real world with a real history. Nonetheless, as I explain in greater depth in chapter four, on Ted Hughes, a subject’s existence in a real world does not necessarily

“Lost / in the mob”

Cleaving this character of “Lowell” from the lived self of the poet allows Lowell to accomplish his second aim in the volume, which is to move past the limitations of the individual self so as to link it to larger tropes and archetypes. This trading of the specific and individual for the broader and archetypal signals a desire to exceed the particulars in which autobiography would more predictably traffic. “Lowell” here first becomes interchangeable with the other figures who surround him in the volume, and then he loses the specificity of his identity in the connections he is able to make with them at the level of trope and archetype. This movement away from a particular self allows Lowell to write a form of self-forgetful autobiography that perhaps never takes its eye off the characterological self that Lowell offers in the volume, but that simply finds the parameters of selfhood too confining for the volume’s larger project of connection with paradigmatic dramas and character types.

The volume’s structure makes this goal clear from the outset. While *Life Studies* is most famous for its account of Lowell’s family, the collection actually begins with four poems that seem to have little to do with them. While the first of these poems, “Beyond the Alps,” is usually read as a meditation on Lowell’s journey away from the Catholic church, the three poems that follow it really only make sense in the volume if they are seen as offering metonymic recontextualizations for the volume’s domestic dramas, which are still to be introduced. “The Banker’s Daughter,” largely a dramatic monologue voiced by Marie de Medici, functions as a lens through which to view Charlotte Lowell’s overbearing presence and the machinations that accompany it, as when she threatens to leave her husband and take young Lowell with her unless the Commander deeds her the house (128).²² Likewise, “Inauguration Day: January 1953’s” rumination on an icy statue of Ulysses S. Grant, sword sculpted permanently into its groove, prepares readers for the volume’s depictions of the Commander, who carries only a ceremonial dress sword and cannot even wield a knife well enough to carve a roast (9; 140). From these two early poems, the figures of conniving and domineering femininity and petrified, pointless masculinity are offered as polestars by which the rest of the volume can navigate. Likewise, “A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich,” a quoted monologue that largely fixates on sexual promiscuity, prefigures both the later poems set in McLean’s mental hospital and the poems of marital discord that appear in “Life Studies II.” Identifying these resonances is perhaps not difficult, but it is significant that Lowell starts with these seemingly unconnected figures, emphasizing that the trope is at least as important as the specific figures that follow.

It is a common observation that Lowell mythologizes his past in *Life Studies*, but that claim always somehow keeps its focus on his ownership of that past rather than on his

guarantee its successful transition to becoming a *poetic* subject. My question with *Life Studies* is not the degree to which Lowell family history is able to appear in the volume, but the degree to which it is able to make the generic leap from history to poetry.

²² I say “largely” because the opening verse paragraph sounds much more like a commentary by a third person speaker than it does a statement about and by Marie de Medici herself: “Once this poor country egg from Florence lay / at her accouchement . . .” (1-2). The dramatic voicing begins much more overtly in the second verse paragraph: “O cozy scuffles, soft obscenities . . . / Every night / I kicked the pillows and embroidered lies / to rob my husband’s purse” (6; 9-11).

transformation of it.²³ A mythology is necessarily larger than life; why, then, do we insist on reading this mythology as life rather than as a literary invention that has surpassed it? Lowell's decision to begin the volume with larger-than-life figures, and indeed, with an extended meditation on both classical and Christian mythology in "Beyond the Alps," suggests that mythology in its most literary sense may indeed be the dominant frame for all that follows, even if its figures have been adapted from his own lived experience. As a result, there is the suggestion that this apparently personal writing inherently exceeds the bounds of the personal, making whatever possible personal connections might be adduced subordinate to the larger tropological linkages that the volume encourages.

The final question, then, is to ask why Lowell would write a family history that at once stages the impossibility of reclaiming his own personal history and highlights his ability to subordinate that history to a larger associative system? Psychoanalytic readings like Witek's would appeal to the volume's transition from its prose origins to its poetic final product to suggest that its purpose is to allow Lowell to reinhabit that history for the very purposes of exceeding it at the level of language and genre—the sketches' point is for them to be discarded.²⁴ However, the volume itself offers a different explanation at the level of content.

"Grandparents," a present tense interlude that falls between "Dunbarton" and "Commander Lowell," shows the poem's 'I' attempting to make sense of his grandparents' deaths and his resulting inheritance of their farm. The speaker variously reminisces, grieves, and, finally, inflicts minor damage to his grandfather's property: "I hold an *Illustrated London News*—; / disloyal still, / I doodle handlebar / mustaches on the last Russian Czar" (34-7). The *Illustrated London News*, like the family's heirloom furniture, is the speaker's inheritance, and this extended poetic writing becomes a gesture like doodling handlebar mustaches: it is an exercise in remaking, above all. Doodling in this case is not just a mode of artistic creation, but also a mode of literally defacing an existing representation.²⁵ Lowell suggests that making his past artistically his own involves placing his doodled stamp upon it, which is also to say that the art must deface that past in order to recount it. However, the most meaningful defacements in these life studies are not, as is often suggested, the unflattering portrayals of both of Lowell's parents, but the far more neutral displacements of facts with more literary details, and even of the

²³ Perloff cites Boris Tomashevky's claim that "the 'autobiographical poem' is one that mythologizes the poet's life in accordance with the conventions of his time" (Erlich 202 in Perloff 80). Likewise, Stephen Spender raises the specter of a "Lowell myth" (111).

²⁴ This argument is scattered throughout Witek's monograph, but her clearest summation of it appears when she explains, "He unhooks the laborious formalities of his early poems in favor of the rapidity of prose and then dismantles that for poetry. Such movement across forms is the strategy of a writer who knows that what Eakin calls the 'pure ore of a final and irreducible selfhood' is a prize beyond his grasp. Paradoxically, the act of trying and discarding identities in language itself works to structure his identity, so that even as the poet flees between forms, what we hear is an utterly recognizable lyric voice" (87).

²⁵ Ramazani reads this image of the czar as a displaced, metonymic portrait of Lowell's grandfather (which, if he is right, is itself a defacement of historical fact), meaning that it is not just some deposed and powerless king on whose picture Lowell doodles, but the image of his family's primary male authority figure. Ramazani writes, "At the moment when transcendence might be expected, Lowell eternizes his grandfather as hapless autocrat and shows him to be forever trapped beneath his pen—faced, defaced, refaced according to the elegist's ambivalent impulses" (236-7).

severing of the connections between the speaker and his former selves.

In *Life Studies*, then, the factual realism that adheres to the lived subject's experience is defaced in order to produce the literary realism of this autobiography; and in the process, Robert Lowell is rewritten to become "the real Robert Lowell," the sense of whose realness depends not just on detail, but on the ability to situate him among other personae and archetypes. He contains a bit of the mad negro soldier, a bit of Delmore Schwartz and George Santayana, and even a bit of Marie de Medici and Ulysses S. Grant via their linkages to his parents. Indeed, Axelrod speaks of these portraits as offering a "parabolic autobiography" that "provided the necessary contexts in which to place the primary text" (106-7). But where is the line between primary text and background when the point of the primary text seems to be to establish a connection to that background and create an even larger, more intricately connected text?

All of this metonymization problematizes readers' ability to read this text as a presentation of a maskless, unified Romantic subject. Perhaps it is not "the autonomous, 'impersonal' symbolist mode of Eliot, Pound, [and] Stevens," as Perloff phrases it, but Lowell nonetheless retains some of these impersonal tendencies, making his poetic self a stand-in for great figures of history and vice versa (83). If the 'I' here is once again a unified, Romantic subject, it is at the same time a Modernist diffusion into the abstractions of character types. Consequently, readings that look past the characters' diffusions because of their ability to anchor and comment on the unified figure of Lowell himself, the author standing outside the volume, need to be updated. These diffusions are significant precisely because the textual figure of Lowell becomes interchangeable with these other figures within the space of the text, and as a result, "Lowell" the character takes on a literary, tropological, and mythological life that is unavailable to Lowell, the living poet. The writing stages not a reflection of Lowell's own life, but a projection of the many lives that Lowell himself could never live. It offers not a deepening of subjectivity through language, but an escape from it via the imaginative and linguistic possibilities of poetry.

This is not to say that Lowell's subject is analogous to those that might appear in later postmodern texts: he is not an Ashbery subject drifting through ever-shifting dreamscapes, for example, although the subjective play in "My Last Afternoon" and "Dunbarton" (toucan, kite, newt) would not be out of place in such a context. Instead, the diegetic subjects strain against their anchors, which are imposed partly by the realist style that characterizes the volume, and partly by the reading practices that surround the greater Romantic lyric and autobiography, both of which demand a unified central character as speaker. Attention to the volume's use of the exclusive past tense, however, shows Lowell's efforts to highlight the double-sidedness of his representations. He writes an autobiography that is the stylistic equivalent of a realist novel, but he also turns those novels' fixation on character into a commentary on the constructedness of even historiographical and autobiographical characters, which inherently destabilizes assumptions about what autobiography is supposed to do. His lyric 'I' is made to resemble an autobiographical 'I,' which is made to resemble a third person character, which is in turn made to shed its distinguishing physical features in order to become a trope of itself.

This, unexpectedly, is a marker of success. As Lowell's speaker observes in "Commander Lowell," it is not just that his father was able to blend into the homogenous high society of early twentieth-century Boston, but that his doing so meant he had reached a certain

stature—he had to be “successful enough to be lost / in the mob” (64). Lowell’s attention to trope and persona enable a similar act of successful losing, with his persona looking now like his family members, now like his mentors, now like historical figures. Contrary to the volume’s seeming focus on the figure of Lowell himself, the poems show him in fact to be creating his own mob in which to lose to himself, dissolving the boundaries of individual selfhood along the lines of characterological archetype. In doing so, he accomplishes an even greater act of losing: as Axelrod writes, one of the aims of this autobiography is to give “us greater insight into our own selves” (112). If Lowell has indeed succeeded in providing this insight, he has not only transcended the boundaries of his personae, but he has managed to forge a metonymic relationship even between his literary persona and his audience, whose belief in the character authorized it in the first place.

Lowell writes self-forgetful autobiography, then, by creating a forest of others in which to lose the self. As the next chapter illustrates, Seamus Heaney does something even more radical, redefining the self as an ever-shifting intersection of language, history, and culture. His past tense poems, and especially the children in them, work as blinds that exclude the adult speakers behind them from the scenes they present, allowing the distorted perspectives and judgments of childhood to animate the poems in ways that Lowell does not. Heaney also builds on Lowell’s techniques of scenic insulation to create a mode of lyric that, contrary to more common generic practice, focuses on breaks, changes, and disjunctions rather than on the reconciliation of conflict within the space of the poem. Lowell lays a necessary foundation in *Life Studies*, but Heaney seizes on the possibilities of self-forgetful autobiography to reconceive not only the self, but the lyric genre.

2: “It Was Still All Me”: Self-Forgetful Autobiography in Seamus Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist*

Since Seamus Heaney’s death in August 2013, critics’ primary concern has been to solidify his legacy. Indeed, an MLA Bibliography search through work published since that time shows about a quarter to be memorial pieces, and several more to be efforts at constellation: Heaney and Hardy, Heaney and Yeats, Heaney and European poets like Milosz and Celan. Add to these a smattering of articles on politics and ethics, and an underlying question becomes clear: who was Seamus Heaney, and what did he mean to us?

That, of course, depends on what we mean by “Seamus Heaney.” The name is a slippery metonym that covers both the man and the icon, the friend and family member as well as the Nobel Prize-winning International (but Quintessentially Irish) Poet. It also serves as shorthand for the poetic corpus that we have inherited upon the departure of his physical one. Part of the process of understanding Heaney’s legacy involves determining the degree to which we are willing to let these figures overlap. Heaney himself seemed ambivalent about his coexistence with and divisibility from his poetry. As the following interview excerpts illustrate, poetry is at once a mode of moving beyond himself and a route back to himself:

[‘The Salmon Fisher to the Salmon’] started where I always like to start, in the ground of memory and sensation, but I had a hunch that during the actual writing the impulse had got tied up rather than set free. There wasn’t enough self-forgetfulness. . . . The one simple requirement—definition even—of lyric writing is self-forgetfulness. (O’Driscoll 88)

What pleased me most about ‘Bogland’ wasn’t its theme or its first-person plural, but the fact that it had been given, had come freely, had arrived out of old layers of lore and language and felt completely trustworthy as a poem. It may have said ‘we’ but it was still all me. (O’Driscoll 90)

As these statements suggest, poetry for Heaney is both a forgetting of the self and a reassertion of it through the process of reclaiming its linguistic and cultural roots—work that depends on self-forgetfulness, but which nonetheless can proudly be claimed as “still all me.”

Heaney’s uneasy and paradoxical relationship to his work signals that, however else we might formulate his legacy, we cannot allow his personal, cultural, and literary incarnations to be taken interchangeably. There has long been a tendency to read Heaney’s poetry as more or less straightforward autobiography, but that approach smooths over the often productive fissures between the poet’s various personae. Instead, we need to approach the work in a way that both sees past the self of the poems and recognizes how the collective subjecthood of lore and language can speak to a self that perhaps was always present, but had not reached its fullest expression until it found its way into poetry.

This counterintuitive movement away from one self to reveal another is seen most clearly in Heaney’s first volume, *Death of a Naturalist*. Prying apart these layers of lore and language yields readers a view of Heaney’s speakers that affords a more nuanced and expansive understanding of the self of the poems, particularly of the childhood poems whose verbs are entirely in the past tense. These poems are built on a careful balancing of speakerly inclusion in

and exclusion from the scenes they present. This balancing suggests that the ‘me’ that Heaney is so proud to be able to identify is not to be found in the poems’ ‘I,’ but in the less easily fixed space of their language. This shift allows for a view of his autobiographical poems that looks beyond a diegetic ‘I’ to focus on the negotiations between speaker, self, and poet. When these negotiations succeed, the result is what might be termed self-forgetful autobiography.

Presenting this paradoxical notion heavily revises the approaches that most critics have taken to Heaney’s work, who tend to see it as autobiographical without considering the ways in which the poems complicate that self-reference. Generally, the criticism divides into two camps: one that is primarily concerned with Heaney’s political positions (and, particularly, with his involvement or non-involvement in the Northern Irish Troubles), and one that finds in the poetry reflections and recollections about Heaney’s life and community.²⁶ Both camps participate in a version of biographism in taking the poems as direct statements from the poet about his real, actual circumstances, which tends to downplay the involvement of the poetic imagination. This tendency is especially pronounced in treatments of his first volume, *Death of a Naturalist*, which largely revisits the world of Heaney’s childhood, whether through depictions of landscapes or through deliberate recollections of first-person experiences. Indeed, Neil Corcoran describes it as exploring “the proper relationship between this poet and his own first community [his family]” (10). And, while Blake Morrison eschews such overarching statements of autobiographical connection, he nonetheless reads as though that connection were a given, saying of “Digging” that “Heaney claims kinship with his father by turning his writing implement into a violent weapon” (26).

By contrast, Helen Vendler offers a somewhat more conflicted position in her monograph on Heaney, asserting that his poetry “tells an expressive autobiographical story,” but nonetheless entitling the chapter covering his early books “Anonymities” (2). She explains, “his child-self is almost anonymous, and many of the poems of childhood treat . . . experiences that could be those of any child growing up on a farm . . .” (14). Indeed, as she notes, “a broad and generalized pastoral directive governs the early self-portraits” (28). But even as Vendler distances the volume’s children from Heaney, she still is eager to hear his voice in the poems’ speakers: “‘I wanted to grow up and plough,’ says the adult poet remembering his child-self . . .” (21). Vendler goes further than most critics in recognizing the volume’s anonymizing tendency, but the contradiction here is obvious: if the children are governed by a broad pastoral directive and could be any child, why should they be seen as autobiographical self-portraits?

In fairness, Vendler’s use of “anonymities” is not as absolute as the term suggests. As her analysis reveals, it is not that Heaney has written himself *out of* his poems in some Eliotic quest for the impersonal, but rather that he has not fully written himself *into* them. The poems are not specific about who their speakers are, focusing as they do on sensory perception as such

²⁶ The political camp is represented by everyone from Seamus Deane to David Lloyd, Desmond Fennell to Edna Longley, while the autobiographical camp includes Neil Corcoran, Blake Morrison, Michael Parker, and Helen Vendler, among many others. See Seamus Deane, ‘Seamus Heaney: The Timorous and the Bold’; David Lloyd, “‘Pap for the Dispossessed’: Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity’; Desmond Fennell, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1*; Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*; Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*; Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*; Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*; and Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*.

and on widely shared social practices. The exception, Vendler says, comes in the form of “several poems [in which] the idiosyncratic rises through the general,” a grouping that happens to include a number of the volume’s most famous poems, such as “Death of a Naturalist,” and “Mid-Term Break” (28). What sets these poems apart, though, is less the child himself and more the particulars of the poems’ description. Vendler singles out the particularity of the speaker’s mother in “Mid-Term Break”: “The adolescent boy whose awareness makes the mother’s inscape unforgettable is the differentiated speaker who rises above stereotype and anonymity” (31). Ultimately, though, what Vendler says here is that the artistry in these poems is stronger than in the others. Their characters are more uniquely identifiable, but that is not at all the same as saying that they are uniquely identifiable as Heaney himself.²⁷

From Vendler’s account, it would seem that whatever autobiographical work this volume performs is that of coincidence and association, providing a series of scenes not unlike those of Heaney’s life that often feature children who are not unlike the child Heaney probably was. Some of the poems feature a speaker who refers to himself as ‘I,’ but the volume’s general adherence to what Vendler calls a broad pastoral directive rather than the demands of more personalizing idiosyncrasies calls the referential value of these ‘I’s into question. As Vendler’s readings show, it is not the speaker’s ability to say ‘I,’ but his ability to see (and especially to speak) as others do not and to empathize deeply with those around him that distinguishes him as a subject.

These qualities reinforce Heaney’s claim that lyric requires self-forgetfulness. The poems that Vendler singles out are those that exceed the boundaries of the self by turning outward. They are not poems like “An Advancement of Learning,” another poem in *Death of a Naturalist*, which is focused on an ‘I’s encounter with an especially frightening rat, but which fails to show that ‘I’ as more than a generic child in a perilous situation. No moments of particularizing description occur, places where the poet’s embrace of his language outshines the particular diegetic demands of the poem. Instead, the poem’s focus on narrative privileges statements of action over poetic description, with the poem’s few moments of interiority rendered as summary statements, as in, “My throat sickened so quickly that // I turned down the path in cold sweat” (12-13). Even the speaker’s epiphany that he “forg[ot] how [he] used to panic” when he used to hear other rats around his house asserts the primacy of narration (29). “Forgetting to panic” only makes sense from a narrator’s perspective: in the moment, one panics, or one does not. Only in retrospect will it occur to anyone that he might have forgotten to panic, a temporal lag that reveals the poem’s focus is storytelling as such, not on presenting its child character or the particulars of the scene in which he is placed. The poem ends up being self-conscious not because it is too focused on an ‘I,’ but because it is unable to grasp its opportunities to be about more than that ‘I’s’ actions. The poem lacks the stylistic idiosyncrasies that so readily signal Heaney’s presence in the more successful poems.

²⁷ I say this in full awareness that “Mid-Term Break” is a recounting of an event verifiably taken from Heaney’s life—the wake of his brother, Christopher, who was struck and killed by a car. Notably, however, the poem resists autobiographical commonplaces, neglecting to indicate even whose wake it is or how that person might be related to the speaker. The poem may very well be a completely faithful transcription of that day’s events, but it is not terribly interested in announcing that fidelity, preferring instead to focus on the scene as such.

“Self” can mean one of two things in this discussion, then. It can point to the subject referred to by the ‘I’ of the poem (the speaker/child in this case), or it can point to the implied self that is revealed through the poet’s engagement with language, which in the best instances marks the poem with his signature. Heaney does not specify which of these selves lyric needs to forget, but his observation that the unsuccessful poem gets tied up “in the ground of memory and sensation” suggests that a simple one-to-one transfer of the self’s experience to the page (if such a thing were possible) is not enough to make a poem—it needs to do more than say ‘I.’ Some kind of accession to what he refers to in “The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac, and a Knocker” as “the plane of poetry” is necessary. Heaney describes this plane as a space of transcendence:

The achievement of a poem . . . is an experience of release. In that liberated moment, when the lyric discovers its buoyant completion . . . , a plane is—fleeting—established where the poet is intensified in his being and freed from his predicaments. The tongue . . . is suddenly ungoverned. (xxii)

It may be that what is needed is not forgetfulness as such, but rather a perceived freedom to ungovern the tongue and become “intensified,” to be more than the non-poetic self.

This redefinition of selfhood as something beyond the poem’s speakerly ‘I’ helps to explain why Heaney speaks of his ability to identify “Bogland” as being “still all me” with such pride even as he champions self-forgetfulness. “Me” here refers not to the restrictions of “memory and sensation,” but to something more inherently expansive, as his cumulative definition of “me” in this statement shows. The poem, he says, “had arrived out of old layers of lore and language. It may have said ‘we’ but it was still all me.” The self here is not bound and restricted, closed off from its social and cultural currents, but is contiguous with a sense of collectivity—a ‘we’—that is in turn accessed through layers of lore and language.²⁸ Presumably, this connection is part of what becomes intensified on the plane of poetry. What is of particular interest about this definition of the self, however, is the diffuseness it gestures toward. This self is sedimentary, like the bog itself, composed not just of the events of a personal and collective past, but of the literary practices that bring those events into language, too. The self in this view is modular and composite, not the unified and inviolable Romantic subject that is usually meant

²⁸ Heaney never defines this lore and language especially well, and the connection that he makes here between subject, language, and landscape suggests sometimes uncomfortable associations with nationalist projects that would embrace the implication that the Irish people are inextricable from the landscape itself. As is so often the case, Heaney’s position on this issue is complex: he speaks of “an element of transgression in celebrating the Croppies in 1966,” and an attractive “implied alternative to the British connection in making the Bog of Allen the mythic centre” (*SS* 90). Yet, while Heaney here suggests that he embraces native Irishness out of a youthful spirit of rebellion, that rebelliousness did not run deep enough to endorse the violence of the IRA rebels who ultimately took up his later poem, “Requiem for the Croppies,” as a rallying cry. Indeed, they caused Heaney so much horror that he felt the need to formulate the nuanced position that appears in “The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac, and a Knocker,” which both makes poetry conversant with the wider social world and removes it from a political sphere that could fuel such violence. I am not attempting to clarify Heaney’s political position in my focus on this phrase, but rather I am trying to understand the effect that his emphasis on the subject’s connection to the literary as such has on his understanding of his place within the represented worlds of his own works.

by the term, “lyric speaker.”

Self-forgetful transcendence, then, is achieved at least in part by acknowledging both this compositeness and its inverse—its severability. Heaney illustrates this when he cleaves his ‘I’ into two positions in poems whose verbs are exclusively in the past tense. These poems refer to an ‘I’ who partakes in the poem’s events—usually a child—and an implied speaker who brings them into language. As the discussion above has indicated, these ‘I’s make no necessary connection to Heaney himself, so the usual assumption that these poems are autobiographical can be left aside for the moment in order to examine instead the kinds of self that emerge from this split speaker.²⁹

Overall, Heaney’s use of this doubly referring ‘I’ challenges the assumption that his story can be accessed through declarative statements of past experience. If readers want Heaney’s self, they will have to look to the places where language attains the intensifications of the plane of poetry. This, then, is self-forgetful autobiography: just as on the plane of poetry the tongue is ungoverned, so too are apparently autobiographical poems allowed to refer past the ‘I’ and attend to the layers that constitute the written self as it comes to being in poetry. As a result, Heaney’s early work can be shown to do a great deal more than simply correspond to a broad pastoral directive; rather, it subverts that directive to comment on the misdirectedness of autobiographical reading.

This chapter begins with a teasing apart of Heaney’s diegetic and speakerly subjects before proceeding to an extended reading of “Death of a Naturalist” that charts the layers of subjectivity that appear in this past tense poem. The readings reveal a notable divide between the knowledge of its child diegetic subject and its adult speaker, which prompts larger questions about speakerly knowledge in lyric and generic expectations about how speakers know what they know, and what they are expected to do with that knowledge. By examining an early draft of “The Early Purges,” I show the multiple modes of knowledge and temporality that are present in these past tense poems, arguing ultimately that past tense lyrics are able to depict change and learning in ways that present tense lyrics are not, and that indeed this emphasis on rupture is one of the hallmarks of Heaney’s use of this genre. However, to effect these breakages, Heaney must separate the poems’ events from his own present experience, which suggests that this mode of autobiography bears only a slant relationship to its author. If the poems point to Heaney at all, they do so through their language and stylistic signatures, not through their diegetic content. The poet in effect is nowhere and everywhere in the poem, making this autobiography both completely derived from his self and totally forgetful of it, thereby prompting the paradoxical

²⁹ To be clear, dividing the speaker’s ‘I’ in this way offers no guarantee that the poet’s self will be forgotten and the plane of poetry attained, as illustrated above with “An Advancement of Learning,” which is wholly in the past tense. Nor is it the case that only the volume’s past tense poems succeed in attaining self-forgetfulness: “Digging” is anchored in the present, but it nonetheless makes Vendler’s list of poems with individualized speakers (which, paradoxically, is to say that they achieve self-forgetfulness). From Heaney’s comments above, it is clear that self-forgetfulness is a goal of all his lyrics. The past tense poems simply put that goal on display more clearly than others by hardwiring it into their grammar. Indeed, the spotty success of this technique may explain its relative infrequency in his subsequent volumes. As the discussion below explains, the change in tense is driven by the demands of the individual poems and does not indicate a different project from the present tense poems.

term self-forgetful autobiography.

Child as Mask

While many poems in *Death of a Naturalist* follow the lyric convention in which the speaker explicitly refers to himself in the poem (which is to say that the poems have a lyric ‘I’), they break from convention by being entirely in the past tense. Certainly, several of the volume’s reflections on Heaney’s earlier life follow the more common lyric practice of commenting on the past from the perspective of the present (one of the most famous, “Digging,” is among them), but *Death of a Naturalist* fairly bristles with poems—around twenty-five percent of the volume—that refuse this more typical mode of lyric reflection by not acknowledging the moment or conditions of their utterance. While tense often does not indicate temporal position in literature, the decision to write a poem entirely in the past tense nonetheless can be read as a means of pointing toward a space of action that is unconnected to the space of utterance.

In *Death of a Naturalist*, these spaces are usually indicated by a divide between an adult speaker putting into language some limited (but important) drama of childhood, in which the poem's diegetic ‘I’ is seen to pick blackberries or have alarming encounters with frogs. This ‘I’ is understood to be a child, but, as I will show later, the disjunction between the speaker's language and knowledge and the child subject's knowledge is such that, contrary to the poem's apparent desires, the child cannot possibly be taken as its speaker.

As a result, an unexpected division occurs within the referential self in these poems. While readers are almost certainly expected to take these two incarnations of the lyric ‘I’ as an indication of continuity and the marker of full subjecthood in the speaker—proof that he is not simply words on the page, but a person with memories and a past beyond the poem—it would be equally valid to say the opposite is true: the need for the child is proof of the adult speaker’s limitation as a linguistic phenomenon who cannot even enter the diegetic world he describes, let alone the world outside the poem. Indeed, this circumscription in language precedes any illusion of continuity that autobiographical reading requires, and so, paradoxically, some of these famously autobiographical pieces (including the title poem) are as much exercises in speakerly exclusion as they are portraits of the speaker’s past.

The question Heaney raises through his exclusive use of the past tense is the degree to which the subject of the speaker’s recollections (usually a child) is in fact meant to be the same subject as the speaker. Usually, poems of reflection contain some kind of connective tissue that asserts the remembered moment’s connection to the moment of utterance, often a phrase like “I remember,” or temporal deictics like “now” or “then.” An example of this more typical usage appears in “Follower,” in which the speaker says,

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away. (21-4)

“Today” signals the speaker’s control over the scene, subordinating it not only to his present moment of utterance, but to his present moment of consciousness. The poem creates its sense of pathos through the reversal of its figures, which presumably stems from the speaker’s sentiment.

This is not simply an anecdote, but an anecdote meant to illuminate the contrast visible in the present moment.

Many of the poems in *Death of a Naturalist*, however, lack this explicit deictic connection. There is a child, and a speaker is implied, but their relationship is a matter of inference. The poem is no longer interested in asserting the anecdote's subordination to the present moment of utterance—it is not even especially interested in asserting the existence of its present speaker—and so the child who would normally very clearly be an earlier incarnation of the speaker is now presented as a figure in his own right. The conventions of autobiography would assert that these two figures are intrinsically linked, but the poem's rhetoric defies that connection. It is that rhetoric—or rather, the refusal to mobilize an active rhetoric of connectedness—that complicates what would be an otherwise straightforward relationship between speaker, child, and poet.

In *Death of a Naturalist*, the lyric speaker is generally understood to be an adult retelling events that happened to him as a child, who is a somewhat more limited figure. At times, that child seems to speak, but, as a closer analysis below reveals, this is really an act of ventriloquism by the adult speaker, something along the lines of free indirect discourse in a novel. The child, who is a character in the events that the poem represents, affords the adult a perspective on a scene from that he either cannot or should not enter otherwise; but even as this juvenile perspective signals the speaker's exclusion from the scene, that separation also presents him with aesthetic freedoms that would not otherwise be available. Among the volume's most famous poems are those whose tragedies and terrors really only make sense in the world of a child and would collapse if subjected to the broader understanding and experience of an adult. The child's 'I' works to embed the speaker more deeply into a scene he cannot really enter, thereby heightening that scene's stakes.

"Death of a Naturalist" highlights its movement between these two speakerly positions, and in doing so, it underscores the conflicting kinds of knowledge that animate the poem. The poem's 'I' is a child, but the poem's language, imagery, and general awareness of poetic techniques reveal that its speaker is clearly much older. The speaker's age is distinguishable most readily in the poem's linguistic pyrotechnics—that is, when the poem chooses to be flashy. One of the poem's most striking elements is the oscillation in linguistic register between what might be called a hyper-poetic craftedness and more colloquial directness. The first eight lines or so revel in this craftedness: the buried vowel-rhyme in 'flax-dam' and 'townland' in lines one and two; the careful and contrasting diction of 'festered' and 'gargled delicately' in lines one and five; the dizzying synaesthesia of "bluebottles / Wove a strong gauze of sound around the smell" (6). This elevated, almost baroque language gives way to something far more direct in the poem's final three lines: "The great slime kings / Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew / That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it" (30-2). The language here is no less calculated, and its directness almost conceals the fact that it is still poetic language—after all, the lines are in iambic pentameter. Nonetheless, the elaborate synaesthesia of the first section is gone, as are the delicately gargling bubbles. These final few lines privilege statement over image, signaling a shift in priority from the verbal evocation of a world to the succinct delivery of an idea.

This difference in register is traceable to two sources, the first of which is the function of

each section. While “Death of a Naturalist” contains a narrative arc, that narrative does not really begin until line ten, at which point we learn of the child's history of collecting frogspawn and studying its produce. The first ten lines simply describe the flax dam; it follows that, in the absence of any narrative thrust, the poem is able to revel in its language and imagery. By contrast, the final three lines need to conclude the poem's narrative. Their function is not only to show the speaker's physical response to the frogs (“I sickened, turned, and ran”), but also to offer some explanation of that response (30).

The other source of difference between the two sections is the perspective through which the poem's observations are offered. The perspective in the first ten lines is unspecified: readers may assume that there is a lyric 'I' behind these descriptions, but the poem has not yet made clear who that might be. The 'I' becomes much more specific beginning in line ten, at which point the anecdote about frogspawn collection and analysis begins; indeed, line eleven features the first mention of an 'I' in the poem. By line thirteen, it is clear from the mention of shelves at school that this 'I' is a child, and by line sixteen, this child even seems to be assuming some of the language-generating duties as the male frog is a “daddy frog” and the female a “mammy frog.” The imagery in this section is far more general, as well: the most descriptive language here is “jellied / Specks” and “fattening dots,” which signals the child does not know he is looking at frog eggs at all and is reduced to describing what he sees without any further understanding of it (11-12; 14). Gone is the sophisticated eye of the first ten lines, replaced instead by a naïve schoolchild.

This replacement is, of course, only a feigning by the adult speaker, whose presence is betrayed by the continuing iambic pentameter, even if the meter does become slightly looser in this section. The poem does not oscillate between speakers, as it may initially appear to do, but it does offer two overlapping perspectives: the adult who both knows about the natural world and is able to render it poetically, and the child through whose eyes readers are meant to encounter this natural world. This distinction is not always clear, especially in the second stanza, but the poem capitalizes on this ambiguity to make its haunting proclamation that the spawn would clutch the speaker's hand if he dipped it into the water.

The second stanza begins with what must be the adult's perspective: although the language is simple, it offers a brief synopsis of the next seven lines: “Then one hot day when fields were rank / With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs / Invaded the flax-dam” (21-3). It is not until line 23 that the 'I' is reintroduced, and he offers readers the same information, but with the benefit of a specific perspective: “I ducked through hedges / To a coarse croaking that I had not heard / Before” (23-5). Readers already know what this coarse croaking is because the disembodied speaker just warned us that the angry frogs had invaded the flax-dam, but at this moment, we know more than the child, who is encountering the frogs and their anger for the first time. The adult speaker takes advantage of the child's naïve perspective to return to the descriptive register with which the poem begins: indeed, the frogs' “slap and plop” are almost audible through the repeated 'o' sounds—“down,” “cocked,” “sods,” “hopped,” “plop,” “obscene” (26-8). Likewise, the strong imagery that so characterizes the first section returns as the frogs' “loose necks pulsed like sails,” and they are “poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting” (27, 29). These descriptions, however, are framed by the child's actions: first he ducks through hedges, then he sickens, turns, and runs. It is easy on a first pass to take these

descriptions not as the adult speaker's interpolation, but as the child's perception, and that perception opens the way for the poem's horrific certainty of vengeance and physical possession.

The perspective in the final three lines is indeterminate. Certainly, readers are meant to take this knowledge that the spawn would clutch the speaker's hand as the child's, but doing so raises questions about where this language comes from. It could be the child's language, but as the second half of the first stanza illustrates, if we were to hear him speak, it would be in language like "daddy" and "mammy" and certainly not in language like, "great slime kings" and "vengeance." The lines are better understood as the adult speaker's ventriloquization of the child's thought—what the child would say if he slowed down to tell us what he is thinking.³⁰ The final lines are a necessarily transfigurative representation of what the child's thoughts might be if they appeared in language, and as a representation they are closer to the adult's perspective than the child's.

However, if they were not the child's thoughts, it would be difficult to take them seriously. The fear is real, to be sure, but the logic on which it rests does not stand up to scrutiny. The supposed knowledge of the spawn's clutching of the hand is mere supposition: the speaker asserts that *if* he dips his hand, the spawn will clutch it, but the sense is strongly that the speaker has not tested this theory. More important, prior experience collecting the spawn has demonstrated that it will not in fact clutch his hand. Nonetheless, the speaker both reacts and explains his reaction as if this clutching were a precedented certainty. The enjambment of these lines—"I knew / That if I dipped my hand . . ."—allows that knowing to seem absolute, a value in itself that is well beyond both the specifics of categorization and the need for empirical testing. This is no accident, as the force of these lines depends on readers' feeling with the speaker the horror of the frogs and spawn, a horror that in turn requires that this conditional clutching be taken as fact.

If this speaker were an adult, his responses could easily be written off as paranoid overreactions. But for the child who clearly does not know any better, these perceptions carry the force of reality. This difference in validity offers one explanation for the exclusive use of the past tense in this poem. The poem will not succeed without a child to anchor its knowledge and viewpoints. In effect, the adult speaker needs a space of diegetic experience that is not open to him if the frogs are going to be as horrifying as the poem makes them, and the alternate space created by the past tense provides that separation. Indeed, it grants the adult speaker sufficient distance to speak of this running as the child's final act: the moment of the child naturalist's death. The speaker's separation is not complete, perhaps—after all, the child does not see or do anything unless the adult speaker's language makes him do so—but the rhetoric of separation is strong enough to shield the adult from allegations of hyperbole or overreaction. Ultimately it is this rhetoric that matters most as it points readers away from the craft and knowledge of the adult

³⁰ The other question these lines raise is whether they are meant to stand for the child's language, or a bringing into language for the first time the general sense or fear that the child has not yet actually articulated (what Ann Banfield calls nonreflective thought in *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*). It seems unlikely that the child actually says anything at this point, but simply runs away for reasons he understands, but does not express. Regardless, it is a sure bet that he is not speaking in iambic pentameter, and so, whether the poem renders his language or his pre-linguistic thoughts, these lines, like all lyric poetry, are representations of his speech, actual or projected.

speaker and toward the child's ostensibly real-time experience. The child becomes the center of the poem's attention, leaving the adult in the background to craft the scene, the poem's narrative arc, and, for that matter, the child himself.

The Past Tense and Treatments of Disjunction

While the child may exist to heighten the poem's legitimacy and effects, his willingness to embrace a conclusion born out of fear points to a marked and remarkable transformation in the poem's attitude toward what the speaker knows and how he knows it. Indeed, the poem's drama derives from the opposition of two very different kinds of knowledge to each other. The first stanza offers a scientific quest as the child collects the frogspawn in a jar and takes it to his classroom, where Miss Walls, positioned as the font of academic wisdom, can expound on both spawn and general frogdom. This knowledge is simultaneously personal and abstract: it is the stage at which frogspawn is, variously, clotted water, jellied specks, or fattening dots. The child has direct experience with frogspawn, but he is not really sure what he is experiencing and needs Miss Walls to provide the rest of his information. The encounter with the frogs at the end represents, on one hand, a facet of frog lore that Miss Walls failed to mention, but it also constitutes an opposing, emotionally based pole of the child's knowledge. These threatening frogs cannot be contained under the aegis of textbooks and teachers, which deal in sanitized, empirical knowledge and not with emotional responses to the object of study.

It is tempting to say that what kills the naturalist is an embrace of the fullness of lived experience over what can be learned in a classroom (including the gathering of frogspawn under the banner of scientific discovery), but that would not quite be true. The child at the end of the poem does not react to a new set of events so much as a fear of events that do not actually happen (i. e., the spawn he imagines gripping his hand), a fear that nonetheless is communicated as what the child knows. That fear is stronger than any other empirical observation, and it forces the child to privilege the imagined over the experienced.

Charting this shift from empiricism to phenomenology is important because it shows that the poem does not begin from the epistemological position with which it ends, which is unusual in lyric. David Lloyd offers a good illustration of what more conventional lyric knowledge looks like in "Pap for the Dispossessed": Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity." His argument focuses on manual labor in "Digging," which depicts "the symbolic position of the father in possession of and working the land," just as his father had done before him (21). The speaker at once marks his difference from this tradition and his desire to co-opt it by concluding the poem, "I've no spade to follow men like them. / Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it" (28-31).

Lloyd rightly objects to the speaker's appropriation of the language of physical labor to act as a metaphor for his own cultural labor. However, this attempt to bridge these two conflicting positions is in keeping with expectations about knowledge in lyric. As Lloyd explains, "Knowledge can never truly be the knowledge of difference: instead, returned to that from which the subject was separated by knowledge, the subject poses his objects (perceived or produced) as synecdoches of continuity" (22). Lloyd's assertion echoes many other claims about lyric's insularity, from Mill's view of the poem as an overheard soliloquy to Jonathan Culler's much more recent assertion that apostrophe affirms the speaker's ability to fill the world with his

own projections through language. In the case of "Digging," and probably in a great many other present tense lyrics, Lloyd is right: the poem elides the differences between the turf-cutting grandfather, the gardening father, and the pen-wielding son who takes up figurative digging as his project. In place of these differences, the speaker emphasizes the metaphorical connections that unite all three figures and their occupations. His goal is to reconcile the differences between these figures, thereby asserting the primacy of speakerly knowledge and his language-based control over his represented world. The purpose of the poem was never to explore the differences between the men in his family, but to draw on their labors to legitimize his own.

Knowledge in "Death of a Naturalist" is much less about the enactment of a reconciliation through language, however. Here, two kinds of knowledge are in conflict, and the difference between the empirical knowledge of the classroom and the experiential knowledge of the pond provides the basis of the poem's drama. Knowledge is disruptive here, so much so that it results in the death of the diegetic subject as naturalist. Indeed, the moment at which this difference is most keenly felt provides the poem's occasion. In this regard, the focus on the differences between these two kinds of knowledge is unusual: the poem attempts no reconciliation between them, instead allowing the rupture to remain. However, the poem does adhere to broader lyric expectations by emphasizing the importance of perception. Ultimately, fear of imagined possibilities triumphs over empirical knowledge and experience, just as the pen-wielding laborer perceives his work as continuous with his father's and grandfather's.

Recognizing the centrality of perception as the binding force of these poems' logic reaffirms Lloyd's observations about knowledge's inextricability from the subject: after all, all knowledge, like the rest of the poem's world, is contained in the subject. While this unity of experience would seem to make lyric straightforward, it can actually create complications. One of these complications lies in the poem's temporal movement, as Paul de Man explains in "The Rhetoric of Temporality." In his reading of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," he reveals that the poem's shift from the past tense to the present "now" in recalling a girl who has died is merely an attempt to bring into language what is happening in one moment within the subject (225). His reading shows the switch from life to death in the poem as not actually being two instances, but one thought that understands two moments. As he explains, "The difference has been spread out over a temporality which is exclusively that of the poem and in which the conditions of error [then] and wisdom [now] have become successive. This is possible within the ideal, self-created temporality engendered by the language of the poem, but it is not possible within the actual temporality of experience" (225). The poem must split the speaker's simultaneous thoughts into a before and after to make them intelligible, in part because language must happen in and across time. Effectively, the poem is written backward: it must begin from the "now," the space of difference or disruption. The backstory in which the girl lives is really only present for the reader's benefit, and it serves as the point of contrast on which the poem's present description of her having died depends.

However, these moments of wisdom are not always the points from which poems like this begin. Heaney's "The Early Purges" looks in all ways to resemble Wordsworth's poem, with an extended anecdote appearing to provide contrast to the rhetorical position with which the poem ends. However, as an examination of the poem's first draft reveals, the poem actually developed out of its early anecdote recording the speaker's shock at witnessing kittens being drowned. The

poem as published illustrates the speaker's movement from this shock to a pragmatic position about the management of livestock and the killing necessary to keep animals' numbers in check, concluding, "'Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town / Where they consider death unnatural, / But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down" (19-21). However, this argumentative point came only later. Heaney's first draft of the piece, which is really just a series of anecdotes, reveals that it very much was not written backward, initially simply telling stories for what seems to be their own sake.

The first four stanzas of the draft, which detail the speaker's witnessing of a kitten-drowning at the age of six, appear in this draft largely as they do in the poem's published form. The final three argumentative stanzas, however, are missing from this first draft, replaced by the following:

~~When I was~~/By the age of sixteen I too had come³¹
 To drown kittens with skill and ~~casual good sense~~/indifference.
 One/We never thought of castrating the tom—
~~And perhaps/I suppose lust and death made more sense.~~

And so we could hear his hot night-skirts[?] wince
 And spiral around the barns with no anger,
 Then douse the whole issue with quiet good sense.

~~And no pain~~

The ~~she~~ bitch ("Early Purges" MS)

This poem is far less overt in its argument, in this form merely observing the irony that no one thought to castrate the tom. There is a temptation to read this irony as a kind of allegory, but that urge derives largely from a readerly desire to bestow some kind of larger importance upon the poem. At its core, the poem is an anecdote, and, as the final phrase, "The bitch," makes clear, Heaney was inclined to continue it, but broke off. The poem's one foray into abstraction—"And perhaps lust and death made more sense"—is struck out, either because it breaks the narrative momentum, or because it simply is not what Heaney envisioned aesthetically.

So, what is the point of this poem? In keeping with more general assumptions about the priority of the lyric speech act, it could on some level be said to reinforce the speaker's ability to present a memory, but it seems to be much less about the interactions between remembering subject and the events remembered than it is about the events as such. If the past tense is merely backgrounding, what point is Heaney setting up here? He seems to be asking himself the same question, deciding ultimately to write out the quiet irony of choosing to deal with problems as they multiply rather than address their source, which could carry real metaphorical weight with

³¹ Slashes are meant to represent places where Heaney has written one word or phrase above another. This draft exists as a handwritten manuscript, which allows Heaney greater flexibility in placement than he would have on a typewriter or computer. It also subjects readers to the occasional ambiguities of his handwriting, as in "skirts," which is an educated guess. "One/We" is an overwriting, such that it is not clear which word is meant to replace the other, while "And perhaps" appears above "I suppose," as though it is offered as a suggestion made before Heaney cancelled the line entirely.

the right development. Instead, the next draft shows him using the anecdote to build to an outright rhetorical statement about keeping pests down, which may itself be ironic posturing. Whatever Heaney's reasons for feeling the need to make the poem more than just the narrative, what is overwhelmingly clear is that that larger significance emerges only later: the germ of the poem is its past tense narrative, and the speaker's present moment matters almost not at all.

I read "The Early Purges" development in order to qualify the parameters of de Man's claims and to illustrate the blindnesses that stem from focusing on lyric's moment of utterance. When de Man refers to the "actual temporality of experience" in the poem, he reads from within Wordsworth's poem's fiction of a unified, diachronic consciousness who by convention is responsible for giving voice to his own thoughts at the moment of the poem's linguistic enactment. This temporality of experience, however, does not belong to Wordsworth the poet, who would perceive this poem as the set of moments that constitutes the writing process. Unlike the moment of wisdom that de Man finds depicted in the poem, the poetic process is not instantaneous; instead, writing must occur in and across time. This point is obvious, but it is easy to forget when the dominant theories of lyric focus so heavily on the poems' representations of consciousness, so much so as to suggest that they create the poem almost from the inside out.

This examination of Heaney's drafts is a reminder that this consciousness, too, is a creation of the poem, and it emphasizes the distance between an author-based and a speaker-based temporality. The poem is barely even the poem yet in its first draft—some very strict textual critics might even argue that the first draft of "The Early Purges" is a different poem entirely—and it is difficult to inhabit and compare the consciousnesses of such different texts. What these early drafts reveal is the presence of the figure outside the poem's system of literary convention—the author—into whose larger timeline the poem as a whole fits. In this schema, the poem's own system of past and present is subordinated to the poem's ability as an artifact to mark the poet's lived time through its changes. This is to read the poem in the most unliterary way possible, as if it were like any other made object, like a car or a building, the very completedness of which serves as a record of its making. It is easy, however, to forget that nearly every poem contains both kinds of temporalities, in part because drafts tend not to be published, leaving readers only with the smooth, self-contained literary artifact and the overwhelmingly appealing fiction of the consciousness within.

My point in clarifying these dual temporalities is to make explicit that it is easy to assume too much based on the convention of the speaker's consciousness. Who would not pick up "The Early Purges" and conclude that the boldness of its final lines is the central point toward which the poem was always striving, either as a straightforward statement or as ironic overstatement? And yet the very overstatedness of the lines reveals what is actually the case: they are invented as a saving gesture for a poem that Heaney seemed to feel needed to be "about" something and felt incomplete as mere anecdote. Whether the poem's sentiments are Heaney's is beside the point; the clearest sentiment is his artistic one, which found the anecdote alone inadequate. "The Early Purges" is at its most unproblematic the tale of how a speaker who very well could be Heaney got over his squeamishness about death and learned to take the long view about farm management. Its drafts, however, also illustrate a poet's struggle toward what he could call poetic significance in making a poem that does not merely offer the occasion to put thoughts into language, but to make a poem that matters. "The Early Purges" might be taken for an

autobiographical work on the basis of its narrative and argumentative content, but it is even more compellingly so on the basis of its development from draft to published poem.

Nearly every poem could tell a similar story of the author's aesthetic struggle through an examination of its drafts, and in that way, every poem could be said to possess an autobiographical valence. This valence will not always be especially important, however: the first draft of "Death of a Naturalist" looks very similar to its published form, minus some of the more impressive descriptive turns. That poem's narrative arc remains the same throughout, and if the successive drafts have a story to tell, it is that of Heaney's realizing where his descriptive skills can be put to their fullest use. A comparison of internal and external temporalities is especially important in "The Early Purges," however, because of the sharp disparities between the poem's implied thematic development and Heaney's compositional process. The poem's speaker is brash, suggesting a confidence that informs the poem from its very beginning. However, the draft of the poem in its early stages is tentative, unsure about where it is headed, if it is headed anywhere at all. This discrepancy offers a reminder about the dangers of assuming that we can pin down originary moments or statements in a poem like this. De Man's condensation of a poem's narrative arc into one moment of consciousness is elegant, but it necessarily trivializes that arc as simply a requirement of language's diachronicity. Worse, it ultimately says more about his assumptions and reading practices than it does about the poem. Considering the etiology of "The Early Purges" encourages readers to remain skeptical about emphasizing deep structures of our own conceptual making over what exists before us in the language. The presence of a narrative arc does not merely point to a speaker whose thoughts are the end product of a personal history that must be stated diachronically to be sensible to an external listener; it points also to the movement of narrative itself. "The Early Purges" teaches readers to think carefully about what exactly they mean when they refer to a poem's point of origin, and to recognize that the presentation of the narrative arc can be valuable in itself whether or not it leads to a cumulative point that would look like the originary moment of consciousness of which de Man speaks.

Indeed, narrative arcs prove sufficient in themselves over and over in *Death of a Naturalist*. The title poem even uses one narrative to set up another, with its adult speaker nesting past moments in his larger narrative structure to build to a moment of disjunction. This temporal contrast within the narrative between habitual action and specific incident (the frogs' gathering for vengeance) seems initially to be just a recasting of what de Man calls the states of error and wisdom, and certainly the gaining of wisdom is the disruptive event that the poem turns on. The key difference between this poem and Wordsworth's, or even in contrast to "The Early Purges," lies in its tenses: "Death of a Naturalist's" "now" is implied only through the fact of its utterance. As far as the poem's diegetic action is concerned, there is no time (or thinking, or consciousness) beyond the child's moment of running away from the frogs. In fact, given the poem's title, there is no reason to believe that the child continues to exist past the poem's final lines at all. The poem does not build up to a "now," but effaces that present in favor of accentuating the plot's movement from a distant, habitual past to a still-distant but specific past.

This effacing is paramount. It may well be that, reading from de Man's perspective about temporality, and from Lloyd's assertion of the primacy of unified knowledge, "Death of a Naturalist" can be shown to act like any other lyric in its subjection of events to a single

perspective, and then telescoping that perspective across multiple moments to make it communicable in language. However, “Death of a Naturalist” complicates that perspective by toggling between adult and child. If there is telescoping, it is happening in the adult speaker, who is not the poem’s primary diegetic concern; its focus is on the child, to whom profound changes are occurring. Most important, these changes are permanent, not to be swept away by poetic or linguistic figuration or reconciled by a newly acquired understanding. In “Death of a Naturalist,” change and difference are themselves the focus, not merely the authorization for other poetic moves.

This emphasis on difference instead of reconciliation is one of the key distinctions between past tense lyric and present tense lyric in *Death of a Naturalist*. “Digging” is a model for the present tense mode, in which the speaker’s linguistic ingenuity is devoted to diffusing conflict or difference through metaphor or other poetic means. “Death of a Naturalist,” however, provides a model for the past tense mode, in which differences are not only allowed to stand, but may be positioned as the poem’s central conflict.

The past tense is essential in staging this conflict. In order for the poem to emphasize difference, it needs to remove its adult speaker from a space in which such differences could be reconcilable. Unlike “Digging,” “Death of a Naturalist” does not need for its speaker to make sense of two contrasting elements because that contrast exists in a space that is not connected to the speaker’s current moment of utterance. Indeed, the title states that the child, the naturalist, is dead; no resolution is possible, and so it follows that the speaker would have to be in a different space to allow that death to occur.

This lack of reconciliation in the past tense takes the form of climacterics in the title poem and “An Advancement of Learning,” but in other cases, it is figured as a suspension. For example, “Blackberry-Picking” offers a narrative of berry harvesting that is both seasonal and, it seems, removed from the world of the speaker’s moment of articulation. As in “Death of a Naturalist,” the poem’s subject is once again a child, and, like the title poem, “Blackberry-Picking” depends on this subject to justify the emotional force of the berries’ inevitable rotting. After detailing the glories of picking the ripe fruit, the speaker notes with some detachment, “Once off the bush, / The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour” (20-1). The register abruptly shifts, however, with the speaker first reporting, then lamenting, “I always felt like crying. It wasn’t fair / That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot” (22-3). The child is audible in “It wasn’t fair,” much as he is in “Death of a Naturalist’s” “daddy frog” and “mammy frog”; the difference is that here, the child is responsible for generating the poem’s emotional high point rather than simply providing some coloring for the pre-lapsarian world of frog discovery. The title poem draws on the child’s perspective to deliver its final assertion, “I knew / That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it,” but there is no reason to think that the child actually speaks these lines. “It wasn’t fair” has to be understood at least as free indirect discourse, the child delivering the cry that the more self-conscious adult cannot utter.

This poem looks like it delivers another moment of disruption, then, until the last line appears: “Each year I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not” (24). It is not entirely clear who speaks this line—whether it is more free indirect discourse, or whether the adult speaker has once again taken control of both perspective and language—but its habituality is at odds with both the speaker’s distance from the events and with the very conflict the line describes. “Each

year” suggests that the speaker still finds himself hoping for the berries’ preservation, but the use of the child as the poem’s diegetic subject distances the speaker from these seasonal events, as though the conflict returns every year, but somehow the adult speaker has escaped it. His distance may simply be an effect of the poem’s narrative techniques, which isolate the speaker from the diegetic world so that the childlike complaints, “I always felt like crying. It wasn’t fair” can carry weight that an adult speaker could not bestow on them. The focus on the habitual, however, has the effect of layering each one of these outbursts on top of one another, such that readers get not just one particular iteration of the child’s saying, “It wasn’t fair” (which is what seems to be happening initially), but in fact years of that protest and years of the sense of betrayal. It looks like the child never learns his lesson, and so perhaps he has only himself to blame for his disappointment, but that very stubbornness is in fact what animates the poem.

The tragedy in the poem is not simply that the berries rot, or that the child feels that rot is an injustice; the tragedy is that, despite the speaker's prior experiences of the rot ("knew they would not"), he continues to hope and continues to be disappointed. There is, of course, something indomitable or even romantic about the speaker's continued ability to hope for the berries' longevity, but there is equally something tragic about his failure to learn, and, more importantly, about his continued powerlessness to stop the rot. The poem can, then, be read not just as an illustration of the shocks of discovering the darker side of the natural world (that abundance leads to decay), but also as a rumination on the cognitive dissonance that can revel in the bounties of life while looking steadily past the inevitability of their passing into decay and death (that is, the desire to focus on the hope of keeping even while knowing they will not). It is precisely this double-sidedness of the experience of berry-picking that animates the poem (certainly, it is responsible for some of the more macabre imaginings of the berries as they are being picked, the speaker’s palms “sticky as Bluebeard’s” [16]). To end with the child’s complaint would emphasize the tragedy of death, but to end with the pattern of hope and disappointment is to redirect and complicate that tragedy from a perspective of a greater and more nuanced experience.

Above all, though, the poem does not find a resolution. It simply resets itself at the end, primed for yet another seasonal cycle of joyous picking and lamented rotting, hope meeting and surviving the knowledge of decay. Far from defusing this conflict, the poem argues that these positions are fundamentally irreconcilable. They produce a kind of stasis, but it is less an amicable agreement than a circumscribed arena of dispute. More importantly, that dispute is seen as a poetically productive animus rather than as a problem to solve, a dialectic that can become the subject of portraiture. This dialectic is given more concrete form in the sea and land in “Lovers on Aran,” “Each drew new meaning from the waves’ collision. / Sea broke on land to full identity” (8-9). Hope and knowledge clash and will always clash, but, like Aran’s sea and land, that very conflict defines them, and the poem can find its meaning in representing the clash rather than in trying to resolve it.

Self-Forgetful Autobiography

The past tense lyrics of *Death of a Naturalist* illustrate that sometimes difference is simply difference, and they forge a poetic space for themselves in which they are able to resist lyric’s more conventional movement toward reconciliation. More specifically, this thematization

of rupture is aided by the spaces that splitting the poems' 'I' into speaker and diegetic subject produces. The poems' very emphasis on breakage also reinforces the case for resisting the impulse to read child and adult as the same subject. After all, if these poems are about disjunction, it makes little sense to demand that readers revert to a default mode of reading lyric that relies upon a speaker's unified perspective and consciousness.

While this denial of diachronic linkage between child and adult would seem to pose a problem for autobiographical reading, Heaney's remarks at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate that it is not autobiography that needs to be redefined, but the poems' 'I.' For Heaney, the self is always understood to be something composite, a set of stacked references outward rather than a single entity that wraps itself in its experiences like a caterpillar in a cocoon. These discontinuities between adult and child pose no problem for an autobiographical subject as long as that subject is understood to be merely one more element in the much larger project of mobilizing a linguistic and cultural tradition to forget the referential self. This kind of autobiography looks past that referential 'I' in favor of cultivating the presence of the poet himself, who is not necessarily referred to by the poem's 'I,' but is in the best cases felt everywhere in the poem's language and perceptions. It is a mode of writing that deemphasizes a self embodied as an 'I' so that it can attain a grander state of being that diffuses itself throughout the poem's many layers of lore and language—a mode of autobiography that must be (referentially) self-forgetful in order to speak of its (linguistically intensified) self.

To return to Vendler's metaphor of self-portraiture, Heaney in these past tense lyrics breaks the explicit connection between the portrait's subject and its painter. A painting is not a mirror, and neither is a poem, but that non-coincidence is too easily forgotten when reading the poems as naïve autobiography. By offering generic subjects, Heaney forces his readers' attention away from the portraits' faces and toward the brush strokes of which they are made. That kind of self-reference might be deemed self-consciousness, even cleverness in other poets, but for Heaney it is a way of reminding the reader that his self is not necessarily contiguous with the 'I,' that indeed the 'I' is not necessarily the point at all. Readers who want to find him in the poem will do best to focus on the plane of poetry, the layers of linguistic and cultural inheritance that both constitute and amplify the self. The resulting work is self-forgetful, but it is still all him.

While Heaney focuses his notions of self-forgetfulness on the selves depicted in the work, Elizabeth Bishop takes up the notion of self-forgetfulness as an aesthetic banner, declaring, "What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration" (Stevenson 66). As the next chapter illustrates, the meaning of that self-forgetfulness evolves over the course of Bishop's career, with the early work's cultivation of a sense of speakerly reliability seeming to champion the actualities of the real world over the speaker's ability to reimagine it in language. By the end of her career, a new understanding has arisen—that the possibility of the self's forgetting its own experience is central to its subjectivity. Heaney's experiments in past tense self-forgetfulness are largely confined to *Death of a Naturalist*, but Bishop's appear throughout her career, with a few such poems cropping up in each volume. The next chapter examines her understandings of the past tense lyric as a generic form and its ability to help her shape a self-forgetful figure.

3: The Literal Imagination: Accuracy, Memory, and Autobiography in Elizabeth Bishop

On the eve of the 1954 publication of her prose piece, “In the Village,” Elizabeth Bishop was clearly nervous about how the work would be received. In letter after letter, she emphasizes that it is something new for her: she is, after all, a poet, not a writer of short stories. One way of highlighting this novelty is, counterintuitively, to redefine it as something continuous with the writing she is better known for: poetry about events she has observed or been a part of, like the much-anthologized “The Fish.” In a letter to Ilse and Kit Barker, she says of the story that it is “just poetic prose. And completely autobiographical (although not in the *New Yorker* manner). I’ve just stuck a few years together” (*One Art* 291). Bishop here downplays her efforts at making this a story as such: it is, instead, “poetic prose,” “autobiographical,” “a few years stuck together.” These face-saving qualifiers serve to distance Bishop’s comparatively fledgling efforts at prose from novelist Ilse Barker’s mastery of the form. Her work does not invent or imagine, she suggests; she merely sticks together years.

Indeed, as the letter continues, Bishop invokes her aunt’s decidedly less literary response to the piece to bolster her anti-artistic rhetoric: “Fortunately the aunt involved in it all—my only nice relative—likes [“In the Village”] very much and even corrected some names, and reminded me of this and that. We have equally literal imaginations” (*OA* 291). Bishop’s claim about the equality of their imaginations (which, given the aunt’s interest in fact, seem quite impoverished here) works again to deemphasize whatever interventions the poet might have carried out in this autobiographical work: after all, the piece defers to the aunt’s superior memory. But while the emphasis in this passage is clearly meant to fall on “literal”—the factual—the final word is “imagination,” and this raises the question that floats just beyond nearly all of Bishop’s work: what is the role of imagination in this piece? More importantly, what is a literal imagination as Bishop invokes the term? In context, it points to an insistence that words must connect to real-world correlatives, perhaps not unlike Marianne Moore’s declaration that poetry does not come into existence until poets become “literalists of / the imagination” and “present // for inspection, ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’” (“Poetry,” 29-30; 31-2). However, there is also a suggestion in Bishop’s phrase that even those literal elements require some kind of imagination, particularly when they are invoked in writing. Bishop may appeal to her aunt’s fact-checking as an extension of her own sensibilities, but in doing so, she skims past the imaginative interventions required to stick a few years together and make the piece in the first place.

As problematic as a literal imagination is, it provides a useful figure for Bishop’s poetics, which are paradoxical if not outright contradictory: generally, whatever might be argued of her work, the opposite is equally true. This is especially the case when talking about her autobiographical poems. As Jonathan Ellis cautions, “If we begin to forget Bishop’s life, her poetry urges us to remember it. If it becomes the only thing we remember, her poetry urges us to consider something else” (191). The divide in Bishop studies between work that focuses on biographical elements and that which privileges form illustrates the variety of critical approaches that Bishop can support.³² And yet to think of her work only as autobiography overlooks the

³² As the letters discussed above demonstrate, critics who read Bishop’s mid-period collection, *Questions of Travel*, autobiographically do so on the poet’s own authority, and this authorization has been particularly useful for a generation of critics who have been working during the height of identity-

formal innovations that challenge autobiographical reference, while focusing too much on those innovations looks past the poems' invitations to link them with Bishop's life, to say nothing of direct statements from Bishop herself like the one above, which explicitly defines the work as autobiographical.

Trying to speak to both sides of what might be called a personal/formal divide can lead to serious critical contortions, and "literal imagination" is no exception, subject as it is to the pitfalls of oxymoron and self-negation. However, I would argue that the phrase's virtue lies in its contradictions. While the two halves of the phrase set up a neat binary opposition that both structures this chapter and gives the analysis that follows something to push against, the phrase is meaningless if it is divided into its two parts; its meaning depends on the friction between them. The phrase is a paradox, and as such, it offers a way to encapsulate the contradictions of Bishop's equally paradoxical work. It is not that Bishop is more interested in autobiography than form or vice versa, but that her forms test poetry's ability to be autobiographical at all. What the poems provide is neither an objectivizing or impersonal approach to memory, nor an unabashed return to a lyric mode of expressing the personal as such. Instead, the poems show an oscillation between the two poles of impersonal reportage and an embrace of self-expression in what finally becomes less a muddled paradox than a clearly defined dialectic in the late poems.

This is not, of course, to say that autobiography can cleanly be aligned with literalness and poetry with imagination. Despite LeJeune's insistence on a pact between autobiographical authors and their readers to attest that autobiography's contents are true, that truth is subject to all manner of distortions and redefinitions, as the foregoing chapter covering Robert Lowell's movement away from literal truth to a sense of characterological or situational authenticity illustrates. Still, autobiography as a genre means very little if it cannot be granted some kind of

oriented hermeneutics. Indeed, Zachariah Pickard notes that this co-occurrence has allowed criticism largely to shape Bishop into the figure it needs her to be (32). This kind of identity-oriented work constitutes the mainstream of Bishop criticism, as monographs by critics like Thomas Travisano, Laurie Goldensohn, David Kalstone, and Susan McCabe attest. Indeed, McCabe argues that Bishop's "insistent return to early childhood . . . as a source for poetry becomes a method, finally, for transgressing symbolic signification through the signifiers of loss and homing desire" (203). That is, Bishop's apparently autobiographical writing says much more about her adult life and adult psychology than it does about her childhood as such, which means the value in those poems lies not in the portraits they present but in that portraiture's ability to illuminate the poet's psychology.

However, there have long been a minority of critics who are more interested in the formal and philosophical structures of Bishop's work than in her biography or psychology as such, and their numbers are on the rise. Recent work by Pickard, Gillian White, and even Vidyan Ravinthiran's book on Bishop's prose cadences all build on the sorts of earlier formal insights put forth by C. K. Doreski and Bonnie Costello in their respective monographs (written, incidentally, during the same period as the identity-oriented criticism). This is not to say that biographical Bishop studies have come to an end—Linda Anderson's recent monograph shows that that tradition is alive and well—but it does seem that the time has at last come to ask more than simply what a poem has to say about Bishop, which also means that the time has come to ask why it is useful to say that a poem has anything to say about Bishop at all. As Pickard alleges, it is best to locate Bishop herself "not *in* the poem, although she may well appear there, but behind it, controlling it and us" (36).

truth value. Likewise, while poetry is a creative, imaginative labor, it is assumed to speak from a real world unless otherwise noted, as in a dramatic monologue. Bishop takes this assumption to extremes, going out of her way to accentuate the stenographic accuracy of her descriptions. As she explained to Wesley Wehr in 1966, “I *always* tell the truth in my poems. With “The Fish,” that’s *exactly* how it happened. It was in Key West, and I *did* catch it just as the poem says. That was in 1938” (42). A statement like this suggests that imagination plays no real role in the poetic process at all: the poetry simply tells what happened. If this is the ethos that informs Bishop’s non-autobiographical work, then she is well positioned to make the transition to the presumed reportage of autobiography, as she does in the early 1950s. Whether she writes about catching a fish or the repercussions of her family’s committing her mother to a mental institution, the ethos of saying “*exactly* how it happened” underpins both kinds of writing.

That is, until it doesn’t. Bishop qualifies her claim by saying, “Oh, but I did change *one* thing; the poem says he had five hooks hanging from his mouth, but actually he only had three. I think it improved the poem when I made that change. Sometimes a poem makes its own demands. But I always *try* to stick as much as possible to what *really* happened when I describe something in a poem” (42). Whether the fish has five hooks or three dangling from its mouth is perhaps beyond most readers’ concern; the real point of interest is the way in which Bishop sneaks in her observation that a poem makes its own demands before ending on a reaffirmation of *trying* to stick to what *really* happened. Bishop says, in effect, that poetry cannot be literal no matter how assiduously she tries to make it so. Because she does not articulate what poetic demands are, it is unclear whether they are imaginative, formal, generic, aesthetic, or some combination thereof. Whatever they are, though, they interfere with the desire to remain connected to the literal truth of what happened. Stretching the truth is fine for a fish story—doing so is virtually a requirement of the genre—but what does it mean for autobiography? Are autobiographical demands inherently at odds with poetry’s demands, or are both demands really just extensions of Bishop’s own idiosyncratic understanding of the two genres?

Bishop leaves all these questions open. It is clear, however, that her claim to accuracy looks past large swathes of her work, particularly poems from her first collection, *North and South*, which treat events and figures that never happened and never existed, such as the mammoth, an imaginative figure concocted from a newspaper’s misprinting of “mammoth,” or the gentleman of Shalott, who believes that half of his body is in fact a mirror reflecting the other half. These poems are exclusively imaginative, but treated in a realist style *as if* they were “what really happened.” If a realist style can turn three hooks into five, or a typo into a creature, what happens when it combines with the distortions, impressions, and half-forgottenness of memory?

My goal in this chapter is to map the two conflicting sides of Bishop’s poetic—what I’ll oversimplistically call the literal (“The Fish”) and the imaginative (“The Man-moth”)—and, more importantly, to trace Bishop’s slow evolution toward combining them into a single, dialectical poetic in her late work. My discussion centers on addressing issues raised by *Questions of Travel*’s Nova Scotia poems, “Manners,” “Sestina,” and “First Death in Nova Scotia,” which both do and do not return to Bishop’s childhood. In the volume, they follow “In the Village,” and, as Bishop writes to Randall Jarrell, they “go with it,” whatever exactly that means (*OA* 431). While it is clear enough that they belong to the same terrain and remembered world, their specific techniques vary widely. “Manners” and “First Death in Nova Scotia” are

past tense recollections that rely heavily on free indirect discourse to overlay multiple subjectivities and multiple moments of experience and utterance. “Sestina” looks nothing like these poems: not only is it in the present tense and the third person, but its ostentatiously predetermined form works against the very narrative impulses that undergird autobiography. The divergences in these styles mean that simple claims that might coordinate memory with the past tense cannot be made about these poems; “Sestina’s” placement between “Manners” and “First Death in Nova Scotia” even disrupts the sense of a formal trajectory or evolution of approach to the subject matter. So, in an attempt to explain these shifts between tenses and forms, I focus on the poems’ various techniques and the linkages that connect them to other veins of Bishop’s poetry.

These veins structure this chapter’s three primary movements. It begins with an analysis of Bishop’s modes of narration—specifically, the ways in which the narrating speaker alternately isolates herself from and inserts herself into the narrative. In some cases, her interruptions into the diegesis state in no uncertain terms that the figure we might think of as the remembering speaker is separate from the figure in the experience being recounted, which is a way of building into the narrative the distinction that I have been arguing is also encoded in the past tense. This relatively clean division between narrating speaker and diegetic subject functions much like that which appears in Heaney’s and Lowell’s poems, in which the past tense functions either to keep the speaker out of the recounted world (Heaney) or to construct a figure that can offer an alienated speaker a way back into that world (Lowell). However, Bishop’s treatment of the relationship between speaker and diegetic subject evolves over the course of her career, beginning with a strict divide between them in an early poem like “The Weed,” whose narratorial interruptions focus on giving the sense of a deep concern with accuracy, before moving to a somewhat more fluid medium—free indirect discourse—in her autobiographical poems, “Manners” and “First Death in Nova Scotia.” Bishop combines both narratorial intrusion’s isolation and free indirect discourse’s plurality of consciousness in “In the Waiting Room” to depict the child’s paradoxical discovery of being separate from the people around her while also discovering that she and they are simultaneously “all just one” (83). This poem thematizes the alienation of the self in language while nonetheless carving out a space for the adult speaker to appropriate the telling of that experience as her own. It begins a trend toward a much more complex understanding of autobiographical happening that finds fuller expression in the later poems, which blend straightforward accounts of events with an exploration of the imagination as such.

This interest in the imaginative does not arise spontaneously in the later work, however, and in the chapter’s second section, I return to earlier moments in Bishop’s *oeuvre* to trace a use of the present tense that is devoted to illustrating imagined or impossible spaces. This vein of Bishop’s poetics is particularly useful in explaining the form of the ostensibly autobiographical “Sestina.” Indeed, I argue that the poem’s autobiographical connections are largely a matter of resemblance between the poem’s scene and prior knowledge that readers might have about Bishop’s life, the connection between which the poem’s use of perspective strains against. The poem is actually better placed among the poems of the counterfactual present, which emphasize the imaginative side of the literal imagination. This counterfactual present establishes a powerful counterweight to the rhetoric of accuracy that Bishop’s speakers perform through their

narratorial interruptions. While this imaginative present is most noticeable in *North and South*'s "A Miracle for Breakfast," it also appears in "Sestina" and *Geography III*'s "The End of March." In both "A Miracle for Breakfast" and "The End of March," the demarcation between realistic narrative and counterfactual narrative is signaled by a shift from the past tense to the present and back; "Sestina" simply goes without a past tense frame, the absence of which allows Bishop to seem to write autobiography while also following the poem's formal possibilities to their ultimate conclusion. In doing so, she illustrates the problems inherent in using the lyric form to present autobiography's narratives, even satirizing reading practices that bend over backward to sustain a connection between poet and poem that the poem's demands have long since severed.

These two competing strains in Bishop's poetics—the accurate and the overtly fantastical—demonstrate two markedly different attitudes toward truth-telling in Bishop's work. Both may be interested in carefully observing scenes, but how can a poet who is so declaratively invested in accuracy and truth also be so interested in describing things that have never happened? What kind of statement about truth and reality do these opposing, even dialectical poetics present? By the end of her career, Bishop becomes aware not just of the tension between these poetics, but of the ways in which they can actually serve to supplement each other. As a result, the line between these two strains—the accurate and the counterfactual—is blurred in the late poems, or rather, the oscillations they suggest are reconciled as part of one larger movement. The chapter closes with an examination of "Santarém," which brings together these two competing elements of Bishop's poetics to offer the clearest depiction of her understanding of memory and the act of writing about it. It reframes the poetics of "what really happened" as a poetics that must also include what the speaker *thought* happened or has imagined happening, and in doing so it thematizes and resolves the speakerly divisions that Bishop's past tense autobiographical work has been performing all along at a formal if not a thematic level.

This reframing of events that are presented as lived experience suggests that the poems cannot simply be read as windows onto Bishop's past or even as documents of her retrospective attitudes about it. Rather, the poems are better seen as merely one element of a career-long examination of how poetic demands can be reconciled with the demands of accuracy. This chapter illustrates Bishop's slow evolution from rhetorically privileging literal accuracy to developing a language that awards imaginative and poetic demands a place in their own right, discovering in the process that the imperative to tell the truth must necessarily include an acknowledgement, formal or discursive, of the role of fantasy and imagination in depictions of remembered experiences that even one's aunt might corroborate.

Narration and the Rhetoric of Accuracy

Bishop founded her career on her ability to equate the content of the poems with the content of the perceiving eye (and by extension, 'I'), which is to say, for at least some critics, the real world. However, as her remarks about "The Fish" demonstrate, she also leaves room for doubt about how much of that world can actually appear once it is filtered through the poem's demands. What Bishop offers instead of an exact report of events is a rhetoric of exactitude whose primary purpose is to give the impression of a mind striving to present the observed world as honestly and accurately as possible. The clearest marker of this rhetoric is Bishop's speaker's near-compulsive self-correction, as seen in describing both the hooks in the fish's lip and the lip

itself:

I admired his sullen face,
 the mechanism of his jaw,
 and then I saw,
 that from his lower lip
 —if you could call it a lip—
 grim, wet, and weaponlike,
 hung five old pieces of fish-line,
 or four and a wire leader
 with the swivel still attached,
 with all their five big hooks
 grown firmly in his mouth. (45-55)

The speaker is so careful to communicate the image of the fish faithfully that she engages in two moments of self-correction in these ten lines: one clarifies that “lip” is perhaps too generous a way to refer to the lower part of his jaw’s “mechanism”; the other functions to group more accurately the set of “five old pieces of fish-line” into “four [pieces of fish-line] and a wire leader.” Readers, of course, cannot know that this hyper-accuracy is in fact primarily performance because, as Bishop clarifies nearly thirty years later, there are only three hooks in this lip, not five. This does not mean that there is no wire leader, but rather that the ostentatious display of self-correction here is best read as protesting too much: the speaker’s careful performance of showing herself correcting herself (as opposed to Bishop’s simply correcting the characterizations behind the scenes from one draft of the poem to the next) functions to create a sense of accuracy of method that is assumed to bolster the accuracy of the observations themselves through an appeal to character if not through the relay of factual information. An awareness of this rhetorically constructed observing figure makes reading poems for straightforward information about Bishop’s world or even about Bishop herself impossible. Whatever might be taken as evidence about Bishop herself can no longer be separated from her own constructions of her voice.

Nowhere is this impossibility clearer than in “In the Waiting Room,” which contains perhaps the most overt and knowing change in facts in Bishop’s *oeuvre*: the migration of the contents of the March 1918 *National Geographic* to the February issue. This change seems trivial, but, as with the alteration of the number of hooks in the fish’s mouth, it represents a breach in the poet’s usual rhetorical ethos of accuracy. And, unlike in “The Fish,” this change represents a form of tampering with the public record rather than with strictly personal experience, making the change not only easy to track, but also a knowing intervention into a shared, public history.

When word of this change began to circulate, Bishop at first suggested it was the *New Yorker*’s fault for not checking the poem more stringently: “I was sure *The New Yorker* would ‘research’ this, or ‘process it’ or something—but apparently they are not quite as strict as they used to be—or else are sure that none of their present readers would have read *National Geographic*s going back *that far*” (OA 545-6). Later, she appealed to the clemency of her editor, Howard Moss, as if to suggest that if he did not object, no one else should, either: “When I sent the poem to the *New Yorker* I wrote Howard Moss and said I must confess that this is a little

wrong. The magazine was nice about it and said it would be all right” (Starbuck 87). Finally, she claimed that the change was actually the most correct choice: “Out of curiosity I looked it up, and it turned out that I had combined the March and February issues, but I didn’t change the poem. It was right the way it was” (McCullough 72). That rightness may refer in two directions: that the March issue corresponds most closely to her memory of the events, despite the evidence that her memory is mistaken; and that the March issue’s articles on African women and explorers fits better in the poem thematically than does the February issue’s “Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes,” about Alaska. Whatever Bishop may mean precisely, what matters most here is not that Bishop has altered an unimportant fact, but that she acknowledges an alternative standard of rightness to factual accuracy. As with her identification of poetry’s demands, the nature of this standard of rightness goes unstated, but its presence points to the insufficiency of exactitude—to the poem’s demands exceeding the world’s raw materials.

This slow shift in emphasis from accuracy and verisimilitude to presenting the poem as right the way it is on its own terms rather than in its ability to mirror or connect to events that took place outside the poem is reflected in the evolution of Bishop’s modes of speakerly positioning in her past tense poems. “The Weed,” from her first collection, *North and South*, divides speaker from diegetic subject cleanly and even thematizes that divide through the poem’s emphasis on a dreamed world. In addition to those thematic divisions, however, the poem also marks clearly the places where the narrating speaker intrudes on or comments upon the diegetic dream world, all of which serves to suggest that the speaker is making her best efforts to translate the fantastical elements of the dream world into the shared truths of the real, lived world. In other words, the narratorial intrusions reinforce a sense that the speaker is relaying the dream as accurately as possible, not unlike her descriptions in “The Fish.” By contrast, the mid-period Nova Scotia poems move away from clearly designated speakerly interruption toward the more nuanced combination of perspectives that free indirect discourse allows. These poems illustrate the shaping role of a narrating speaker by overtly taking control of what would otherwise be reported speech: instead of allowing the characters to speak for themselves in the way that events of “The Weed’s” dream are allowed to, characters are made to say what the speaker says they do by overlaying their speech with her own. By her last poem of childhood, “In the Waiting Room,” Bishop is mingling both kinds of speakerly disruption, simultaneously arguing, as she does in “The Weed,” that what she describes “really happened,” but also using free indirect discourse to depict internalized thought as part of the poem’s happening. This turn prefigures the later poems, “The End of March” and “Santarém,” both of which foreground fantasy and wish as diegetic events.

“The Weed” occupies a position between two of Bishop’s early subgenres. Only four poems in *North and South* are in the past tense, and two of those, “Chemin de Fer” and “A Miracle for Breakfast,” can be classed loosely with some of that collection’s best known poems, like “Gentleman of Shalott” and “The Man-Moth,” which record the experience of a hyperbolically counterfactual world. These poems might be called Surrealist, despite Bishop’s antipathy toward surrealism, and to be sure, these poems share Surrealism’s dreaminess: the observations are characteristically sharp, but causal relationships do not always make sense, and

of course in some cases they feature creatures that have never existed, like a man-moth.³³ Indeed, the primary difference between the past tense poems and the rest of the collection is their interest in change and process: something changes over time in the past tense poems, while the present tense poems are simply interested in recording what is true about a scene or situation. This style of writing contrasts sharply with that seen in “The Fish,” which, as the analysis above illustrates, is invested in creating a sense of uncomplicated and only slightly mediated storytelling. There is nothing dreamy or hyperbolic about this poem (except maybe for its penultimate line, “rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!”): it seems to be an account of a real event made by a real person in a real world.

“The Weed,” then, finds itself between these two orientations toward reality. On one hand, it is clearly and declaratively about a dream the speaker has had, but describing this particular dream means describing a scene that exceeds the possibilities of the real world. However, the poem’s speaker is very clearly speaking from a waking (and logical) world outside the diegetic confines of the dream, which gives the poem a great deal in common with “The Fish” in that the speaker tells of events that have happened to her with a performed goal of communicating those events clearly and vividly. It is, in other words, a realist poem about a surreal event, and it seems that the speaker’s attraction to retelling this event lies not only in its symbolic freightedness, but in communicating the strangeness of the physical possibilities made available in this dreaming world.

These possibilities are a matter of attention from the outset, as the poem begins, “I dreamed that dead, and meditating, / I lay upon a grave, or bed” (1-2). This lack of certainty about whether the subject is dead or meditating, or what she lies on, is of a piece with the self-correction that appears in “The Fish” in its apparent striving for accuracy, even if that accuracy takes the form of refusing to choose death or meditation just for the sake of a clearer establishing scene: if the speaker is uncertain, it is best to say so. Moreover, the initial statement that she has dreamed all this establishes both an authority over the details of the experience—they happened to the speaker directly, so she is the best person to talk about it—and a clear divide from both the scene of the poem and the figure described in it. This divide in effect communicates to readers that they can trust the speaker to employ commonly agreed-upon standards of accuracy, observation, and logic: the scene may be fantastical, but the retelling is not, and every effort will be made to render it as clearly and sensibly as possible.

This reassurance is necessary as the poem and its eponymous weed begin their acts of violence toward the figure on the grave or bed: the weed erupts from this figure’s chest, sending “two rivers glanc[ing] off from the sides . . . / (the ribs made of them two cascades)” (31, 34). Attention turns to the water itself, which, after a few drops fall on the speaker’s face, is revealed to be “made / itself of racing images” (45-6). The speaker asks the weed, “What are you doing there?” and she is informed, “I grow . . . / but to divide your heart again” (52; 55-6). Given the

³³ Bishop’s relationship to Surrealism is often discussed, but, as Pickard makes extremely clear, her work is better understood as a reaction against Surrealism rather than an embrace of it. Indeed, he reveals her rendering of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious to be the inverse of Surrealists’ understanding of it (55). The content of her early work may often be surreal, but her speakers’ attitudes toward that content is anything but.

destructiveness of the poem's events, it is surprising that there should be a speaker who can recount this poem at all: she goes from being insensate to being physically rent. Yet the presence of this speaker is not merely a matter of inference, but a fact of which the poem insists on reminding its readers through its many parenthetical interruptions. Crucially, though, this speaker is not the figure lying punctured on the table by the weed: this is someone outside of the diegesis who is struggling to present the events in a coherent fashion.

This outsider position is clear from the first of these interruptions, which explains "(All this was in the dark)" after offering a very clear description of the weed's "green head . . . nodding on the breast," something neither the narrating speaker nor the diegetic subject could actually have seen because of the pervasive darkness, but which the rules of her dream world allow her to see clearly nonetheless (17-18). This narrating speaker understands that these observational logics are contradictory, that she could not have seen all this if it was as dark as she says it was, but she reasserts these conditions in an apparent attempt to capture the scene accurately despite its impossibilities. This interruption signals not just that quest for accuracy, however, but also an attempt to communicate both the scene and her continued presence to an interlocutor.

As such, as strange as this dream is, it must be understood not to be the dream as it exactly was, but the illogical dream as filtered through waking logic. These parenthetical interjections illustrate these attempts at sense-making, culminating in the clearest of these efforts three lines before the poem's end: the weed lifts its head "all dripping wet / (with my own thoughts?)" (54). This question mark suggests that the speaker is working to make sense of this moisture, and ascribing it to her (diegetic subject's) own thoughts provides her best guess as to its origins. More interestingly still, however, this interjection appears between the subject's question, "What are you doing there?" and the weed's answer, "I grow . . .," making the final three lines not merely a dialogue, but a three-way conversation between subject, weed, and speaker. The weed divides the subject's heart in two, and the narrating speaker enacts a similar division of the poem's 'I' by means of these interjections.

"The Weed" prefigures the kinds of division that will characterize the autobiographical poetry in Bishop's later works. The poem highlights the divisions between subject and speaker that feature in the childhood poems; interestingly, the narrative interruptions that characterize "In the Waiting Room" are in this early poem, too. These continuities should not, perhaps, come as a surprise, as, in a loose sense, "The Weed" offers a version of autobiographical writing, as well. It may record events that have occurred in a dream, but it shares autobiographical writing's remobilization of a remembered experience. Whether the events "happened" to Bishop herself is beside the point (and, depending on how one defines "happen," they arguably did as something she experienced—or, at least, as something that her narrating and narrated subjects experienced); what matters is that she remembers them and is able to use that remembrance to create the poem. As a result, this poem about an experience that the speaker is so performatively removed from is also a poem about the treatment of memory. "The Weed" clearly records an impossible world, but, as memory, it is also set up as a retelling of an event that happened (so it seems) to Bishop herself, which would make it part of the experience of a real person in a real world. Indeed, this qualification is what defines Bishop's poetics of accuracy, her claim that "I always *try* to stick as much as possible to what *really* happened when I describe something in a poem."

This implied claim about the ability to retell a dream (or the memory of a dream) accurately redefines accuracy as no longer being a question of someone else's ability to agree that a scene or event appeared in that way, but of a performed scrupulousness of reporting. This lack of verifiability means that it does not matter if a dream happened as the poem says it did, as long as the poem communicates a concern to report events accurately. The question that Bishop raises with "The Weed" is how much different the memory of an event that happened only to her is from the memory of an event that other people (such as her aunt) also witnessed. By keeping both kinds of memory at some distance—by claiming a relatively objectivized position of reporting them instead of occupying a subject position within them—Bishop turns writing about memory into just another kind of observational poetics; it does not necessarily make for a more intimate kind of writing or even a more self-revealing poetry.

This sense of the separateness as opposed to the closeness of memory informs the Nova Scotia writings in *Questions of Travel*, as Bishop begins to write her first poems of a remembered childhood. This separateness is formally very different from that seen in "The Weed," however, because the earlier poem's narratorial intrusions are replaced by free indirect discourse, with the narrating speaker impersonating the figure of the child. This looks like an effacing of distance at first glance, but as the analyses below illustrate, this mingling of poetic voice with character voice is actually a way for a single line to communicate meaning at two different levels—the diegetic and the narratorial—at once. Consequently, while these lines look like the coming together of two figures, they are better read as a linguistic convergence of two of the poem's levels rather than a mingling of characters or consciousnesses.

The story of Bishop's arrival at writing about her childhood is well known: suffering from asthma and eczema brought on by her move to Brazil, she takes cortisone injections, a side effect of which is sleeplessness (Millier 249). It also induces a graphomania, which causes her to stay up nights writing what ultimately becomes "In the Village." What exactly causes her to think of her childhood is less clear, but many critics point to the fact that her moving in with Lota de Soares in Brazil invokes a family structure that Bishop has not had since her childhood (Millier 243). This relationship is, of course, radically different in that it is romantic rather than strictly familial, but it is nonetheless the first household to which Bishop has been meaningfully attached in decades. Interestingly, and much less frequently discussed, Bishop's symptoms also mirror the kind of attacks she had as a child, with an eczema she had not seen since childhood returning (Millier 245).

Whether any of this is actually the cause of Bishop's literary turn to her upbringing is unknowable, but what we do know is that her output in this period of the early 1950's centers on these early years of her life. She writes the stories "Gwendolyn" and "In the Village," as well as the poems that seem to be attached to this world: "Manners" and "Sestina." "First Death in Nova Scotia" is published almost a decade later in 1962, but it returns to this landscape; and, as the analysis that follows reveals, it also draws on some of the central methods of "Manners" in recreating its child speaker's perspective. This is, then, in some ways a new and changed Bishop, a writer of remembered experience rather than a writer who stages conceptual dramas. But, as noted, this remembered experience is often treated as something separate from the speaker, and the creation of a diegetic 'I' who is not the speaker is the clearest symptom of this separation. Despite the poems' change in subject matter, strong connections can be drawn

between these childhood poems and their antecedents in terms of the modes of seeing they enact, specifically in the poems' focus on memory as a scene rather than an intrinsically connected experience. However, they depart from "The Weed's" telling by introducing a new storytelling element—free indirect discourse—which serves to develop authority from within the poem's child perspective rather than imposing a rhetoric of "what really happened" from without.

"Manners" illustrates these qualities of Bishop's new style. The poem's subtitle, "For a Child of 1918," emphasizes the doubleness of its speakerly position from the outset: children of 1918 were in their mid-30s by the time of the poem's writing in the early 1950s, so is the audience here children, or former children?³⁴ In typical Bishop fashion, this subtitle fixes an audience at the same time that it unfixes it, and, unsurprisingly, the subtitle's three areas of concern—childhood, maturity, and the historical juncture—all emerge as important within the poem. The three-stress meter and regular stanzas suggest something on the order of a nursery rhyme, and the positioning of "my grandfather" as the figure of authority makes clear that the diegetic subject if not the narrating speaker is a child.

The poem reinforces this impression through a moment of very naïve-sounding free indirect discourse: in worrying that a passenger's crow might fly away from the wagon, the speaker feigns the child's speech in asking, "How would he know where to go?" (16). "Would" serves to reinforce the speaker's control of the narrative, as the child in the moment of that scene would ask, "How *will* he know where to go?" "Would" signals that the question is merely the adult speaker's impression of the child, and that, moreover, the child cannot break free from the adult's retelling of this story. It also indicates that the adult is unwilling entirely to enter the space of the poem in her own voice by breaking the poem's tense and grounding her recalled concern with language like, "I remember worrying."

This narratorial attention to the child's consciousness nonetheless serves to accentuate a key moment in the child's depicted experience of the poem's events, and as such, this free indirect discourse performs a function that is related to "The Weed's" narratorial intrusions, which provide an emphasis on certain details and highlight a desire to explain. Indeed, the free indirect discourse here expresses concerns that go unvoiced in the diegetic world of the poem. "How would he know where to go?" functions mostly to explain "I was worried" (15): it is a linguistic expression of the child's thought that probably does not occur in language until the narrating speaker gives voice to it. While outright narratorial intrusion serves to cultivate a kind of empirical accuracy by explaining how things are true, free indirect discourse in this case attempts to develop the poem's mimetic strategies, strengthening the poem's claims to experiential accuracy by seeming momentarily to speak from the child's consciousness.

However, while the speaker seems to draw her impressions from the child's thoughts, the poem never actually reports her spoken language. This refusal to quote the 'I's language directly is very much an exception to the poem's rule, as the grandfather's speech is quoted frequently. Indeed, ten of the poem's thirty-two lines are the grandfather's direct speech.

³⁴ This poem was intended as part of a volume of verse for children, but no evidence suggests that anything more came of this intended volume. As a result, children can be thought of as being part of the volume's intended audience, but the poem may well have found new life outside this volume; it was, after all, published in the *New Yorker*, hardly a children's magazine.

Curiously, while the speaker does not quote the child directly, she does quote collective speech of which the child is a part: “we shouted ‘Good day! Good day! / Fine day!’ at the top of our voices” (27-8). This distinction may be purely social: this collective speech occurs only once in the poem, as does the speaker’s only acknowledgement that she has said anything of her own accord: “And I said it and bowed where I sat” (8). “It” is the phrase that her grandfather seems to utter in the previous line, “Good day, sir. Good day. A fine day” (7). It is unclear whether this speech is actually the grandfather’s or the child’s, and of course that ambiguity is the point: the grandfather’s goal in teaching his granddaughter manners is to get her to speak as he does, so in a sense his words become hers. If indeed this poem is meant to be read as a speaker reminiscing about her grandfather, its dialogue would testify to his pedagogy’s effectiveness: she is now able to speak as he does at some length in the poem’s dialogue. However, these two examples are the only places where the diegetic subject actually says anything. The rest of the time, she is merely thinking, or rather, the speaker reports some linguistic version of that thought.

As close as this speech seems to bring the speaker to this diegetic world, however, she ultimately withdraws from it near the end of the poem. While throughout the poem she demonstrates her ability to speak as her grandfather, she suddenly loses the ability to do so in the final stanza, choosing the indirect statement, “he said that the mare was tired,” instead of the direct reporting that has characterized the poem to this point (30). This may simply be a formal or metrical expedient, but it is striking since dialogue and form are not mutually exclusive elsewhere in the poem: the sixth stanza consists entirely of the grandfather’s dialogue, but it nonetheless manages to rhyme “answers” with “manners” and “to” with “do” (21-4). The speaker may indeed be able to speak as her grandfather, but even more than that, she manages to make him speak as she does in this passage, retroactively imposing rhyme on him as her form of manners. That the grandfather never spoke in this way only emphasizes what readers already know to be true: the quoted sections of this poem cannot really be his language, but are merely the speaker’s constructions, meaning that the dialogue is a conceit designed to create an impression of immediacy between readers and the diegetic world. It also suggests something on the order of direct observation, as though the speaker gets out of the way so that readers can hear what she hears more clearly. However, while she impersonates her grandfather’s language, she does not actually impersonate the grandfather’s perspective, as she attempts to do with the child. His language is received as something from outside, akin to an observed phenomenon, while the child’s thoughts are presented as if they were internal—indeed, the speaker provides her language.

As a result, the child is truly caught between adult worlds: she either repeats the grandfather (who, of course, is impersonated by the speaker) or is given poetic voice by the speaker, leaving her ultimately unable to function independently. While the child seems to be the center of this poem, she is actually turned into an absence in this way: thought for and spoken for, she disappears into the figures who control the poem’s language. Yet even as she seems to disappear, the absence she leaves is essential: without it, the speaker has no way to enter the poem, the grandfather has no one to speak to, and the sense of irony that arises in the distance between the child’s youth and the speaking adult’s greater experience vanishes. The child is, in a sense, more a lyric object than a lyric subject—the figure spoken to rather than the figure spoken

from. Her perspective is important, but mainly because it grants her the ability to gather information about the world around her. That information is reshaped in the act of utterance, which is of course the purview of the speaker, not the child.

This effacement of the diegetic/lyric subject is less pronounced in “First Death in Nova Scotia,” chiefly because the poem lacks reported speech of the sort that so characterizes “Manners.” However, the poem nonetheless mobilizes free indirect discourse, this time to make two different statements from two different figures at once. This is a different use of the technique from that which appears in “Manners,” which serves to reinforce the poem’s larger depiction of authority figures’ speaking for others by effectively placing the speaker as equivalent to the child’s grandfather in generating the child’s language. In “First Death in Nova Scotia,” however, both child and speaker have their own differing reasons for bewilderment, and they are expressed simultaneously through free indirect discourse.

As the title suggests, “First Death in Nova Scotia” is about a child’s first encounter with death—that of her cousin Arthur, also a child. The specificity of these details encourages autobiographical reading even more perhaps than in “Manners,” although these details should nonetheless be taken with a grain of salt: when Bishop names family members elsewhere, those names are often changed, so they do not necessarily point to a real person in Bishop’s early life (“In the Waiting Room’s” Aunt Consuelo comes to mind, whose real name was Florence [Millier 25]). The poem describes the scene of Arthur’s wake, building to a statement of the child’s bafflement: “But how could Arthur go, / clutching his tiny lily, / with his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow?” (47-50). On a first read, this question expresses the child’s sense of shock and betrayal, but this question contains much more than it initially seems. As with the question about how Willy’s crow will know where to go, this question is in the wrong tense, which raises doubt about whose question it actually is—the child’s, or the adult speaker’s? There is genuine reason for this ambiguity, because the adult has scrupulously created a world of red and white that should function to keep Arthur in place. The three primary figures in the poem—Arthur, chromographs of the royal family “in red and ermine,” and a stuffed loon on a marble-topped table, whose eyes are red glass—are united by their color palette, with Arthur described as being “all white, like a doll” with “a few red strokes” in his hair (42, 32, 38). Because the loon and the chromographs both illustrate ways of surviving beyond death, the poem implies that Arthur, too, will remain a fixture in this scene. Even the observation that he has been left “white, forever” suggests that his earthly remains will, like the loon’s, be impervious to natural processes of decay.

Perhaps this scene does in fact capture some childhood memory of Bishop’s, but this aggressive chromatic ordering indicates that, if this is a memory, it has been greatly sculpted by the adult speaker, who has effectively woven Arthur into the scene’s decor. Thus, when the question of how he could go arises, there is genuine bafflement behind it. The speaker realizes too late that this color scheme that should trap Arthur in the room also provides him an escape hatch: snowy roads effectively create a network of white along which the pallid Arthur could lose himself. While the child may be attempting to reconcile the fact of Arthur’s physical existence with his inanimate absence—the fact that he is both there and not—along with the physical difficulties presented by closed eyes and impassible roads, the speaker notes both the effectiveness and the inadequacy of her aestheticizing interventions. Despite her best pictorial

efforts, she has been unable to protect Arthur, and, indeed, those very efforts allow him figuratively to travel the snowy roads to accept the pictured royal couples' invitation to be "the smallest page at court" (46).

Free indirect discourse here offers a way for the speaker to comment on an enclosed scene without creating the ruptures that narratorial interruptions normally would. In its fullest development in this poem, Bishop uses free indirect discourse to bridge the gap between figures that appears in "The Weed" while nonetheless maintaining the two perspectives that appear in the poem. There is still a conversation of sorts between the poem's diegetic and speaking figures, but it now happens through doubly-referring language instead of performing a trade-off between speaker and subject.

As a result, the final authority for the poem's experience is positioned within the scene rather than in the act of retelling it. Bishop's principal investment is no longer in performing a quest for accuracy by standing outside the scene and interjecting comment upon it. In these Nova Scotia poems, her speakers camouflage themselves not only within their descriptions, but within the reported thoughts of the poems' children, and in "First Death in Nova Scotia," this thinking is made to comment on the efficacy of the poem's visual logics to use literature as a route to escape death. All of these poems lay the groundwork for "In the Waiting Room," which creates a narrative out of an intensely internalized reaction to the experience of realizing one's own subjecthood. Bishop's speaker maintains enough distance from the reported events to comment on them (as in "The Weed") and to position them as narrative events, but she also gets close enough to use the child's thoughts as events in the narrative, which, in making a single line function both as an expression of those thoughts and as a repurposing of them to advance the poem's plot, draws on "First Death in Nova Scotia's" overlaying of consciousnesses in a single line to speak to multiple levels of the narrative at once. By combining these techniques, "In the Waiting Room" makes feeling and interiority as such into a narrative progression, and the distances between narrator and diegetic subject that both narratorial intrusion and free indirect discourse imply are crucial to the staging of the poem's thematized identity crisis.

The poem's first narratorial intrusion looks much like the type that occurs repeatedly in "The Weed," in which the narrator attempts to clarify an element of a scene for a reading audience on the assumption that the diegetic information on its own is inadequate: "While I waited I read / the *National Geographic* / (I could read) and carefully / studied the photographs" (13-16). This parenthetical comment serves no actual narrative purpose: it is obvious that the child can read. Its chief purpose seems to be to establish the authority of a figure outside of the diegesis, and, in doing so, to reassure readers that there is an ordering consciousness in control of what is about to become a very out of control experience, again much like "The Weed."

The other narratorial intrusions occur nearer the end of the poem, and they serve a very different function. The first of these intrusions stages a complex oscillation between the narrated child's perspective, the narrator's own perspective, and language the child has picked up from somewhere else entirely. After the child has had the fullest version of her existential crisis, she notes, "How—I didn't know any / word for it—how 'unlikely' . . ." (84-5, ellipsis in original). It is clear enough that "I didn't know any / word for it" is the adult's interposition, but what is far less clear is where "unlikely" comes from. And, of course, if the child has no words for the phenomenon she describes, how does she arrive at "unlikely" at all, which clearly is a word that

makes sense in this context? This polyvocal sentence echoes the “*oh!* of pain” that issues from Aunt Consuelo in the dentist’s chair as well as the speaker in the waiting room, who is shocked to discover it was “my voice, in my mouth” (37; 47). “Unlikely” is, in a sense, not just “the family voice” that is shared by both the speaker and her aunt, but the family vocabulary, too (78). And, of course, the unacknowledged family member in all this is the adult speaker herself. It is almost as though she has created a persona for herself using the absent figure of Aunt Consuelo, for whom the child literally becomes a mouthpiece.³⁵

The fullest developments of this cycle of speaking flank “how ‘unlikely,’” when the child’s rhetorical questions once again appear in the wrong tense: “What similarities . . . / held us all together . . . ?” and “How had I come to be here, / like them, and overhear / a cry of pain that could have / got loud and worse but hadn’t?” (86-9). If these were authentically the child’s questions, they would ask “What similarities *hold* us all together” and “how *have*” or even “how *did* I come to be here?” As with Arthur’s leaving and the uncertainty over Willy’s crow’s navigation, these questions are moments of the speaker’s impersonation of the child via free indirect discourse. They are notable here because of the contrast with the other rhetorical questions that precede them: “*Why* should you be one, too?” and “Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone?” (63, emphasis in original; 75-6). Where these appropriately-tensed questions stage the child’s unstated knowledge, finding their first ever expression in language, these later moments of free indirect discourse serve to transition back into the narrative of the child’s thoughts. These questions, too, are likely the first time these thoughts find linguistic expression, but the tense makes clear that their primary value lies in their relationship to other parts of the poem’s narrative of processual development. In other words, these questions serve not just to develop the speaker’s character or explain her thinking, but also to advance the narrative’s movement from the speaker’s unexamined, non-reflective state to her greatest point of crisis. As in “First Death in Nova Scotia,” they are equally the narrator’s questions, not in their capturing of her mental state, but in their positioning as using the child’s mental state as a strategic element in narrative unfolding.

This oscillation between narratorial intrusion, free indirect discourse, and the narrator’s impersonation of the character in these final questions make “In the Waiting Room” a showcase of the full range of Bishop’s characterological presentation. However, far from being simply evidence of Bishop’s virtuosity, these techniques also work together to reinforce formally the existential crisis that the poem dramatizes and explains—the paradox of becoming aware of the fullness of one’s own individuality at the same time as recognizing the commonness of that awareness. Free indirect discourse’s overlaying of speaking subjects mirrors formally the ‘I’s

³⁵ This relationship is actually slightly more complex, however, as the adult speaker also becomes the mouthpiece for the child’s thoughts. This is clear from the poem’s statements of the child’s feelings: “But I felt: you are an *I*, . . .” (60). If “felt” is to be taken literally, “You are an *I*” is not a statement the child has actually made, but is merely the translation of a feeling. Consequently, the poem is the first time it finds a form in language, and as such it is necessarily the adult speaker’s language giving voice to the child’s thoughts. Perhaps Aunt Consuelo can make the child say things, but the speaker can say things not even the child can on the child’s own behalf. So while, in a sense, this creation of language puts words in the child’s mouth, it is more precise to think of it as the child’s thoughts coming out the speaker’s mouth as part of a performed impersonation of the child.

claim to possess a composite family voice, even a broadly human voice, while the narrating speaker's clarifications serve to isolate both herself and the child from each other in the poem. This separation is ultimately both reinforced and overcome by the questions that explain the child's thinking while also advancing narrative progress, allowing both figures to speak at once, as they do in "First Death in Nova Scotia." This poem, in other words, brings together the disparate modes of narration and characterization that appear in the other poems in order to use both the rhetoric of accuracy found in "The Weed" and the overlaying of consciousnesses seen in the Nova Scotia poems. This full range of technique is needed to make the poem's experience sensible by both talking about the experience and selectively seeming to speak from within it.

However, by creating the space to talk about the events depicted, the speaker presents those events as something distant and distinct from her own lived experience. This is also to say that they are presented as scenes in their own right, not unlike the dream in "The Weed." As mentioned, the treatment of both dream and memory as scenes presents them as worlds unto themselves; the speaker's personal connection to them as her own direct experience is as a result well beside the point. While these presentations of scenes are realistic and rhetorically connected to a larger poetics of accuracy, other apparently remembered scenes are not, most notably that in "Sestina," the poem that appears between "Manners" and "First Death in Nova Scotia" in *Questions of Travel*. This third person, present tense poem's unrealness raises questions about the limits of Bishop's rhetoric of accuracy, and, further, it connects to a vein of fantastical writing that runs throughout her *oeuvre*. Above all, "Sestina" challenges the idea that writing about memory means that an author attempts to communicate her experiences realistically or as in some way her own.

Fantasies of the Present

"Sestina" differs from the other Nova Scotia poems in that it returns to what seems to be a more typically lyric present tense. However, it very much is not a present of a speaker's immediate experience—indeed, it is difficult to determine whose, if anyone's, experience the poem might record. While the past tense poems make productive use of their divided perspectives, here, the dominant third person perspective belongs to someone who can take in the scene in its entirety, including the characters' thoughts, but who is not ultimately to be found within that scene. This remove grants the speaker enormous freedoms—greater even than those found in the past tense poems—and as such she can more easily follow opportunities presented by the language and poetic form, putting those possibilities ahead of strict mimetic accuracy. Indeed, this cultivation of the sestina—a rigorous and self-consciously artful poetic form—for what seem to be autobiographical ends tests lyric's ability to be autobiographical at all.

"Sestina" is often read as a poem bent on communicating an emotional truth whose expression demands a transcendence of realistic modes of storytelling, but, as will become clear, the poem's unmoored perspectives make such claims difficult to support. Instead, "Sestina" is better thought of as furthering a counterfactual tradition inaugurated by Bishop's earlier sestina, "A Miracle for Breakfast," and terminated by the late poem, "The End of March." Both of these poems share a past tense frame that transitions into a present tense space of fantasy or imagination. "Sestina" makes the most sense as one of these imagined spaces; it simply lacks the contextualizing past tense frame that characterizes the other two poems. While thus far my

focus has been on Bishop's rhetorics of accuracy, the outcomes of which appear most frequently in discussions of her poetics, there is also a strongly defined strain of imaginative flight in her work that receives much less attention. If "Sestina" is in fact autobiographical—and, as the following discussion makes clear, those links are tenuous—Bishop suggests that her autobiographical writing need not necessarily be situated within her poetics of accuracy. It may just as easily draw on her poetics of counterfactual fantasy, a strain that challenges readerly assumptions that writings of childhood should be assimilated into her other writings that aim for mimetic authenticity.

Much of the charge that drives critics to read "Sestina" as a scene from Bishop's own memory comes from its resemblance to the avowedly autobiographical "In the Village," in which the child's grandmother cries into the potato mash she is stirring (CProse 259). The poem reuses this setting and characters, but it changes the details: in the poem, she is "reading jokes from the almanac, / laughing and talking to hide her tears" (5-6). Despite these differences, the two occurrences are similar enough to suggest the same world if not actually the same scene: perhaps the two works recount different events and different times in the same kitchen.

Whatever its relationship to "In the Village," "Sestina's" domestic scene unfolds easily enough at first: grandmother and child talk in their kitchen, and an unspoken and unacknowledged sadness pervades the poem. Indeed, because "tears" is one of the sestina's repeated end words, someone or something is always crying in the poem, whether figuratively or literally: the grandmother, the teakettle, a man's shirt buttons that resemble tears, even the falling of moons from the almanac. These particular items—tears and almanac—sow the seeds of the poem's strangeness in the otherwise straightforward domestic scene that the other end words—"house," "grandmother," "child," and "stove"—establish.

Most of the poem does indeed describe that domestic scene, with the grandmother making tea and putting more wood in the stove. But then, in the fifth stanza, the objects start talking: "*It was to be*, says the Marvel Stove. / *I know what I know*, says the almanac" (25-6). It is unclear whether these items are actually talking, or if this is what someone—possibly the child—imagines they would say if they in fact could talk. Whatever the case, their speech has no effect on any other element of the scene. The next lines describe the child's drawing a house and showing the picture to her grandmother as if nothing had happened. The almanac is not finished intervening into the scene, however: "the little moons fall down like tears / from between the pages of the almanac / into the flower bed the child / has placed in the front of the house" (33-6). The poem effectively creates a world within its diegetic world, one in which printed or drawn representations can travel to other similar spaces of pictorial representation. The almanac then explains its actions by saying, "*Time to plant tears*," again apparently to no one (37). The grandmother sings to the stove (not the child) and the child draws another house. While the envoi of a sestina usually functions to tie the poem's elements together by condensing all of its anchor words into three lines instead of six, this one actually drives the figures of the poem farther apart: the almanac, grandmother, and child seem largely disconnected from one another in these lines, perhaps more so than at any other point in the poem.

As Susan McCabe's gloss of the poem illustrates, it is tempting for critics to read "Sestina" not just as a portrait of Bishop's early life, but as a portrait of Bishop's feeling in the moment of writing (which is of course many moments, especially given Bishop's habit of

working on poems for months and years). McCabe argues,

“Bishop’s world [is] full of feeling. A sorrow *is* being hidden and repressed, but informs every aspect of the child’s environment. We do not need to know the specific ‘early sorrow’ [the poem’s original title] that lies within this poem, but we can assume from the grandmother’s sadness that Bishop’s poem returns to the early events of loss, of the separation enforced by her mother’s insanity and subsequent removal to an institution” (emphasis in original, 208).

This reading makes sense as part of a symptomatic hermeneutic, which necessarily assumes that the poem’s subject matter, diction, or other elements point to something beyond the boundaries of the poem. Indeed, autobiography is built on the assumption that the text can link directly to the experience of a real, non-textual person, and that it can in turn offer both direct and indirect insight into him or her.

There are two problems with reading “Sestina” as autobiography, however. First, the poem is in the third person, not the first person, meaning that it makes no direct claim to be Bishop’s own experience. There are third person autobiographies, to be sure, such as “In the Village,” but it is at least rhetorically important that Bishop does not accentuate the connection between herself and the poem’s child. Moreover, McCabe’s reading of the poem’s tears as a response to Bishop’s mother’s institutionalization draws on biographical information that is not present in the poem: there is no mention of Bishop’s mother, and even “sorrow” is written out of the final drafts. While this family tragedy offers a sensible cause for the poem’s effects, the poem itself offers no hint of what might motivate these tears. Given the absence of information that McCabe’s reading treats as foundational, it is worth asking what about the poem invites these biographical linkages. Why are they appropriate here, and why is it appropriate to speculate about the tenor of Bishop the poet’s emotional world based on an implied but unsupported connection between her and the child in the poem?

Second, leaving aside the validity of biographical assumptions, “Sestina” also calls into question basic conventions about the autobiographical genre. Specifically, autobiography suggests links to events that really happened. But given the talking inanimate objects in this poem, how could these descriptions correspond to actual events? Some critics, like Anne Colwell, would object that a literal reading of the scene misses the point, asserting instead that the poem’s breeches in realism are meant to illustrate the child’s feeling: she “projects herself onto objects, [and] makes images” (153). However, if that were the case, one would expect the child to take more notice of the objects’ actions; instead, the almanac seems to drop tears in the child’s drawn garden almost behind her back. How does a child imagine something she seems not actually to observe?

More importantly, casting these images as the child’s projections is inconsistent with the poem’s focalization: it is able to access the grandmother’s thoughts, but not the child’s. Indeed, the speaker knows a great deal about the grandmother’s thinking, explaining, “She thinks that her equinoctial tears / and the rain that beats on the roof of the house / were both foretold by the almanac, / but only known to a grandmother” (7-10). By contrast, the child is always observed as an external figure: “the child / is watching the teakettle’s small hard tears . . .”; “the child draws another inscrutable house” (13-14; 39). If the child’s perspective is important enough to fuel the poem’s imagery, why is the poem unable to offer glimpses of her thinking in the way

that it offers glimpses into the grandmother's?

Perhaps this is an intentional asymmetry—we see the child's thoughts and hear the grandmother's—but it makes more sense to say that the poem's real concern is, once again, with the rendering of a scene, this time an invented one, the control over which ultimately rests with the describing speaker. Indeed, her judgments permeate the poem: "Then the child puts in a man with buttons like tears / and shows it proudly to the grandmother" (29-30). These adjudications—buttons like tears, proudly—sound like conclusions reached by someone who observes the scene rather than the child herself. The speaker here seems mainly to represent her own perspective—one that can dip in and out of others', but which is ultimately not dependent on or beholden to any other. While the impulse to read this poem autobiographically would assert that the speaker is the child who has grown up and is remembering this scene, the disconnect between child and speaker indicates that there is no good reason to read the poem this way; if anything, the adult has a stronger connection to her grandmother. In this case, reading autobiographically creates linkages between speaker and characters where none actually exist. The poem's characters are not emotional or perspectival anchors so much as they are features of its domestic landscape, and the poem is not about them, but about the speaker's ability to animate and transfigure the scene in which they appear.

If indeed the poem is autobiographical, then, it is deeply unconventional. It is, if anything, an autobiography of counterfactuals, an autobiographical scene whose very value lies in its ability *not* to resemble real life as it might have been. This license may be connected to the sestina form, whose repeated anchor words create a logic that operates independently of the poem's other logics: a sense of sorrow pervades the poem because tears appear in every stanza, and their ubiquitousness springs from the poem's form-induced repetition of the word, even when it has nothing to do with sorrow (such as in the tears on the teakettle). What "Sestina" shows most clearly is the demands that poems make: the scene may very well have started out as Bishop's own memory, but that memory's contact with the poem's formal structures created something else entirely. It is notable that the poem's title shifts in successive drafts from emphasizing feeling as such ("Early Sorrow"), albeit not necessarily Bishop's feeling, to highlighting poetic form as such.

This performed hyper-awareness of form positions the poem as an overt demonstration of the problems that attend using lyric for autobiographical purposes. Autobiography is, like all narrative, teleological, moving through the beginning, middle, and end of the author's life. Lyric, if theorists like Sharon Cameron are to be believed, is non-teleological, essentially taking one moment and expanding it.³⁶ The conventions surrounding lyric as self-expression allow the fact of utterance to replace autobiographical connections between events that establish a consistent persona in each of them. The assumption is that the speaker, like an autobiographical 'I,' speaks from the end of a set of experiences, and that presumed end point replaces the need

³⁶ Sharon Cameron is especially thorough in theorizing this expanded moment in *Lyric Time*. As she writes, "The configuration the lyric speaker presents is usually a static one; not because nothing happens in it but rather because what does happen is arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history" (70). Or, more succinctly, "The poem is like a breathing space, a necessary 'time out'" (90). Action may occur within the poem, then, but it is bounded by lyric's non-historical moment.

for a chronological accumulation of events. If autobiography relies on a contract to connect author to 'I,' lyric does so even more, making autobiographical lyric intensely dependent on readers' faith in the connection not only between the autobiographical 'I' and the real person it is presumed to refer to, but between the poet and 'I.'

Bishop pushes that faith to its breaking point by writing an autobiographical sestina. At the level of content, sestinas are perhaps the least teleological of all lyric forms, repeating the same words in different contexts and combinations: they literally move in circles. At the level of form, however, they are extremely teleological, following completely predictable patterns of permutational development that culminate in a three-line envoi. It might be said that a sestina relocates its teleology from its content (which might normally include narrative) and into its form. Similar observations might be made about a sonnet or a villanelle, each of which follows tightly prescribed rules of order and development. Indeed, the number of lyric forms that privilege a telos of form over a telos of content suggests a generic rule that perhaps explains why lyric and narrative were seen as mutually exclusive for so long. Bishop combines narrative and poetic form in a number of places, but rarely in such highly formalized contexts.³⁷ While topical connections to "In the Village" may tempt biographically-minded readers to see the poem as an outgrowth of that same story and world, making those autobiographical connections requires reading past the formal obstacles that Bishop puts in place to challenge the possibility of lyric in one of its most heightened forms to tell an autobiographical story.

As much as "Sestina" departs from "Manners" and "First Death in Nova Scotia," which bookend it, the poem perhaps unsurprisingly has a great deal in common with Bishop's earlier sestina, "A Miracle for Breakfast," whose climax features a foray into a present tense scene of counterfactuality to describe what the poem variously characterizes as a miracle (32) and not a miracle (25). Notably, the poem at first glance seems to do what "Sestina" does not in combining narrative and the sestina form, but closer examination reveals that the temporal movement that suggests the passage of time is actually the telescoping of events that occur within a single moment (indeed, the recursions of the sestina form help to emphasize this moment's singleness). The poem offers a modern version of what many critics have likened to Jesus' feeding of the five thousand using only five loaves and two fish. Here, a man on a balcony feeds everyone present breakfast by offering them each a crumb from a roll and a drop of coffee from "one lone cup" (16). What happens next is ambiguous, but the telling itself is important enough for the speaker to break the past tense narrative frame to specify her ability to retell that event: "I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle" (25).

Returning to the past tense, the speaker reports that she sees a villa from whose doors emanates the smell of hot coffee—a scene not unlike the one she was surrounded by before she

³⁷ As with almost everything else, Bishop offers exceptions to the trends her own poems establish. Most of her narratives—"The Fish," "The Riverman," "In the Waiting Room," "The Moose," even "The Weed"—are in unrhymed free verse, with the early poems not even featuring stanza breaks. One might cite "The Burglar of Babylon" as a counterexample, but as a ballad, its marriage of narrative and form is not only unproblematic, but generically appropriate. The more flagrant exception is "A Miracle for Breakfast," another sestina that is interested in change and the passage of time, but, as the discussion below makes clear, that temporal movement is more illusory than it initially seems; the form actually reinforces the artificiality of the poem's perceived temporal movement.

received her coffee and crumb. Likewise, she sees a balcony, but this balcony has been “added by birds, who nest along the river” (29). Is the revelation here that she sees a balcony, or that she understands that birds have built it? Is it a revelation at all—this is, after all, not a miracle. The next line is set off by dashes as if to indicate a break in the speaker or the moment: “—I saw it with one eye close to the crumb—” (30). What that means is unclear, though: does the crumb transform her vision, as a prism might? Or is it just that she sees new things, and the crumb is nearby? As the next stanza progresses, there is the suggestion that this “white plaster” she sees on the balcony is really the white insides of the crumb, with its “galleries and marble chambers. My crumb / my mansion, made for me by a miracle, / through ages, by insects, birds, and the river / working the stone” (31-4). This reading does not hold up, though: what does stone have to do with a breadcrumb, to say nothing of riparian fauna? Equally striking is the conversion of this scene from not being a miracle to being a miracle, a conversion that may happen less in the world itself and more in the speaker’s perception of it. It may not be that the crumb is a mansion, but that it somehow enables the speaker to see the interconnectedness of her environment, and, as Anne Colwell suggests, that understanding is the miracle (65).

Stranger still, the narrative now breaks its frame entirely to enter the present tense for three lines before returning to its prior past tense frame of narration: “Every day, in the sun, / at breakfast time I sit on my balcony / with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee. // We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee” (34-7). Two readings are possible here: one is that, because this miracle/not-miracle happens daily (which the rest of the poem’s focus on the moments before and after the miracle does not actually suggest), the speaker is able to revisit this “mansion” and have a feeling of plenitude, even though the miracle/not-miracle as she describes it has nothing to do with eating and everything to do with an enhanced understanding of her surroundings. In this view, the narrative telescopes not just to the next day or two after the events being recorded, but to a long enough period to be able to encode habituality, which itself implies a future that features the continued repetition of the event. This reading would make sense, but it cannot account for the lines’ placement within the narrative’s chronological movement: why put what seems like a happily-ever-after moment in the line before the return to a past tense frame?

An alternative (and, I think, better) approach is to read the speaker’s experience of time itself as part of the miracle that is encoded in/occasioned by the crumb. In this reading, no time actually passes—she does not in fact drink coffee on balconies every morning—but the crumb gives her the *feeling* that she does, and that feeling (and the crumb’s ability to deliver it) is the miracle. The speaker does not deliver a statement about her habitual actions—which is to say that this present tense does not indicate a forward shift in time beyond the scene of the past tense diegesis—but rather she switches to the present to offer this sitting as a constitutive proposition about the world seen through the crumb. It is, then, a scene out of a fantasy, which is precisely what the counterfactual present is mobilized for in “Sestina.” This dependence on holding the crumb and the limited duration that attends that holding help explain the return to the past tense narrative frame once the crumb is “licked up”: without the crumb, there is no habitual coffee-drinking on balconies.

While both sestinas employ a counterfactual present tense, then, a question remains about the most obvious difference between the two poems: why does this present moment receive a

past tense frame in “A Miracle for Breakfast,” but not in “Sestina?” The best explanation for this frame is that the miracle centers on the perception of time itself. At minimum, the poem requires a before/after model, which “Sestina” simply does not: there is arguably an escalation in the latter poem’s imagery, but it does not depend on change as such in the way that “A Miracle for Breakfast” does. Indeed, this distinction is very much in keeping with Bishop’s earlier writing: the difference between “The Gentleman of Shalott,” a present tense poem about a man who believes he has been cut in half and assumes that a mirror supplies the illusion of his other half, and “The Weed,” a past tense account of a woman rent by the eponymous plant, is that “The Weed” is about the process of the weed’s growth, while “The Gentleman of Shalott” is invested in describing incidents as they are. It is not that strange events are reserved for the past or present tense, but that the nature of some of these strangenesses is temporal rather than merely scenic.

Not all of these counterfactual present tenses are devoted to strange events, however. Bishop’s late poem, “The End of March,” shares both sestinas’ use of the present to describe a daydream. The poem oscillates between a past tense frame in which the speaker describes a fairly gloomy day at the beach, and a speculative middle section governed mostly by conditionals and present tense verbs of preference. Because these present tense verbs are used to describe future-oriented actions or wishes, the poem appears to be devoid of a present. The result is a poem that looks backward at what happened, and then pivots to a space of what the speaker would like to happen before returning to narrating past events. And, crucially, while this present is overt and even jarring in “A Miracle for Breakfast,” it is almost unnoticeable in “The End of March” as the poem focuses on the past and the desired future.

“The End of March” is instructive because it effectively breaks its own narrative frame, and in doing so, it puts on display the methods of construction that underwrite all of Bishop’s past tense poems. In enacting that breakage, Bishop’s speaker builds on the parenthetical interruptions that occur in “The Weed” by effectively interrupting the narrative itself with another scene. This interruption signals that the poem’s real subject is the speaker’s interaction with the events that she retells, events that include not just her memory of them, but her fantasies that arise from them, thereby suggesting an equivalence between memory and fantasy (which is not much different from the link she previously established between memory and dreams). This equivalence is logical—both realms arise out of a mental landscape—but it also suggests that the scene’s primary referent lies not in the real world of what happened, but in the speaker’s head, where that happening is simultaneously fixed and subject to reinvention. As a result, the poem can be seen to offer a reappraisal of Bishop’s poetics of accuracy, along with hints that “what really happened” now must include fantasy, desire, and other internal reactions to the scene described.

While the majority of the actions in “The End of March” occur in either the past tense or in infinitive phrases governed by conditional verbs, the present indicative does appear with some frequency in the fantasy section, often hiding in plain sight. The present tense is very easy to overlook here because it generally acts as a way to moderate the much more evocative language of the imagined descriptions. After detailing the attributes of her “proto-dream-house, / . . . that crooked box / set up on pilings . . .,” the speaker breaks off abruptly in describing a “palisade / of—are they railroad ties?” (24-6, 29-30). The grammar of this sentence is disrupted overtly by

the dash, but the inertia of the descriptive chain that precedes it is such that “railroad ties” stands out much more than the shift to the present or the sudden appearance of a question. The next line, “(Many things about this place are dubious),” also simultaneously demands attention and encourages readers to overlook it: the statement occupies a whole line, but it also appears in parentheses and seems to be a digression from the much more compelling description that precedes it. These interruptions would not be out of place in “The Weed,” and, as in that poem, they work to emphasize the centrality of the speaker in retelling these events. The difference here lies in these interruptions’ content: while for the most part in “The Weed,” interjections largely work to clarify a scene, here they work to destabilize it. What the speaker knows is in fact what she does *not* know, and she interrupts what seems to be the poem’s primary descriptive work to clarify these gaps in her knowledge.

It is significant, therefore, that both of these forays into the present tense are also moments of uncertainty. They ostensibly help to define and describe the place, but they also signal the limits of the speaker’s descriptive abilities. She inserts railroad ties into the scene even as she doubts that whatever she is seeing are railroad ties at all. And, most importantly, that vision is not of the palisade directly, but of her recollections of it. As the stanza reveals later, “That day the wind was much too cold / even to get that far, / and of course the house was boarded up” (49-51). The shift to the present reveals not only a disjuncture in the narrative frame, but in the field of vision. Until the third stanza, readers might plausibly believe that Bishop’s speaker has brought them to a beach and describes it to them as she sees it in the moment, with the past tense functioning as an atemporal storyteller’s past. Once the speaker starts questioning what she is actually seeing, however, that apparent lack of mediation between speaker and scene is no longer possible to sustain. The speaker describes not just what she remembers, but also the faults and gaps in her memory, such that part of what can be declared is the very inability to make credible declarations: “many things about this place are dubious.”

However, none of this is apparent on a first read. Moving linearly through the first few stanzas, readers receive extremely precise visions of what the speaker would do in her dream house, visions that readers do not yet know are actually disnarrations—the narrative equivalent of untruths. These visions begin slowly and generally—“look through binoculars, read boring books, / old, long, long books”—but soon they take on the textures of the particular: “foggy days, / [I’d] watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light. At night. . . / I’d blaze it with a kitchen match / and lovely diaphanous blue flame / would waver, doubled in the window” (34-5; 38-41). These scenes are as specific and evocative as anything observed directly, but they are of course not really present—or rather, they are present only as features of the speaker’s fantasies.

In this case, however, fantasy is really memory: one assumes that these careful descriptions are the product of the speaker’s observation of fog and matches on previous occasions. The poem’s temporality is divided in these descriptions, which exist as past-informed future projections anchored in the speaker’s present moment of wishing. However, they also take on the status of present fact by dint of their appearance in language and, more importantly, in readers’ imaginations. That lovely blue diaphanous flame wavering in the window cannot be unpictured once pictured (or rather, few readers would be willing to allow it to be), and so its status as counterfactual wish is difficult to accept alongside the empirical fact of its appearance in the poem. That tension, however, is precisely the point. The speaker’s fantasies are

absolutely real as features of her consciousness, and so it follows that they should receive the same treatment as the objects of the exterior world, which also appear in the poem only because they, too, have found a place in the speaker's consciousness. Those disnarrations, then, are also credible narrations: they may not correspond to any event outside the poem, but they do correspond to the events in the imagining consciousness that narrates them. In this way, these fantasies are put on par with "The Weed's" dream, and the burden of accuracy is shifted from external verifiability to scenic coherence.

That vindication of the imagination is short-lived, however. In the lines that follow the image of the wavering match, the speaker begins to pull back from the world as desired and into the world as known. Instead of continuing to assert what life would look like in the space of this imagined dream house, she focuses on observation:

There must be a stove; there *is* a chimney,
askew, but braced with wires,
and electricity, possibly
—at least, at the back another wire
limply leashes the whole affair
to something off behind the dunes.

A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible. (43-8)

It would be so easy for the speaker simply to proceed with her assumption that there is a stove and light: this is, after all, her fantasy, and, unlike *National Geographic* articles, no one can fact-check it for accuracy. Instead, she is careful to keep these fantasies tethered to the possibilities authorized by her memory of the place. This return to the real seems like a deflation, even a renunciation of the daydreaming subject. However, in the final stanza, daydreaming is accepted as part of the process of observation. The stanza initially promises to be a reprise of the first two, with the beach changing as the sun comes out "just for a minute" (53). "For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand, / the drab, damp, scattered stones / were multi-colored" (54-6). Color is suddenly restored to this bleak world, and with it, the possibilities authorized by daydreaming. The stones' extension and retraction of their shadows

could have been teasing the lion sun,
except that he was now behind them
—a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with. (59-63).

The lion sun seems at first to be a visual descriptor that likens the sun's roundness to a lion's mane, but it draws on two other elements in the poem, as well, the first being the weather (March coming in like a lamb and going out like a lion, as the freezing wind would indicate), and the second being the dog-prints in the sand in the second stanza, "so big / they were more like lion prints" (15-6). The lion, in other words, has been in the poem all along, but he has been contained as a metaphor that lurks in the speaker's language. In these first two lines above, he seems only a playful figure of speech, but by the last line, he himself is a ludic figure, playing with the abandoned kite string observed in the second stanza. More important is that he becomes a figure at all: it is as though the speaker forgets that the lion is only a metaphor in this last line and grants him full presence alongside the other observed phenomena of the beach. "Could

have” and “perhaps” are not used to qualify the lion’s status as sun, but to offer speculations about other elements’ relationship to it: the stones “could have been teasing” the lion sun, and the sun “perhaps had batted” a kite from the sky, leaving the string on the beach. There is no question by this point in the poem that the sun is a lion who has left paw prints in the sand, unlike the earlier observation that they were more like lion prints than dog prints. Crucially, the speaker does not dismiss the vision as “impossible” as she does her earlier visions about the house; her speculations get the last word. The speaker is presented with a choice in the poem between her imagination and the dreary, observed world, and she chooses the imagined option, but only as long as she makes that choice clear through the acknowledgement of her own speculative intervention with “perhaps.”

Like “impossible,” “perhaps” is one of the few moments of present self-reference in the poem, a moment of metacommentary on the scene as presented. “Impossible” is unanchored temporally—it might be the speaker’s thought on the beach (for that matter, the whole fantasy scene might exist within the remembered beach scene), or it might be the speaker’s comment on the scene after she has finished her description—but “perhaps” is unproblematically part of the scene’s retelling. As a result, the poem ends with a doubled assertion of the speaker’s power over the scene, not just in her ability to body forth an imagined lion, but in her self-conscious reference to her own moment of narration.

While this poem appears to pivot between the contents of the speaker’s memory and desire in such a way as to overlook her present moment of consciousness, it is actually that very moment that allows the poem to swing between those mental states. The poem may be bent on the exploration of times and states well apart from that present moment, but narratorial interventions like “perhaps” point very clearly to a speaker who is otherwise largely swallowed up by the spaces of recollection and fantasy that she presents. The poem makes no effort to disguise the fact that an ‘I’ walked on the beach and would like to live a hermetic and scholarly life in a better version of the house she has sometimes seen, but those actions leave little option for that ‘I’ in a moment-to-moment present: she can remember, or she can daydream, but she can do nothing to effect those dreams and improve her current reality. And yet, as hollowed out as the speaker’s present seems, her narratorial incursions reaffirm her presence and her control over what is presented in the poem.

“The End of March” is key in Bishop’s poetics of accurate recollection, then, in downplaying the present moment of recollection in favor of presenting the scene recollected. It just happens that, for once, Bishop allows her speaker in this poem to follow a train of thought that arises from that recollection, a sort of daydreamed kite of her own to play with in answer to the gloom of the rest of the scene. In this sense, despite its reactivation of “A Miracle for Breakfast’s” oscillation between past and present in its narrative framework, it ultimately departs from the earlier poem by allowing its transfigurative miracle of perception to have the last word rather than confining it to an interlude within the larger narrative. By seizing the opportunities presented by both transformative perception and figurative language, “The End of March” follows “Sestina’s” example more closely by deferring ultimately to poetic possibility rather than the faithful rendering of a “real” event. Where earlier Bishop poems would perhaps follow an association or fantasy briefly before returning to a realistic anchor, this poem ultimately chooses the non-realities authorized by its metaphors over “what really happened” that day on the beach.

Crucially, “The End of March” includes what did *not* happen, but what the speaker wished happened, as part of “what really happened,” and that inclusion enables Bishop to begin bringing together the two opposed strains of her poetics—the accurate and the fantastic—to present a fuller vision of lived experience in the poetry.

The Dialectic of Memory

As “The End of March” suggests, by the time Bishop writes the poems that appear in *Geography III*, it is clear that she is after a more complex understanding of truthfulness than the more straightforward, factually oriented rhetorics of her earlier poems would allow her to express. One indication of this new complexity appears in her assertion that substituting the March issue for the February issue of *National Geographic* in “In the Waiting Room” is the right choice; another version of it stems from the emphasis she places on fantasy in “The End of March,” even ending the poem on what is essentially a fanciful wish. Bishop’s final poems, grouped as “New Poems” in *Complete Poems*, express an even more difficult view of accuracy, one that is self-contradictory and built on its own unraveling. Where up to this point, the poems may have emphasized the separateness of the speaker from the scene she describes, the late poems include qualifications that effectively undo the rest of the poem. In the unpublished “A Drunkard,” Bishop seems to write an autobiographical tale about the origins of her alcoholism, but then she nullifies it by cautioning, “And all I’m telling you may be a lie . . .” (*EAP* 151, l. 47).³⁸ This self-cancellation is difficult to make sense of: why bother writing a confession only to make it an object of suspicion? If Bishop’s rhetoric of accuracy was about cultivating readers’ faith in the trustworthiness of a poem’s recorded events, here that trust is revealed to be self-cancelling: taken to its logical extreme, scrupulousness about getting events right must also lead to an awareness of the problems of memory and even the possibility of bad faith on the part of the rememberer. More vexing still is that this speaker may also *not* be lying at all. The statement instead codifies Bishop’s understanding that to tell the whole truth, one must acknowledge the possibility of lies, and perhaps even be ready to lie a bit herself to arrive at the “rightest” statement.

This is the innovation of Bishop’s final poems: she tells the most complete truth by learning to countenance untruth. This is especially important for writing about remembered experience: it is not simply that memory fails, but that memory is built on an oscillation between failure and “correctness,” and to render that oscillation accurately, poems must somehow enact it by including evidence of that failure. That does not always mean that Bishop intentionally deceives her readers, but that there is now room in her writing about memory to include what she cannot remember, what she has consciously or unconsciously distorted, or what she has perhaps

³⁸ My grouping of this poem with the late poems glosses over a problem with dating it. There are references to ‘a sort of sonnet called “The Drunkard”’ in letters to Lowell written in 1960; however, surviving drafts of the poem include lines written on stationery from Harvard’s Kirkland House, into which Bishop moved in 1970 (*EAP* 344-5). The most important question for my purposes is not so much when Bishop wrote a poem connecting the Great Salem Fire to her drinking, but when she wrote the last line, which casts the entire rest of the poem in doubt. This is a move that aligns well to those in other late-period poems, so I join Travisano in dating the poem as it appears in *Edgar Allen Poe and the Juke-Box* from the 1970s (345).

even fabricated for any number of reasons. In gaining this understanding about memory, Bishop brings together the two disparate strands of her writing that I have charted in this chapter—the accurate and the counterfactual—realizing at last that they are part of the same project. In these poems, accuracy can only be attained by incorporating the counterfactual.

This realization appears most clearly in “Santarém,” in which Bishop discovers that the distinction between imagined event and remembered event is false not because both memory and imagination are roughly equivalent mental phenomena, as her earlier poems might suggest, but because the factual pole of that pairing—memory—is itself constituted of an oscillation between fact and untruth, whether intentional or otherwise, which means that there is no memory without doubt about its veracity. This is a further development from “The End of March”: while that poem doubts its details, “Santarém” shifts its doubt to the poem’s entire recollective enterprise, beginning, “Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after, after—how many years?” (1-2). However, the rest of the poem offers a detailed description of Bishop’s trip down the Amazon that, much like the descriptions of the proto-crypto-dreamhouse in “The End of March,” are vivid enough that the question of whether they really happened gets pushed to the side. “Santarém’s” speaker effectively expresses uncertainty about whether there is a palisade at all, but then presents a poem detailing the visual nuances of the palisade she is not even sure exists.

With “Santarém,” Bishop formulates a holistic understanding of memory that makes doubt a foundational part of memory itself. Indeed, that doubt is so foundational that even this disclaimer is doubtful: she only *may* be misremembering, so that even the speaker’s doubts about her doubts are dubious. At a biographical level, Bishop is right to begin the poem this way: eighteen years passed between her February 1960 excursion down the Amazon from Manaus to Belém and the poem’s 1978 publication; obviously, misrememberings may have occurred (Millier 306).³⁹ However, seizing on the fact that the speaker’s fears about misremembering may only be a standard precaution, the poem then launches into a vivid and evocative account of her trip down the Amazon. As in “The End of March,” the poem is invested in this conflict, but, at least at first, it ultimately seems to prefer imagined possibility to fact.

However, this preference is not as straightforward as it initially seems. One complication is that, as in “The End of March,” the speaker corrects herself frequently and is attentive to her own errors. As she says of her early impressions of Santarém,

I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.
Two rivers. Hadn’t two rivers sprung
from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four
and they’d diverged. Here only two
and coming together. (12-16)

The speaker’s false assumptions are included alongside her descriptions of the place. This mistaken notion is corrected, but it still stands: the rivers are and are not reminiscent of the Garden. And, as in “The End of March,” the utterance of this error brings it into being, whether erroneous or not, which again plays with the line between happening and not happening, narration and disnarration.

³⁹ Bishop’s drafts reflect this passage of time. As Brett Millier notes, “the first two lines move from ‘Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after two years’ to ‘after five years’ to ‘after eight years,’ until she abandons the count for ‘after, after—how many years?’” (534).

The speaker then dismisses her interpretation whole-cloth:

Even if one were tempted
to literary interpretations
such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female
—such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off
in that watery, dazzling dialectic. (16-20)

The speaker here moves from mistaken facts to inappropriate systems of categorizing them. As with those facts, she dismisses these hermeneutics, but only after she has raised them in readers' minds, making them both present and not. That the dismissal still includes a critical term—dialectic—suggests some uncertainty about the possibility of moving past these interpretive frames completely, but it is clear that the fact of the rivers as they are will ultimately win out over the speaker's attempts to schematize and interpret them.

With this realization, the poem begins to deliver its facts in a more straightforward manner, although it does include the repeated correction of “the church, the Cathedral, rather” (21; cf. 57-8), seemingly to remind readers that the speaker is aware of her tendency to misremember and is doing her best to stave off that possibility. This might almost be seen as another kind of narratorial interruption except that, unlike previous versions in “The Weed” and “In the Waiting Room,” this speaker seems to interrupt herself from within the poem's diegesis instead of interjecting from another sphere of experience, thereby incorporating self-correction into the very narrative that this speaker tells.

Aside from the introductory warning, then, the poem's self-corrections perform an attempt to offer a straightforward account of the speaker's journey. However, as Zachariah Pickard notes, this poem is not exactly interested in reproducing the experience of visiting Santarém for the first time. The speaker knows far too much about the city for this to be her first visit: she knows about the region's history (settled by slave-owning American Southerners), she knows about the cathedral's having been struck by lightning a week prior to her arrival, and she knows Portuguese well enough to be able to connect *azulejos* to *azul* (144-5). He concludes that this information is all gathered after the fact and fed into the speaker's memory of the place, meaning that the poem offers an act of synthetic memory that includes both initial impressions and relevant information the speaker gathered later. There are ways around this conclusion, of course: perhaps she studied guidebooks before going and learned the region's history; perhaps in talking with the pharmacist or someone else she learned about the church; and, as we know, Bishop herself had been living in Brazil for some time before taking this trip, so her Portuguese would have been up to the associative work that the poem performs.

Pickard is nonetheless right in noting that the poem does not simply offer a scene as it unfolds to a naïve eye. Instead, it offers the speaker's personal version of Santarém, the symbol of which is the wasps' nest that the speaker becomes excited by at the end of the poem. Pickard concludes that, “like her private, half-imaginary version of Santarém, [the wasps' nest] stays with [the speaker], and, in the process, like Santarém, it assumes a private significance. . .” (146). The opposition that Pickard establishes here is clear: actual Santarém vs. the speaker's Santarém. This is also the opposition established by the assumption that she “may be remembering it all wrong.” That the speaker goes on to remember it anyway suggests that being wrong is not that important to her—her impressions are appealing to her, just as the wasps' nest is appealing to her

despite its ugliness to Mr. Swan, and that self-adjudication emerges as the most important factor in the poem.

However, a reading that valorizes the speaker's subjective impressions does not account for the corrections, the tale of the Edenic and non-Edenic rivers, and the discussion of hermeneutic frames. Pickard's emphasis on the speaker's highly subjective remaking of the trip overlooks what the lines quoted above make clear: she likes her (mistaken and highly subjective) ideas about the place *as well as* the place itself, presumably as that place can be understood to exist independently of her perceptions of it. The next lines, which talk more about the Garden of Eden, seem to enact her movement away from her personal associations about the place and toward the reality of it, reinforcing the usual rhetoric of accuracy by including mistakes so that the speaker can show herself correcting them. However, the inclusion of those errors in the poem, along with the repeated correction of church/cathedral, indicates that this movement toward the factual is not a mode of subjective effacement in favor of objective truth, but of inscribing these mistaken ideas of the place as part of her larger experience of it, which in turn also includes both her erroneous assumptions and the surfacing of the facts that reveal her mistakes. That is, the errors are as much phenomena as the rivers are, and the poem reinforces that equivalence by not only including them in this account, but by repeating them multiple times within the poem itself. The poem is not concerned with simply separating "what really happened" from what is made up, or desired, as a poem like "The Fish" would. Instead, it stages an interaction between the two poles of truth and error, setting up its act of recollection as fundamentally dialectic.

If the wasps' nest is the figure of the speaker's experience of Santarém, the "watery, dazzling dialectic" of the rivers' meeting provides the figure for her understanding of memory. Her disclaimer at the beginning of the poem functions not (primarily) to destabilize what follows it, but to offer a counterpoint to the confident remembering that constitutes the rest of the poem—to provide a Tapajós to the recollection's Amazon, as it were. Together, the two statements stage the larger dialectic of recollection and doubt that Bishop suggests underlies all acts of remembrance. While the disclaimer suggests an unreliable narrator, its inclusion actually points to a speaker who has thought deeply enough about memory to understand the need for a counterpoint to her recollection, thereby offering a claim *for* her authority rather than a claim against it.

The poetics that Bishop authorizes through this statement is something genuinely new for her. She is not advocating the kind of lyric seeing that allows and even encourages the world to be remade by a perceiving poet—that remaking would obscure, or at least devalue, the world as it stands independently of the poet's perception. Nor is Bishop advocating the accuracy for which she is so well known: one cannot simultaneously build a poetics on observation and begin a poem by disavowing the correctness of that observation. What she finds in this poem is a way to, at last, live in her proto-crypto-dreamhouse and let the lion sun play with the kite string without hedging these images with words like "impossible" and "perhaps." "The End of March," too, stages a dialectic movement, but it does so reluctantly: it feels as though the speaker knows she is getting away with something in bodying forth the lion at the end of the poem, and "perhaps" clarifies that her privileging of poetic imagination is a conscious and willful act rather than an expression of something intrinsically true. "Santarém," by contrast,

makes no apologies about offering both truth and untruth. It may be “an ugly thing” to an observer, but to her, like the wasps’ nest, it is “exquisite . . . and hard as stucco.”

“Santarém,” in finally illustrating this dialectic of memory, offers a synthesis of the two movements that have defined Bishop’s career. The quests for accuracy and characterological authenticity that find expression in self-correction and free indirect discourse, as well as the interest in presenting scenes that both have not happened and could not happen, come together in this poem’s rhetoric, its epistemology, and even in its tenses, with the present tense disclaimer serving to frame the past tense act of performed remembering. As this chapter has illustrated, tense proves central to Bishop’s staging of memory and experience, whether as a sphere of discrete experience in the poems of recounting or as a point of contrast in the counterfactual poems.

To return to the hermeneutic of the literal imagination, then, Bishop’s treatment of memory at various points in her career shows two opposing relationships to the phrase’s constitutive terms. The early- and mid-career autobiographical work treats the necessity of imagination as something like a dirty secret, focusing on “what really happened” to the point of denying that imagination has been involved in the poems’ construction at all. When imaginative acts do appear, they do so either in poems that are hyperbolically removed from the real world, as in “A Miracle for Breakfast,” or beneath heavy camouflage, as in “Sestina.” However, the late poems begin to acknowledge the imagination’s central role in retelling events: as “The End of March” and “Santarém” in particular illustrate, to recount the literal is also to recount the imaginative processes that occur within it. The speaker’s fantasy in “The End of March” is as much “what really happened” as is the bleak weather on the beach. The imagined literal and literal acts of imagination both become important cornerstones in the work. And so, while Bishop’s implication that her autobiographical writing is just a matter of sticking a few years together encourages it to be read as a straightforward account of the literal events of her life, reading in this way overlooks the far more nuanced statements those poems make about memory, persona, and the interactions and mutual exclusions created between poetry and reality.

Having arrived at these conclusions, a final problem remains: how can Bishop’s claims about her writing’s autobiographical origins be squared with these readings? To what degree should statements made in her letters determine the modes of reading her poems? On one hand, the content of the letters has a stronger connection to Bishop the poet than does the content of the poems, but on the other, as writing, the letters are subject to the same disjunctures and alienations from the writing self that occur in the poetry. Consequently, the self-effacing figure that arises from the letter to the Barkers can be read as yet another character, another mask like the child in the poems, and taking its assertions as in some way the last, most authoritative word on Bishop’s relationship to her writing is to overlook the play with subjectivity that runs throughout her work. As a result, her statements are best read as a movement between the truth and her idea of the truth, an idea that may be highly contingent on purpose and audience. Is she remembering all wrong, or, like the speaker “A Drunkard,” outright lying? Maybe. More likely, she embraces the possibilities of language to show that a wish, however fleeting, is as important as fact, and that the truth, especially a remembered one, must be both literal and imagined.

Despite its complexities, then, Bishop’s version of self-forgetful autobiography can be seen as a further development of Lowell’s and Heaney’s. Indeed, at least some of what can be

said of Bishop's poems of childhood can also be said of Heaney and Lowell's in their focus on scenes and in their use of the diegetic 'I' as both a point of access to a scene and a figure behind which the speaker can in a sense disappear. In the next chapter, I turn to a very different poetics, examining as a kind of limit case of both the formal and theoretical questions this dissertation has asked so far the project that Ted Hughes carries out in *Moortown Diary*. Instead of offering largely mimetic recreations of previous or remembered experience, Hughes attempts in this volume to capture subjective experience without the distorting lens of subjectivity. This is, of course, a problematic project that is only problematized further by what Hughes discovers to be the inescapable subjective displacements of poetic language. Far from embracing the possibilities of poetic language to exceed literal reality, as Bishop does in her late poems, Hughes returns in the volume's notes to poems that he feels have veered too far toward the poetic in an attempt to reassert a kind of authorial subjective control over the poems. *Moortown Diary* departs from Bishop's understandings of self, memory, and poetry by attempting a kind of writing that at once remains free of the self and in close contact with it so that it can trigger what Hughes calls the "souvenir bloom" (*MD xi*). While this dissertation has so far considered the effect of the past tense on lyric, the final chapter broadens the discussion to consider lyric's generic effects on the presentation of memory. Hughes attempts to write for his own personal use, but, as his notes illustrate, that personal use does not necessarily align well with the public, formally-derived sense of self that arises from poetry. His writings inadvertently illustrate the truth of Heaney and Bishop's assertions that poetry requires the forgetting of the self, this time because attempts to the contrary are surmounted by his own understandings of the genre itself.

4: The Souvenir Bloom: Poem and Paratext in Hughes' *Moortown Diary*

“In a way,” writes Ted Hughes in “Words and Experience,” “words are continually trying to displace our experience. And in so far as they are stronger than the raw life of our experience, and full of themselves and all the dictionaries they have digested, they do displace it” (120). This is an unexpected claim from the author of *Moortown Diary*, which attempts to encapsulate experience in precisely the words that Hughes claims will displace it. Hughes ends up making two attempts at several of these experiences, writing them down initially in “rough lines”—and often wholly in the past tense—before revisiting them in what becomes the paratext to the volume (x). As this chapter illustrates, however, poem and paratext frequently offer radically different versions of the same event, with Hughes returning to that event years later to add information that “should be there” in the poem (64). In this way, the displacements of language are bypassed by Hughes’ refusal to allow language—particularly poetic language—to become experience, treating poetry instead as a mnemonic device that allows him to access experience as he remembers it.

As a result, the poems’ ultimate value lies not in their ability to replicate experience, as one might expect of writing from or about memory. Instead, it lies in their ability to exceed poetic or linguistic reference and call up what Hughes calls the “souvenir bloom,” which he uses to reapproach the moment in the notes (xi). Hughes suggests through this mode of return and rewriting that the displacements of language can actually be an asset if they can be made to complement memory rather than stand in for lived experience. This chapter traces these modes of complementarity to unpack Hughes’ claims about the relationship between language, poetry, memory, and experience, all in an attempt to answer a key question: how does *Moortown Diary*’s poetics (and subsequent response to them) help the volume perform the often conflicting tasks that are involved in being both poetry and a diary, and, more important, how do these tasks affect Hughes’ ability to speak in his own voice of his own experience?

This question of the volume’s generic relationship to a diary is only the first and most obvious of the problems that surround the volume. Other issues arise even before looking at the poetry, including the collection’s very status as a volume: the poems that comprise it appear in three separate incarnations (as *Moortown Elegies*, then as part of *Moortown*, then finally as *Moortown Diary*), but while the body of work is repackaged and retitled, the poems themselves change only very slightly in their text or their ordering within those successive volumes.⁴⁰ Another problem comes from the sense that the collection is so unlike Hughes’ other works, which are generally devoted to fleshing out abstract problems, or, as Hughes explains in a letter to Anne-Lorraine Bujon, to enacting “the ‘dramatisation’ of a purely internal psychodrama” (Letters 622). Works that perform this dramatization range from *Crow* to *Cave Birds* to

⁴⁰ The positions of five of the volume’s thirty-four poems—“Struggle,” “Snow smoking as the fields boil,” “A monument,” “A memory,” and “The formal auctioneer”—shift from *Moortown* to *Moortown Diary*. Generally, however, their positions shift by only a couple of places, keeping the volume’s larger thematic clusters intact. The only textual change I have observed is to the final lines of “Coming down through Somerset,” which I discuss more fully below.

Gaudete, but *Moortown Diary* looks nothing like any of these volumes.⁴¹ And, unlike the *Crow* poems, the diary poems are not part of an ongoing project that transcends the limits of a particular collection; it is the very ability to cordon the diary poems off from the larger stream of Hughes' often accretive and even permutational work that makes them so distinctive.

What the volume purports to show is simply daily life on Moortown farm, an enterprise Hughes and his wife, Carol, undertook in the early 1970s under the management of Carol's father, Jack Orchard, who looms large near the end of the collection (and whose death occasions its brief venture into elegy). The experiment was short lived, so it is perhaps fitting that Hughes' poetic innovations are also self-contained. As he tells Bujon, the poetic experimentation takes the form of limiting subjective engagement with his poetry: "The nearest I have come to [objective descriptive writing] is in the diary pieces about farming, that I collected in a Volume [sic] titled Moortown. . ." (622). Paradoxically, he considers this diary a departure not just because of its objectivity, but because, unlike his other work, it is not really about him, despite carrying the title of diary. Because he has so privileged psychodrama elsewhere, he concludes, "In that sense . . . , I have in fact chosen almost exclusively subjects from 'inside' myself," even when the poems generally offer little in the way of autobiographical connection (622). This distinction is striking because it casts the poems of *Moortown Diary* as objective, and, counterintuitively for a diary, not part of his larger poetic project of dramatizing his own internal psychodramas (and, to go further, it seems that the very purpose of the earlier poetry was to make this kind of subjective intervention); that is, it is a diary that is not about its author.

Hughes here aligns objectivity with a break from his usual poetic practice, and that is very much the point. Indeed, Hughes does not even call these "diary pieces" poems, but instead rather confusingly calls them notes in the volume's preface (to be distinguished from the actual notes that appear after the poems in the volume's back matter).⁴² This new style is designed to

⁴¹ In what is probably the most sustained examination of *Moortown Diary*, Craig Robinson's essay, "The Good Shepherd," works to situate the farming poems among the other, more mythical work. His readings reveal that the particularity of the figures in these poems is really just a way to put a face to the elemental and mythical forces that animate the other works in the larger *Moortown* collection, such as *Cave Birds* and *Adam and the Sacred Nine*. Robinson may be right about this, but there is a sense that if myth is present in the poems, it is largely as an undercurrent. One can very easily read *Moortown Diary* without ever thinking about myth, although life forces are omnipresent. Robinson's reading makes the collection merely variations on a theme, with poem after poem illustrating another version of the conflicts and continuities between life and death, when what animates the poems is, as Robinson himself points out, the speaker's sense of their extraordinariness rather than their larger symptomatology, often at the level of fact and event.

⁴² It is worth noting, however, that this classing of the poems as notes or a kind of anti-poetry does not appear until *Moortown Diary*, since the preface that announces them as such does not appear in the earlier volumes. In *Moortown*, the pieces are offered on their own with no prefatory qualification; and on their own, their lineation makes them look like poems. Their appearance in *Moortown Elegies* suggests even further that they are poems, even placing them within a specific poetic subgenre. These early classifications (or withheld classifications) raise the question of when exactly Hughes decided that these pieces were not poetry. A suspicious reader might even allege that the decision to call them something other than poetry might have come well after the fact as a saving gesture to justify their characteristic roughness. Regardless, it is clear that the poems become notes and anti-poems at the same time that the

be Hughes' way of "getting reasonably close to what is going on, and staying close, and of excluding everything else that might be pressing to interfere with the watching eye. In a sense, the method excludes the poetic process as well" (x). Nevermind that the mode of "getting . . . close" is to write in "rough lines," the formal rudiment of poetry; in Hughes' view, the poems of *Moortown Diary* are not poems in any usual sense, showing Hughes attempting to write from a position of equanimity and remove, downplaying the poet's subjective interposition in favor of relating "what is going on."

Indeed, in Hughes' mind, the experiment proved so successful that the poems managed to function as exactly the aides to memory that a diary entry should. Looking over "February 17th" in hopes of finding poetic material to develop further, Hughes instead found himself

in the position of a translator: whatever I might make of the passage, I was going to have to destroy the original. And what was original here was not some stranger's poem but the video and surviving voice-track of one of my own days, a moment of my life that I did not want to lose. I then saw that all the other entries, even the more diffuse, still carried that same souvenir bloom for me. Altering any word felt like retouching an old home movie with new bits of fake-original voice and fake-original actions. (xi)

These statements are startling in light of Hughes' own observation that words displace experience, to say nothing of de Man's assertion that the language of textual autobiography necessarily defaces the life it claims to report. None of this seems to occur to Hughes, however, when he sees in the poem "one of my own days" and is convinced that any further revision will destroy that day forever by introducing "fake-original" elements, suggesting that the goal of revision is to return to an originary moment rather than to increase the writing's aesthetic refinement.

On a larger scale, however, this view that revision entails destruction of experience is immensely problematic for a poet, who must retain the ability to revise his own work in order to improve it as a work of art. Instead, Hughes states in no uncertain terms that the value of these poems lies not in their status as art objects, but in their ability to evoke his own memories. This is a completely different kind of personal writing from that which has appeared in the work of the other poets that I have examined so far, which has freely mined and altered personal events for the larger end of creating well-crafted poetry. Hughes suggests a radically altered measure of poetic value, one that is not only personal, but totally anti-literary: the poems are souvenirs, objects that are meant to evoke memories for someone who has already experienced them, rather than mimetic writing designed to recreate an experience for someone seeing it for the first time in a poem.⁴³ The souvenir bloom, in short, highlights the difference between an autobiography and a diary: an autobiography is written for an audience, while a diary is written for its author's

volume becomes a diary, an impression that is reinforced by the restoration of dates (presumably of composition) to the poems, which are absent from their incarnations within the earlier volumes.

⁴³ Talking about lyric as a mimetic genre of writing is unconventional, but so are these poems. Here, I mean the term to suggest that the poems are focused on representing a scene for a reader whose only knowledge of it is through the language of its recreation. They are not, as in Hughes' successful diary poems, meant to capture and write from a moment, but rather are attempting to create or recreate a moment that, because it has passed, is accessible by no other means.

personal use. One answer to the question of how these poems constitute a diary, then, lies in Hughes' treatment of them: they are diaristic because he finds personal, mnemonic value in them, and he insists on maintaining that mnemonic valence even if it comes at the expense of a more polished poetic that might be achieved through revision.⁴⁴

However, *Moortown Diary* consists of more than just its documentary poems. In addition to these poems that capture experiences that Hughes identifies as his own, he also notes that not all of the poems succeed in capturing this lived moment. As he says of them,

If I missed the moment . . . I could always see quite clearly what had been lost. By the next day, the processes of 'memory,' the poetic process, had already started. Though all the details were still absolutely fresh, most of them no longer seemed essential to the new pattern taking control. The pieces here which begin to look a little more like 'poems' mark the occasions where I had 'missed the moment' in this way. (x-xi)

Hughes implies strongly here that "the new pattern" formed by memory and the poetic process (which, for him, are inextricably linked) pushes out his actual experience, leaving the poetic as such—with all the difficulties and ambiguities that surround that term—to take its place. Their inclusion signals that the diary is not just (or wholly) a record of Hughes' experience, but also a record of the places where poetry exceeds his experience—where, in other words, the imperatives of art supersede the priorities that Hughes has just enumerated. These poems miss their originary moment, but in doing so, they create and inhabit a new moment of their own making, much in the way that the more mimetically-oriented poems of Lowell, Heaney, and Bishop's autobiographical writing do.

Not content to let these poems and their new moments speak for themselves, however, Hughes instead added notes not only to them, but to several of the volume's other poems as well, before publishing the poems as a freestanding volume in 1989. He also appended the preface from which I have been quoting, in which he explains the larger social context of the farm and the poems' composition process.⁴⁵ These notes frequently add information as a kind of parallel text to the corresponding poem. As the analyses that follow reveal, these notes often point to an entirely different set of priorities from those that appear in the poems themselves; they may leave the text of the poem untouched, but they create a counterpoint that reframes the way in which the

⁴⁴ This posture against revision is not absolute, however. The final two lines of "Coming down through Somerset" as it appears in *Moortown Diary* are broken differently than they are in *Moortown* and *Moortown Elegies*. In the earlier two texts, the last lines read, "Into a yew post. Something / Has to stay" (40-1). In *Moortown Diary*, these last two lines are combined into one: "Into a yew post. Something has to stay" (40). This change is small, to be sure, and, without an appeal to Hughes' original drafts, there is no way of knowing which version is original and which is revised. Nonetheless, the change indicates that Hughes is in some measure willing to intervene in the poems' form if not their content, meaning that he is perhaps not as doctrinaire about refusing to revise the poems as he initially suggests.

⁴⁵ The poems had, of course, already appeared on their own as *Moortown Elegies*, the first editions of which were printed in 1978 in small, limited-edition quantities. This volume lacks the notes that accompany *Moortown Diary*, which suggests that in some way the notes themselves are key to understanding the volume's relationship to the diaristic, even if they themselves make little sense as a diary in their clear address to a reading audience.

poem is read. In addition to whatever content the paratext contributes, then, it also is significant for its introduction of a second moment of speakerly consciousness to the volume. The poems may be intended to be immediate encapsulations of a day's events, but the paratext necessarily is a form of memory writing—precisely what the original poems were trying to avoid. I have been speaking throughout this dissertation about the past tense's ability to contain and refer to two moments—one of diegesis, and one of utterance—but this volume makes literal that formally-derived understanding of divided temporality by making these depicted experiences the subject not of revision but rejoinder, refusing to allow the version of experience recorded in the poems to be the only version.

In addition to creating a dialogue between experience and the memory of it, then, these notes are important for two other reasons. The first is their implications for the volume's claim to be a diary. It would be one thing for Hughes to effectively take up and publish an old journal, but the paratext reveals an awareness and intention to publish for an audience, which complicates his claim that personal, mnemonic value takes precedence over the value that the poems might have for other readers. He wants readers to see these moments as he does, which necessarily repackages what were mnemonic writings as also intrinsically mimetic in their ability to show readers scenes or events for the first time rather than reminding them of events they have already witnessed, thus blurring the lines between the kinds of writing the volume attempts to perform.

The other, more complex issue the notes raise concerns the volume's poetics and its relationship to the documentary. If these poems' roughness can be excused by the pursuit of getting close to the action, they should be able to communicate on their own what Hughes found important about the moments they capture. Frequently, however, the notes record an outright disagreement with the poems' priorities, which might simply signal that Hughes' experiment failed, but it might also say something larger about what poetry, even of this type, can and cannot say or do. While Hughes provides notes for poems that are in both the present tense and the past, the notes that record the strongest opposition to the poems correspond to those that are wholly in the past tense: "A memory," "Roe-deer," and "Orf." A comparison between these poems and their notes occupies the bulk of this chapter, in which I read these poems and their notes against each other in an effort to discover how Hughes is able to elicit a souvenir bloom from poems that have missed their moments, and whether the notes can act as correctives to the distortions of poetry by supplying not a "fake-original" moment, but by somehow returning to a moment of authentic experience (or by rerouting an artificial poetic moment to reach a more authentic, remembered one) and undoing the processes of memory and poetry.

I conclude this dissertation with an exploration of *Moortown Diary*, then, because it acts as a kind of limit case for the issues that the dissertation has raised so far—the lines between lived experience and poetry, the insulating properties of the past tense lyric, and the roles that memory can and should play in the creative process. This chapter constellates the sets of binaries that Hughes establishes in the volume—objective vs. subjective, memory/poetry vs. direct experience, poem vs. note, mnemonic writing vs. mimetic writing (which is also to say, diary vs. autobiography), personal value vs. aesthetic value—in an attempt to determine what exactly Hughes is writing against when he rejects the poetic process, and to attempt to articulate more fully the intertwined understandings of writing, memory, and subjectivity that Hughes merely gestures toward. I begin this exploration by trying to unpack both the parameters of

Hughes' objective writing and to establish what exactly Hughes has against poetry that would prompt him to write anti-poems that reject both aesthetic polish and a process of reflection. As the notes' responses to the poems suggest, the poems that fail to capture their moment (which are often more aesthetically realized than those that do capture it) contain something other than Hughes' own experience, implying that poetry in some way interposes its own subject to displace the author.

Hughes' experiment in anti-poetry raises the question of how authors appear in their poems in the first place, or, following de Man, whether they can at all. I chart this authorial displacement in "A memory," whose note suggests that the forces of poetry have radically superseded the forces of experience. From there, I pursue in greater detail what specifically the notes can say that the poems cannot by examining "Roe-deer" and "Orf," two fairly polished, aesthetically-realized poems in the past tense to which Hughes counterintuitively responds in the notes by activating traditional poetic tropes that the poems themselves reject, making clear that Hughes' problem with poetry lies not in the tradition as such, but in his own understandings of aesthetic value. Among the many other possible explanations for calling *Moortown Diary* a diary, then, is the reading of the collection as a document of a poet reevaluating his relationship to his own understandings of not just language, but of what constitutes poetic value, an understanding that changes again between the time of the original writing and the composition of the notes. The resulting document offers a very different kind of writing about the self and memory from those that I have examined in the other poets of this dissertation, and the chapter concludes by comparing Hughes' statements about poetry, memory, and temporality to Lowell's, Bishop's, and Heaney's understandings of these same elements.

The Souvenir Bloom

Before getting into the relationship between the poems and their accompanying notes, it is necessary establish what exactly Hughes means when he calls the poems' writing objective, and why he would be at such pains to avoid the processes of poetry. To put this last issue another way, what is so problematic about poetry, and why would it interfere with the project of keeping a diary?

Hughes' relationship to poetry and to writing at large was fraught during the early 1970s, when he was writing the poems that would ultimately make up *Moortown Diary*. Contrary to his proclamations in "Words and Experience," his practice is fueled by a belief that words, if not necessarily poetry, can in fact express subjective experience, but that he had forgotten how to forge this necessary link. As he explains his recovery efforts to Anne Bujon,

I squirmed and weaseled a way toward a language that would be wholly my own. Not my own by being exotic or eccentric in some way characteristic of me. But my own in that it would be an ABC of the simplest terms that I could feel rooted into my own life, my own feelings about quite definite things. So this conscious search for a 'solid' irrefutably defined basic (and therefore 'limited') kit of words drew me inevitably towards the solid irrefutably defined basic kit of my experiences—drew me towards animals, basically: my childhood and adolescent pantheon of wild creatures, which were saturated by first hand intense feeling that went back to my infancy. Those particular subjects, in a sense, were the models

on which I fashioned my whole workable language. (630)

Hughes says here that subjectivity is to be found in the language itself through the fact of the author's having chosen one word over another; it is not necessarily worked into the poem through what might be thought of as stylistic flourishes—"being exotic or eccentric in some way characteristic of me." Instead, Hughes argues that his subjectivity is encoded in the language at its most fundamental. For him, writing (although he does not go so far as to say poetry) is not about leaving signatures, but about establishing building materials. Whatever the poem says, and via whatever form or fashion, it is intrinsically his because it is in his vocabulary. The first step for him is the creation of an idiolect—the highly subjective understanding of language as an individual actually uses it—or maybe more accurately, an articulation of an idiolect that already exists in the "basic kit of [his] experiences." Language in this view is an organic outgrowth of the poet's life; whatever the content of the poem, it is, at its core, about and from the poet's experience.

This is significant because *Moortown Diary* is a reinvisioning of this process after the attempts in *Crow* to "break [language] out of dependence on a sacred object for subject"—that is, to widen the scope of the writing beyond such previous totems as hawks, pikes, or pigs (632). But then, as Hughes says, "autobiographical things knocked it all to bits, as before," by which he means the deaths of Assia Wevil and their daughter, Shura (632). When he returned to poetry, Hughes explains, "I started again at the beginning, with ABC language, in my diary pieces" (632). This new beginning may offer Hughes' best explanation for why the volume is called a diary: it is the record of a poet asserting himself and his experience through the choices he makes in language—not in the usual sense of mimetic or rhythmic choices that are carried out through the medium of language, but by actually sorting language into that which belongs to his experience and that which does not. This reattempt to establish which language belongs and which does not may also account for the objectivity of the volume, which at its heart is a concern for facts and things rather than feelings *about* things.⁴⁶

If Hughes is right, though, that a poet is visible through the sheer fact of his selecting one word over another, his pursuit of objective writing is problematic, to say the least: all writing is inherently subjective in this view. Craig Robinson notes, however, that this is not the only way in which the *Moortown* poems depart from their stated aim toward objectivity. He observes that the diary poems are "clearly the work of a poet with an established way of seeing. Perhaps the very notion of his being able to come in from a long day's farming and set down his impressions, already in a kind of verse, suggests as much" (260). Robinson goes to note that the very paucity of these entries—around forty over the course of two years, by Hughes' admission—reinforces the sense of a strong poetic selectiveness at work: "Even in keeping a diary Hughes has directed his attention only to scenes of prime importance for his imagination" (261). That poems should be works of the imagination should come as no surprise to anyone, but this reassertion of basic

⁴⁶ The problem, of course, is that making this diary fundamentally about a poet's relationship to language does nothing to explain its actual content. If Hughes simply wanted to establish an idiolect, he could have just compiled a vast vocabulary list entitled, "My Experience." That the poems do in fact have their own plots and dramas adds an extra element to account for. It is likely, then, that the material of the poems at the very least presents an occasion for writing, a way of cementing Hughes' claim to certain parts of his language.

generic expectation does come as a bit of a shock to a reader who has subscribed to the volume's rhetoric of objective reporting.

It would be better, then, to qualify this so-called objectivity as something more like the reticences that characterize Bishop's early poems: it is not that they remove all evidence of poetic subjectivity, but merely that their attention is turned outward, such that spaces of introspection are rerouted through the speaker's projections onto the animals he observes. Examples pepper the volume, as when a mother sheep dreads "She must have been deceived away from [her lamb] / By crafty wolvisish humans," or a calf wishes his mother would "go away. He's meditating" ("Bringing in new couples" 24-5; "Happy calf" 8). One of the foundational permissions of the volume, then, is the right for the speaker to speak on behalf of the animals he observes, despite the fact that he cannot know whether a sheep thinks of humans as crafty and wolvisish any more than he can know if cows meditate. As a shorthand, I call this arrogated right a kind of cathexis, by which I mean not necessarily that the speaker makes the objects of his observation reflect his emotional landscape, for example, but simply that his thoughts about the scene and animals he observes become phenomena that are indistinguishable from other external phenomena he observes.⁴⁷ This poetic liberty is not unique to these poems, but it is notable given that it tends to take the place of statements about the speaker's interiority.

While this displacement of speakerly perspective is a common trope in the volume, some poems, like "February 17th," attempt to get rid of it altogether by providing no interiority at all, human or animal, focusing instead almost entirely on the speaker's actions—in this case, performing emergency obstetric surgery on a ewe in the midst of birthing a stillborn lamb. This poem, unlike the others mentioned, is wholly in the past tense, perhaps appropriately so, given its interest in the drama of the scene as such, and in the past tense's prioritization of action and event. This priority becomes clear when a break in the drama emerges: the speaker realizes that his efforts to extract the stillborn lamb from its mother are "useless," so he goes "Two miles for the injection and a razor" (25-6). Time must pass during this journey, during which period the 'I' must be thinking something, even if only about the strategies needed to perform this surgery, but there is no indication that he thinks anything at all. Instead, he goes and returns two miles, as if by magic, in the space of a line, and by the next line, he "Sliced the lamb's throat strings" (27). The actions here are grizzly enough to speak for themselves, and one might read the absence of interiority as a defense mechanism against reliving actions that many readers might find traumatic, or at least disgusting.

This is not, however, to say that a sense of subjective interiority is entirely absent from the poem. It may not appear as a diegetic component, but it certainly is in evidence in the poem's imagery. The lamb is strangled by a "noose of mother-flesh"; the severed head lying on the ground has "all earth for a body"; upon removing the lamb, the afterbirth is a "smoking slither of oils and soups and syrups" (13, 30, 44). These descriptions are not, perhaps, cathetic in the usual sense, but they are indications of places where the speaker seizes upon opportunities to provide descriptions that exceed what is necessary for a straightforward recitation of events. They say little about the 'I's feeling, but a great deal about how the poem's speaker thinks,

⁴⁷ The more conventional way to refer to this phenomenon might be to call it an instance of the pathetic fallacy, but I am avoiding that term here because of its implied judgment. My purpose is to describe Hughes' poetics in these poems, not to say whether his language is true or false.

revealing a fascination with the ironies attendant to dying at birth, and with the sense of something elemental, even primordial about the processes of birth itself. These are the kinds of structural fixations that Robinson identifies, and that readers of Hughes' other work know to be enduring fascinations. The poem may not exactly be about Hughes himself, but it is certainly contiguous with the kinds of dramas that prove so attractive to the poet elsewhere.

This recasting of the poet as a disembodied selector of language rather than an element of the diegesis is very much in line with Heaney's adult speaker's positioning of himself in "Death of a Naturalist" as something akin to an all-knowing narrator, visible through the poem's descriptions, but removed from the poem's action. The difference here is that "February 17th" is about the adult Hughes: it is not a reenactment of a childhood memory, but, presumably, a poem written very close to the time of the events. The poem's 'I' is still formally removed from the poetic author function that brings it into being, but its ability to mask that function is more limited: where Heaney's speaker can impersonate the child through free indirect discourse, it is considerably harder to impersonate oneself at the distance of a day or a week—how would that mask identify itself as such, as opposed to just being straightforward speech? "February 17th" may have more in common with Lowell's poems that feature his adult self, which are perhaps more focused on creating a sense of character than this poem is ("Lowell," as well as his father and mother), but which nonetheless draw on the exclusive past tense's ability to insulate a scene from the speaker's larger reality. The best measure of that insulation here may not be a temporal remove, as is more usually the case, but the lack of interiority—the sense that the speaker could not say what the 'I' felt in that moment if he had to. Instead of engaging with the events, the speaker engages with the poem's language, which creates a very different sense of presentness from that which one might expect to find in a poem whose 'I' is embroiled in life-and-death events.

Even these most objective poems do retain a qualified sense of subjectivity, then. The question lies in whether that subjectivity is communicated to readers who might be accustomed to looking for it elsewhere. Generally, the answer seems to be negative: most critics who read this collection at any length—and there are surprisingly few—find it to be missing a certain spark. As Neil Roberts observes, "At times [the] priority of registering the animals' suffering results in a kind of note-form from which the speaker's subjectivity is almost withdrawn" (*Literary* 123). Roberts implies here that, without speakerly subjectivity, there is little to say about the poems apart from the fact that the animals suffer; from a critical perspective, at least, these notes offer little to engage. Perhaps more importantly, the volume often simply does not appeal to critics' aesthetic sense. Thomas West states this most clearly when he says, "Some readers will feel like participants in a strange, new world; others will find, like I do, most of the poems intolerably flat" (104). Both Roberts and West suggest that the events themselves are not enough to animate the volume in the absence of what Hughes identifies as his more usual subjective focus. But is the problem Hughes' lack of a more traditional sense of subjectivity, as Roberts asserts, or the anti-poetic that animates the volume, as West implies? Amplified, these questions connect to longstanding concerns about the importance of the poet's presence in the poem and the degree to which successful poetry turns on its mobilization of recognizable poetic language and tropes—that is, its ability to resemble what we know to be poetry. Hughes, through his adoption of an objective, anti-poetic writing, effectively attempts to remove the

elements that would normally be understood to animate poetic writing, downplaying both a sense of a subject and poetic language.

Ironically, Roberts writes about a similar indirect mode of subjectivity a few years later, borrowing from Mutlu Konuk Blasing the notion of an intending ‘I.’ Blasing locates this ‘I’ within the structures of lyric itself, which in turn is to be found on the borderline between sound, signification, and formal structure. In Roberts’ gloss of it,

‘Poetic rhythm . . . is a mentally audible movement of sounds that will not reduce to discursive meanings or formal effects.’ It ‘makes audible an intending “I.”’ This “I,” however, ‘is not prior to its words, and its words have nothing to do with “self-expression.” It is, rather, ‘a rhythmic pulse “between” music and figure; it is neither music nor figure and without it there is neither music nor figure.’ (Blasing 55, 31, 86 in Roberts “Lyric ‘I’” 195)

In other words, this intending ‘I’ arises out of a sense that the elements that constitute lyric are performing at their highest levels. Roberts consequently breaks from Hughes’ assertion of the identity between poet and language by suggesting that the intending ‘I’ is not a given, but something that only the best poems achieve through writing that fully realizes its formal and linguistic potential.

Roberts does not address the degree to which the Moortown poems succeed in creating this ‘I,’ but he does offer examples from *Crow* and *Birthday Letters* that together shed some light on what both he and West find to be missing from *Moortown Diary*. In *Crow*, he finds the intending ‘I,’ here equated with the character of Crow himself (who is positioned as the singer of the volume’s songs), through

rhythm—the transition from the mimetic anapaestic opening to the compacted spondee of the line’s end, of ingeniously handled alliteration—the condensation of the vowels of ‘featherless’ in ‘filth,’ of the naked and comically human ‘elbows’ projecting in the middle of the line. The identification of Crow with the style of the poems, which occurs frequently in Hughes’ comments on the book, is perfectly achieved here. (210)

Roberts suggests that if Crow is to be a singer, he needs to be audible through the style of the songs themselves; if he is to make a volume about himself, he needs to be discernible as more than just subject matter for the poems, and as more than a stated source of the language.

Upholding this position becomes a more complex affair when discussing the autobiographical *Birthday Letters* poems, which take Hughes’ own experience as their first cause. That the poems stem from his experience is never in doubt; what is in question is whether they truly capture some kind of subjective feeling or position, or whether they are just about things that happened to him, Plath, or both. Nonetheless, Roberts asserts that the intending ‘I’ largely fails to appear, as he finds in the volume less “exposed feeling than . . . often uninspired writing” (211). The collection, instead, draws heavily on prior knowledge about the troubled history of Hughes and Plath: unlike the Crow poems, which must create a sense of Crow from the poetic utterance, Hughes does not need to create himself from scratch in order for him to exist in the poems. Roberts, however, distinguishes this pre-existing Hughes from a figure of the writing poet that he aligns with the intending ‘I’: “The most lyrically accomplished moments of *Birthday Letters* are not (with a few exceptions) reconstructions of the past, but piercing

revelations of the mourning—or more accurately melancholic—‘I’ at the moment of writing” (214). Roberts leaves open the question of whether this melancholic ‘I’ is a fiction induced from the melancholy speech, or whether it is understood to be Hughes himself, but in either case, it is clear that this figure’s existence depends on these “lyrically accomplished moments,” which is to say that the ‘I’ must do more than simply refer to the author, and that its ability to transcend this reference is bound up in the degree to which the poem succeeds aesthetically.

This notion of transcending diegetic facts is familiar: it sounds very much like the moments at which Helen Vendler discerns a poetic subject in Heaney’s early verse, noting that “his child-self is almost anonymous, and many of the poems of childhood treat . . . experiences that could be those of any child growing up on a farm . . .” (14). Nonetheless, there are “several poems [in which] the idiosyncratic rises through the general,” as in “Mid-Term Break”: “The adolescent boy whose awareness makes the mother’s inscape unforgettable is the differentiated speaker who rises above stereotype and anonymity” (28, 31). Although Heaney’s poem must create its diegetic subject, while Hughes’ poem need only refer to a subject that is well defined in other stories—even histories—that antedate the poem, both autobiographical approaches share a common problem. Just as it is not enough for Heaney to include an ‘I’ in a poem for it to be about him, neither is it enough for Hughes simply to write about what seems to be his life.

Thus, Roberts concludes,

Birthday Letters . . . owes its very existence to the already known (or mis-known) life-history. It would be absurd to try to read these poems without reference to that history. Nevertheless, if the ‘I’ who, for example, was ‘sitting / Youth away in an office in Slough’ could hardly be said not to be ‘prior to its words,’ the lyrical charge of the passages I have quoted is not dependent on reference. Like all the examples I have considered . . . they are the effect of breaking through to an intense, linguistically constructed subjectivity. (214)

No doubt the more memorable images in “February 17th”—“noose of mother flesh,” “all earth for a body”—would satisfy some of Roberts’ requirements for creating an intending ‘I,’ but they are admittedly scarce in the poem. It would be fair to say that most of the poem’s writing is fairly flat and dependent on reference; indeed, the point of the poem is in large measure to refer to the events that it recounts, which include reference to an ‘I’ who appears as an agent in the diegesis, but whose actions are stated so straightforwardly as to keep him from becoming a fully-fledged subject in Roberts’ or Blasing’s sense.

Perhaps the most important lesson to take from Roberts’ readings is that the subject of poetry takes shape as the result of a set of processes that are independent of the poet’s experience. The very fact that Roberts can distinguish between an ‘I’ who sits his youth away in Slough and the poet who presumably did precisely the same thing (in the case of this autobiographical poem) points to at least two levels of subjective reference in the writing: to the poet on what might be called a referential plane, and to the intending ‘I’ on what might be called a poetic plane (not, perhaps, too unlike Heaney’s “plane of poetry,” on which the tongue suddenly becomes ungoverned). The poem’s ability to refer to the poet does not guarantee the ability to create an intending ‘I,’ however, and Roberts suggests that even the poem’s ability to refer to its author is predicated upon first establishing an intending ‘I.’ It is as though a poem must conduct its referential project backward, beginning not from the space of experience, but

from the space of poetic writing: the poem's 'I' must first be a lyric 'I' before it can be an autobiographical 'I.'

There is an obvious problem in this circuit of 'I's, though: what if the poet's experience simply does not lend itself to the kind of writing that is likely to produce a fleshed-out sense of subjectivity? What if the events are more important than the subjective response to them? At what point does the need to write a good poem overshadow the need to record the events themselves, an overshadowing that may alter or color the events in ways that would depart from a more straightforward, non-poetic retelling of them? Hughes' attempt to formulate an anti-poetry suggests that, whatever else it might be—a path back to a personal relationship to language, an attempt to retain the vitality of experience—he is bent on inverting this more usual relationship between intending 'I' and the poet's 'I.' Hughes seems to want to reverse the truisms about language's usurping qualities that appear everywhere from his own writing in "Words and Experience" to de Man's work on autobiography in order to reestablish experience as the primary plane of *Moortown Diary's* poetry.

Here again, though, Hughes is at an impasse: what does it mean for a poem to record experience? How would readers know whether it has done so? Hughes is perhaps the only person who can say with any certainty whether his experiment worked, even if he must do so fifteen years later. These questions help to understand why Hughes added the paratext to the volume, effectively offering a guide to the poems and expanding and correcting those that do not quite succeed in capturing the lived moment. Yet the very addition of the notes suggests that the poems do not work without contextualizing statements about the anti-poetic project or the events recorded in the notes themselves, casting doubt on the success of the project as a whole.

There seems to be no obvious logic to explain which poems need notes and which poems do not. The most immediate explanation is that the poems that, as Hughes says, missed the moment need notes as a corrective, and certainly they constitute a significant portion of the notes. However, other notes simply add context to poems that seem to function perfectly well on their own, as in the note to "Foxhunting's" tale of the Reverend Jack Russell's introduction of the sport to the Devon, which also resulted in the cultivation of foxes and an explosion of the local fox population. This history is by no means necessary to understand the poem, but it does implicitly reframe the hunt as not simply a violent, anti-fox activity, but as a paradoxical path to vulpine well-being, even if this point goes unstated in either of the texts themselves. "Happy Calf's" note explains the network of associations with Eastern artwork and philosophy that the problematic word, "meditating," indexes, but it, too, leaves the poem intact, offering a kind of midrash rather than a direct intervention into the text of the poem itself.⁴⁸

By and large, then, the notes act as framing supplements or counterpoints to their poems. The most interesting notes, however, are those that offer conflicting accounts of events or radically different attitudes toward them from those that are presented in the poems. All of these

⁴⁸ Hughes recounts of "Happy Calf," "I remember thinking [while observing the poem's nodding calf] . . . , 'What a subject for an old Chinese painter!' This evoked the idea of a Chinese sage, on his mountain, in a trance, deep in Tao. The calf was obviously in a religious daze. . . , [animals'] inborn defense against natural conditions. Our lost birthright. I kept all that from intruding with the single word 'meditating'" (65).

correspond to poems that are wholly in the past tense, at least two of which—"Roe-deer" and "Orf"—have the formal polish that Hughes says is a symptom of having "missed the moment." The past tense alone is not necessarily an indication of this belatedness: "February 17th" not only is wholly in the past tense, but Hughes seems to have found it successful enough not to need a note—indeed, it is so successful that it effectively gives rise to Hughes' conception of these writings as a volume. Nonetheless, the correlation between missing the moment and including a note is high enough that it suggests that Hughes' impetus in including these notes is not simply to prepare the poems for a wider audience, but to reclaim his authority over experiences that have been subsumed and altered by the poems. These notes necessarily work from memory, which should subject them to the poetic processes the notes were designed to avoid, and indeed, in some ways, they adhere more closely to poetic expectations than the poems do. These notes use the souvenir bloom not just as a marker of evocative value, but to generate further writing that seems to escape the generic limitations of Hughes' poetic (or anti-poetic) practice.

The Displacements of Poetry

The poem in which Hughes is most obviously displaced from the poem's narrating or intending 'I' is the one that attempts to make that displacement least obvious through its title—"A memory." While the last few poems of *Moortown Diary* offer elegiac depictions of Hughes' father-in-law, Jack Orchard—the elegies from which the first incarnation of the collection drew its title—this is the only one that is wholly in the past tense, and the only one to invoke the volume's bugbear of memory directly. While "A memory" should suggest that the scene is linked closely to Hughes' own experience and recollections, the note suggests otherwise—that in fact the processes and demands of poetry displace that experience, making "memory" not a signal of the poem's closeness to Hughes but of its distance from him.

The poem focuses on Orchard's strength and energy while shearing sheep. He is "powerful as a horse" with a "flame-crimson face [and] drum-guttural African curses"; his occupation shifts from farmer to collier, "a face-worker" whose head resembles bare granite—a "bald, arch-wrinkled, weathered dome" (2, 6, 14, 18). Hughes' portrait of Orchard manages to capture an inner vitality that perhaps would be more difficult to render if he simply stuck to external details, but for a reader, pinning down this man and this moment is a difficult task given his comparison to a horse, fire, the curses of an entire continent, a different sort of laborer, and even the rock that that laborer works on. It is as though to capture Orchard, the poem must first obscure him.

These obvious figural interpositions problematize the poem's title: there is no possible way this is a memory. Perhaps the scene is remembered, and perhaps the impression of strength is remembered, but the language is all after the fact, from the moment of writing. That this poem is in the past tense only reinforces its ability to present a scene that is isolated from the stream of events that surrounds it, giving the speaker the license he takes to present his reanimation of an event that otherwise lies inert. The title reminds readers that memory is not simply the facts, but the facts as a remembering subject is able to assimilate them to an ongoing consciousness—that is, to a 'now' that is also simultaneously engaging with the transformational mediations of poetry. The language of the poem disfigures both Orchard and the speaker by distorting Orchard into an unrecognizable intersection of things he is not (horses, colliers) and by positing as

memory those modes of expression that the speaker invents at the moment of utterance rather than those that would have occurred to him in a moment of direct observation.

While at some level, this speaker must be connected to Hughes (who if not the poet chooses the language of the poem?), this indulgence of the possibilities of language is evidence of Hughes' willingness to cede control of the poem to an intending 'I,' which ultimately displaces Hughes' own sense of what is most important about Orchard so that the poem can cultivate its portrait of fiery power. It would clearly be too much to say that the poem writes itself, but, following Heaney and even Bishop, the combination of poet and the plane of poetry can exact demands that may supersede the poet's own sense of what is important or even true about the object of the poem's description.

This departure is clear in the corresponding note, which, removed from this transformative linguistic power, makes a radically different claim about Orchard's most fundamental characteristics. As Hughes explains in the note, "The Hartland Orchards have a crest: a raven. That could easily be accounted for, I used to tell him, if they had originally been Moorish pirates. We treat it as a joke, but for me it identified his essence" (68). Of the many transfigurings that appear in the poem, neither raven nor pirate is among them, even though these are, for Hughes, Orchard's essence. The poem offers figures of earth and fire in place of these more obviously nautical tropes (pirate, raven as signifier of pirate), and in doing so, the note almost suggests that the poem only partly gets Orchard right.

However, as Hughes continues, it becomes clear that this earth and fire imagery come from other, more sensorial sources: "Throughout whatever he did, [Orchard] smoked a cigarette. . . . He spoke the broadest Devonshire with a very deep African sort of timbre" (68). The poem's fire is most likely a rendering of this smoldering cigarette, which synecdochically becomes an extension of the man smoking it, while the African curses are a version of the timbre of his voice. While these key figures—fire and Africa—link to the poem, they already appear very different. Orchard's "flame-crimson face" is not necessarily the result of "sweating and freezing" (that is, the product of internal warmth), but is merely the glow of the cigarette (6, 5). Likewise, "drum-guttural African curses" suggests that the Africanness is part of the curses themselves—that it is as much content as it is delivery—but the note makes that Africanness merely the sound of Orchard's voice. Reading the poem against the note's clarifications creates no particular contradictions, but it does signal places where the poem has chosen productive ambiguities over the precision of more limited language.

As Hughes continues in the note, it seems that Africanness, which the poem offers in passing, is actually what Hughes finds most interesting: "Unlike the indigenous Devonians who seem to be usually short, and often thick-set, he was very tall, broad and gangly, with immense hands. His line of Orchards came via Hartland . . . which at one time was held by Moorish seafarers . . . , and blood-group factors evidently do reveal pockets of North African genes here and there along the North and South Cornwall and Devon coasts" (68). Perhaps this is merely an endnote to the poem's more focused task of presenting a scene, but it seems strongly that the poem has missed the point if its purpose is to present Orchard's essence (or rather, Hughes' sense of his essence), which is not fire and earth, but an indigenous Africanness (which, it should be noted, suggests something more in line with Conrad's depictions of Congolese natives in *Heart of Darkness* than the cultures that would actually be found in North Africa).

Arguably, the poem's exclusion of what Hughes identifies as Orchard's essence might just be chalked up to his understanding of what makes for good poetic material: lyrics are often better equipped to provide embellished, imaginative descriptions of specific scenes than they are to offer complex speculations about family lineage that meld history, anthropology, folklore, and modern science. That there is such a thing as 'good poetic material,' however, points to precisely the problem that this volume of diary entries raises: how does an author build into a poem information that poems do not readily embrace, even when that information is at the core of the author's understanding of a person or event? How does that exclusion prompt a shift in focus away from what is most important and onto what is most effectively poeticized? In this poem, Hughes' actual sense of Orchard cannot find a place for itself in the poem, which prompts him to adopt the freer, less generically-prescribed form of the note to communicate that information.

The notes for "Roe-deer" and "Orf" reveal a similar supplementary relationship—this time, focusing less on specific information that cannot appear in the poems than on modes of seeing or interacting with events that the poems seem to repel. Like "A memory," these poems are wholly in the past tense, which provides them with an enabling isolation that lends themselves to dramatizing events that would exceed the possible or believable in other contexts. By contrast, the notes reassert Hughes' authority over scenes that the poems themselves show to be beyond their speakers' understanding, a mode of redress that suggests that missing the moment results in a loss of authorial control on the plane of poetry.

Revising Back to the Ordinary

Like many of the other past tense poems in this volume, "Roe-deer" thematizes the act of interpreting events rather than simply jotting them down as notes, as Hughes suggests is the aim of most of the other poems in the collection. As such, it puts on display the interventions of a speaker figure in the act of observing, but it is not always clear from a reader's perspective who exactly this speaker might be—Hughes in diary mode, an intending 'I,' or some other figure entirely. While identifying this figure definitively may not be fully possible, what is clear is that poem and note mobilize different sets of permissions about how those observed phenomena can be treated. As the analysis below makes clear, the poem heavily qualifies and even ironizes the notion that a speaker might be in control of what he sees, while the note freely embraces the cathetic relationships—the ability to speak on behalf of observed animals—that characterize so many other poems in this volume, placing Hughes firmly in control of its descriptions. That the note works more like many of the collection's other poems than does "Roe-deer" itself suggests that to miss the moment is not just to miss direct experience, but also to miss the volume's governing aesthetic. While the note does not attempt to restore that aesthetic, it does attempt to reinstate the relationship between observer and observed that accompanies the volume's poems of direct experience. As a result, the poem's apparent embrace of the poetic process is both destructive of experience and generative of further writing that attempts to resurrect the perceptive relationships that underwrite that experience.

The exclusive use of the past tense accompanies missing the moment in "Roe-deer," and its enabling insulations allow the poem to thematize an indecisiveness about what the speaker actually sees, such that the poem is able to create a space where multiple possibilities about what

is real can exist in the same moment without actually having to be resolved. However, without the poem's separations between the diegetic 'I' and the speakerly/intending 'I,' the present tense note has to choose a reality for itself. It errs more strongly on the side of common sense, but also on the side of human sense-making and, ultimately, control over a scene that, as the poem suggests, may or may not be entirely earned.

Indeed, temporality is of fundamental importance to the poem, creating a rift between realities even within the space of the poem's diegesis. "For some lasting seconds," Hughes writes,

I could think the deer were waiting for me
To remember the password and sign

That the curtain had blown aside for a moment
And there where the trees were no longer trees, nor the road a road

The deer had come for me. (8-13)

The section's repeated emphasis on the temporariness of this encounter—"for some lasting seconds," "for a moment"—almost works to state an error in perception, as though the speaker is uncertain whether it is what he saw that lasted only a few seconds, or his misled way of seeing them that was briefly in error and was subsequently corrected. And yet these few seconds occupy a quarter of "Roe-deer's" twenty-one lines, meaning that the speaker is tempted by the possibility of treating the error not simply as a moment of being wrong, but, as the poem suggests, a glimpse into an alternative reality in which the curtain has blown aside for a moment and the deer really have come for the speaker. Indeed, it seems at first that asserting the certainty of this glimpse is what animates the poem; certainly Keith Sagar thinks so, writing that "[Nature] is now recognized as the only reality, into which we are granted an occasional privileged glimpse" (139). This reading of the glimpse, however, discounts the section's highly conditional temporal framing, and, above all, the counterfactual "I could think." The glimpse is not into "the only reality," but into an unreality of the speaker's own making—what he could think up, which is to say, imagine. Contrary to Leonard Scigaj's assertion that Hughes in this collection "no longer relegate[s] Nature to a function of human perception," nature in this poem is significant precisely because it is the object of highly uncertain perception (180 in Sagar 139).⁴⁹

"Roe-deer's" beginning does little to suggest the ontological crisis with which it ends, simply stating that "In the dawn-dirty light, in the biggest snow of the year / Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, alerted" (1-2). It then swerves to the interpretive by alleging, "They had happened into my dimension / The moment I was arriving just there" (3-4). The implications of this assertion are grand: that the deer exist in another dimension; that they are able to travel between them; that there are other inhabited dimensions at all. But then the poem swings again toward the pole of skeptical common sense by asserting that this is a "vision of the abnormal"

⁴⁹ This statement comes from within Sagar's *Laughter of Foxes*, where it is identified as coming from Sagar's 1991 book entitled, *Ted Hughes*. However, a search through an online copy of that book reveals that this book does not have 180 pages, nor does it contain this sentence. Either Sagar is using a different edition, or he has confused it with another text. I have given co-credit to Sagar to reflect this uncertainty of origin.

(6). The “all-way disintegration” of the next line is both a hyperbolic rendering of the snowstorm, which causes an all-but whiteout, and a nearly literal continuation of the line of thinking that blurs dimensions and allows deer to travel between them. This disintegration is brief, however, only lasting a few seconds, while the speaker enacts and records the blowing aside of the curtain and renders roads and trees as something else, or simply as disintegrated nothing. The poem in this passage gives reign to the counterfactual possibilities that the deer have come to take the speaker to another dimension, and it does so in part by dissolving trees and roads, using the lack of objective sensory information as license to fabricate other, more subjective possibilities for this increasingly informationless world.

However, this fabrication snaps off abruptly. While the entire poem is in two-line stanzas, the end of this speculative section, “The deer had come for me,” stands on its own, as though its complementary line were also obliterated by the snow (13). Suddenly, the sensory world returns: “They ducked through the hedge [which appears in the poem for the first time here], and upright they rode their legs / Away downhill over a snow-lonely field / Toward tree dark” (14-16). This is the side of the speaker who sees these events as “abnormal” and is anchored enough in reality to remain skeptical about the possibility of trans-dimensional deer. “Rode their legs” is a curious and slightly surreal formulation that keeps the poem from lodging its epistemological pendulum fully at its empirical extremity, in effect keeping alive the possibility that these are abnormal deer in a normal world.

However, the next lines assert that this is only a possibility, not reality: the deer are only “seeming to eddy and glide and fly away up / Into the big boil of flakes” (17-18). This seeming is on par with “I could think” in that both admit to a counterfactual line of thinking even while actualizing that thinking poetically. These counterfactuals disnarrate as they narrate by asserting that which is avowedly unreal as images and impressions that are as real as any other information in the poem. The poem could use this fact to its advantage by omitting the evidence of counterfactuality, by making “seemed” “was” and letting the poem show that the speaker “could think” the deer had come for him without rhetorically emphasizing that that interpretation is merely supposition. This refusal to choose a side suggests that if the speaker is in fact Hughes, he is wrestling with the imaginative possibilities of poetry, which would want to declare that the deer do fly and that they really are from another dimension. The poem’s refusal to decide the matter definitively suggests that Hughes the diarist and Hughes the poet arrive at a detente in which the very open-endedness of seeming is given highest priority.

The results of this negotiation are very different from a more traditional, speaker-controlled approach to observation and narration, which are often characterized by the speaker’s cathetic investments into the objects he observes. “Roe-deer,” however, resists this easy connection between describer and described. Instead, it reserves that identification not for the deer, but for the snow, who is figured as a writer in the final stanzas: “The snow took [the deer] and soon their nearby hoofprints as well // Revising its dawn inspiration / Back to the ordinary” (19-21). The implied metaphor here makes hoofprints into writing, and, because snow must obscure the hoofprints rather than erase them in order to enact these revisions, it demands that readers supply a pun to make sense of this revision—the snow’s white-out becomes the typist’s Wite-Out. A good deal of mental work occurs in these final lines, nearly all of which could fall under the heading “I could think.” That it does not (declaratively, at least) indicates that this act

of revision, and perhaps more important, revision by obscuring, is at the heart of the speaker's rendering of this scene. The snow's mode of revising allows the original language a continued, albeit buried, existence. Merely whiting out a typewritten page does not remove the writing; it simply makes that writing illegible. The typewritten language remains even as it is effaced, such that the revised page becomes a palimpsest of its two drafts. In a similar way, the poem's skepticism about whether to grant the deer's emmisarial mission the status of poetic reality creates what are effectively two drafts of the same event: one in which the speaker is amazed and convinced that the deer have come for him, and one in which he knows better. The poem's rhetoric of orthodoxy, in which the speaker "could think" but does not fully allow himself to inhabit the reality that that thinking would produce, becomes the snow that revises inspiration back to the ordinary world. Counterintuitively, the sign of that ordinariness is the adoption of cathectic investments that the poem has to this point rejected, using the landscape itself—the snow—as the speaker's mouthpiece.

The poem's use of the past tense reinforces this rhetoric of ordinariness by sealing the poem off from the rest of the narrating/intending 'I's ordinary world, which can continue untroubled by the possibility of trans-dimensional deer. The 'I' here reflects on and revises his reality, but he also keeps enough of it alive as a possibility as to make it recoverable, and, in effect, to retain a more imaginative version of himself in the poem as its diegetic subject. More accurately, this separation from the present world of the narrating 'I' allows him to create two moderately defined diegetic personae for himself: one that accepts the deer as ambassadors from another dimension, and one that calls them abnormal and refuses to depart from the rules of his more quotidian experience. The question, though, is to what degree this is Hughes' experience and to what degree it is the result of poetic demands. Is either of these 'I's Hughes himself (or a diegetic figure who is meant to reenact his direct experience), and if so, how would we know?

Rather than answering this question directly by returning to this scene in the poem's note and adding clarifying information, Hughes instead leans on his relationships to these deer to reveal the degree to which the poem departs from his more usual experiences. The note offers a second story about an encounter with a similar deer, and in much the same language: "*I had one of those moments*, or rather several long moments, when you wonder whether what you are looking at actually is, at last, a ghost. . . . *I could only think* [the deer] must be some kind of earthy troll" (emphasis added, 63). This boundedness of "one of those moments" and the reflective counterfactuality of "I could only think" initially seem to extend the strategies of the poem in an attempt to capture what Hughes describes as the "unnatural"-ness of the deer's appearance. However, while the poem makes the epistemological conflict between opposing actualities its central drama, the prose sets up that drama only to deflate it. In effect, Hughes gets his revenge by making the deer the baffled party, not the human speaker; and in doing so, it is the note, not the poem, that finally succeeds in revising this encounter back to the volume's ordinary perceiver/perceived relationship by allowing a familiar and predictable cathectic overwriting of the deer to take over the note's account.

Hughes accomplishes this revision using three connected strategies. The first is to appeal to an objective and shared knowledge about a specific landscape. This specificity is lacking in the poem, whose references to setting are abstract and sketchy: trees, road, hedge. The note, however, attempts to flesh out this world much more fully:

If those two deer, on that snowy February morning, had gone downhill, and through the copse visible in the combe (the ‘tree dark’ from which they had probably started), they would have been stopped, at the bottom of the next field, by the River Taw. In April, I was standing beside that river just after dawn, looking up the grassy combe In other words, I was looking up toward that copse I mention above. (62-3)

This description does not limit itself merely to the kinds of landscape features involved here, as in the poem, but works to situate them in reference to each other and to the speaker; it even names the river they border, which adds an objective cartographical knowledge to the first-hand, lived knowledge of the copse and combe. These multiple planes of knowledge make this world doubly real, aiding Hughes in asserting the actuality of the anecdote that follows.

Second, Hughes positions himself within the anecdote as one who cannot be baffled or awe-struck for long. As he writes, “At that hour in the morning I was ready for anything—certainly for a ghost” (63). This statement of readiness is complicated by the language of speculation (“I could only think”), but it nonetheless marks a significant departure from the poem. There, the speaker is clearly not ready for deer to be emissaries from another dimension, and this lack of readiness may be responsible for the poem’s subsequent oscillation between belief and skepticism. In the prose, though, Hughes uses this readiness to pivot into a definitive statement about what the deer actually is, which the speaker in the poem is never in a position to do. Hughes is able to say conclusively that the deer is not an “earthy troll, some little old man living wild, or maybe even a little old woman,” to say nothing of a ghost. His “I could only think” has an implied “then” after it; he sets up this image only to revise it later by revealing the deer. That momentary supposition is recognized as a moment of error, not the beginning of an equally legitimate course of knowledge as it is in the poem. There, the speaker never really knows that something supernatural has not occurred; unwilling to let go of the idea himself, he relies on the snow to mask (if not completely destroy) that possibility and drag the scene back to the ordinary, commonsensical world, speaker in tow.

Finally, in deciding to take control of the revision back to the ordinary, Hughes grants himself another power in the note that he refuses to accept in the poem: he can say what the deer thinks. As he writes, “It stood, within twenty paces, clearly trying to puzzle out what kind of creature I might be, and thinking, perhaps, that I might be a big roe-buck” (63). This imputation is perfectly reasonable, but mainly because it is the mirror image of the speculation that Hughes has just entertained in the previous lines: the unknown figure must be some kind of human, so it follows that, for the buck, the unknown figure must be another deer. Its puzzlement is emphasized when it “circle[s] to the left and studie[s]” Hughes some more before loping back up the hill, “stopping now and again to look back.” The deer is embroiled in an epistemological struggle on par with the speaker’s in the poem. However, the control in this anecdote rests not with the deer, but with Hughes, who, observant as he is, is merely standing as he was: the deer is performing the outward symptoms of disbelief in the prose. These actions make perfect sense: anyone who has encountered a deer in the wild can recognize this behavior of scouting, circling, and withdrawing amid backward glances. What is not obvious is that the deer assumes that Hughes is another deer. To be fair, that assertion is introduced with “perhaps,” but the qualifier feels more like a hedge than a real expression of doubt.

All of this is to say that the prose embraces and indulges in the volume's more usual cathetic relationships between observer and observed in a way that the poem refuses. Where the poem complicates and problematizes, holding off as long as possible the desire simply to make the deer an outgrowth of the speaker's mindset, the prose accepts this outgrowth as part of its process of revising not just to the ordinary, but to the definitive and real. By offering another version of what the poem could be, the note reinforces the poem's skepticism and restraint, both of which can be read as a product of Hughes' inability (or refusal) to speak directly through poetry.

This conclusion is in line with "A memory's" failure to capture the essence of Jack Orchard, and it is also in keeping with Hughes' larger claim in his note to "Orf": "As I submitted to what seemed to be the requirements of the writing [of the poem], I was keenly aware of all that I was rejecting. Details that were not important to the writing were still important to me! And still seem important" (64). This note points to the conflict between living and poetic writing, or, as Hughes puts it in this volume, between the "authentic fingerprints of the day" and the poetic process, which he likens to the processes of memory (64). In this note, it seems that memory is no longer linked to the poetic process, but resists it even as it is overshadowed by it. The note emphasizes that there is a personal, remembered world outside of the poems, but that "the requirements of the writing" refuse that world a space of existence within them.

In the case of "Roe-deer," if the requirements of writing the poem—which include refraining from taking a definite position about whether what his speaker narrates has really happened—denied Hughes the control he might have desired, it makes sense that he would turn to the far less bounded genre of paratextual notes to write what is "important to him." To resist poetry is to assert the personal in this case, and that favoring of the personal may explain why the non-poetic note is free to engage the deer cathetically while the poem is not: cathexis is a way for the personal and subjective to dominate all that surrounds it and project importance onto the observed environment. It may be a common trope in Romantic poetry, but that need not limit its uses to poetry. Indeed, as "Orf's" note makes even clearer, poetic tropes are often more at home in the notes than in the poems themselves, raising further questions about what exactly the requirements of the poetic writing really are.

The divide between "Orf" and its accompanying note illustrates the tension between poetic and personal value very clearly. Unlike "Roe-deer," "Orf" is not devoted to staging the movement between contradictory epistemological positions: it is unequivocal about its speaker's having shot a terminally ill lamb, even turning the fact into an anaphoric refrain. The facts are not in question, at least within the world of the poem. Instead, the conflict surrounding how the incident should be characterized is carried out between the poem and its note. In the poem, the shooting of the lamb occasions a metaphysical discussion between the speaker and the lamb-life, which asks to be extinct, but which settles "for permission to wait . . . // Inside my head / In the radioactive space / From which the meteorite had removed his body" (19-22). The doubled prepositional construction *inside/in* makes situating the lamb-life difficult: are the phrases appositives, so the speaker's head is the radioactive space (and if so, why)? Is the lamb-life to live in both the speaker's head and in the physical location in which he was shot? Is this a complex way of saying that the lamb-life will return to the speaker whenever he passes the spot

at which the shooting occurred? This ambiguity resists the poem's otherwise straightforward mode of explanation and apology, but, unlike in "Roe-deer," the challenge it presents has less to do with deciding what happened at the level of plot and more to do with the exact aftereffects of the shooting.

Wherever the lamb-life ultimately waits, it is fair to say that its appearance is unexpected, as is the turn to the cosmic that transforms the bullet that dispatched him into a radioactive meteorite.⁵⁰ Perhaps more importantly, there is no sense of recrimination toward the lamb's assassin; if the lamb-life is resentful about anything, it is that it is made to wait around and is not able to be banished immediately. Hughes explains in prefatory remarks to a radio reading that the poem came about two weeks after the events it recounts, time enough for "memory and conscience" to have had an effect (Norwich Tapes in Robinson 272). This is the only time Hughes mentions conscience, whose absence from the paratext is striking given the difficult ethical positions in which the poems' speakers frequently find themselves, tasked as they are with making life-or-death decisions about the farm's many animals. A suspicious reader might find in this final exchange between lamb-life and speaker an attempt by the speaker to exonerate himself by creating a lamb-life with no vested interest in living. The poem does not strain the speaker's epistemological understandings, but it strains its readers', who must accept the existence not just of a lamb-life, but also of a talking lamb-life that harbors no ill-will toward the speaker who has just shot him. In the absence of other voices or figures in the poem, there is no way to question the veracity of these events, unbelievable as they seem. And, unlike "Roe-deer," there is no attempt to question or overwrite the poem's more fantastical elements. Whether these exonerating details reflect Hughes' own self-servingness, or whether they are the more accidental product of his recollections being filtered through the demands of poetry, both poem and speaker are assured in their ability to state what happened.

What, then, of the note's claim that the poem has left out important details, which is also to ask, what can an intending 'I' not communicate? The answer seems to be an almost sensationalized heightening of pity that by turns demonizes and exonerates Hughes:

The lonely, hunched-up way he stood there, in the cattle pen, on the lumpy, dry, compacted bedding (which was chicken litter from a battery farm—probably part of his failure to recover!), and the way the afternoon sun came on to him from the open opposite end of the building, and the shockingly-amplified crack of the rifle under the brittle asbestos roof. That should be there. And maybe the stony grave in the wood that I dug for him, and the little oak sapling that I planted on it (an extraordinary sort of funeral for any livestock casualty). (64-5)

In this rendering of events, the lamb is pitiful and defenseless, robbed of his armor of flies and sickness that in the poem turns his "nose and face [into] one festering sore" (1). Indeed, in the first eight lines of the poem, it seems that the speaker shoots a manifestation of illness and not a lamb at all. In the note, however, the lamb is only ever a lamb. Further, the act of shooting him is rendered more starkly, in afternoon sunlight and with a "shockingly-amplified crack of the rifle." In the poem, "I shot" is repeated three times, but the emphasis falls on the conditions that

⁵⁰ This is the best I can parse the "radioactive space." Meteorites used to be widely believed to be radioactive, so the passage of the bullet/meteorite through the lamb's head would have contaminated it.

set up the shooting and not the phenomenological experience of the shot: “I shot the lamb. / I shot him while he was looking the other way. / I shot him between the ears” (10-11). There is no sense here of what the shot sounds like, or how it might interact with the wider world around the lamb; instead, the attention narrows from lamb to back of head to a precise spot between the ears. The note provides the rest of this sensory detail.

The effect of this added detail is initially to make the killing even more stark and brutal—the piteous lamb on the recycled (and most likely filthy) chicken litter shot violently in broad daylight. Hughes looks especially cold-hearted in this portrayal, even more than in the poem because of the lack of description of the sickness to contextualize his actions. But then the note swings in the other direction to illustrate what might be taken as signs of Hughes’ remorse: the “stony grave in the wood that I dug for him, and the little oak sapling that I planted on it.” As Hughes himself remarks, these actions are “extraordinary” given that the lamb is a “livestock casualty,” part of the five percent of lambs a sheep farmer can expect to lose every lambing season (Norwich Tapes in Robinson 269). In light of the harshness of the note’s description, this burial seems like an atonement, even though in the poem there is nothing to atone for—if anything, the speaker has done the lamb a service. The inclusion of these final details makes the rendering of events in the poem and in the note very different, almost alternate versions of the same scenario, this time with the heightened feelings that are omitted from the poem.

However, these alternate versions are not so much reimaginings as simply exercises in framing. The note adds detail without replacing what is in the poem: the two versions of events are not mutually exclusive, but arguably the note’s details are allowed their harshness on one hand and sentimentality on the other because of the strength of vision (to say nothing of the strength of apology) presented in the poem. And yet they do not so much intrude on the poem as they begin from it: they do not constitute footnotes to be inserted into the text, but merely an intersecting set of information. This complementary relationship speaks to the temporal distance between the note and the poem: Hughes wrote the note much later, and it effectively constitutes a whole new moment of perception and utterance that is separate from that which appears in the poem itself. As a result, the note points to the generative effects of the souvenir bloom that Hughes finds in even in this poem whose formal polish suggests that it missed its moment.

Counterintuitively, however, this poem reminds Hughes of what it does *not* depict rather than what it does. Contrary to what Hughes’ initial comments about the souvenir bloom would suggest, the poem’s mnemonic properties do not lie in its ability to capture an event or experience through language, imagery, and reported event. Here, those elements, which apparently contribute to the creation of a different scene mimetically than the one Hughes actually remembers, trigger associations that lie beyond what the poem actually says. This associative relationship suggests that this writing that was initially supposed to resist memory actually finds its fullest value in its ability to evoke memories and invite further writing from and about memory. Further, it reframes this mimetic writing as a kind of functionally mnemonic writing, even if it only does so for its author, thereby blurring the boundaries between poetry and anti-poetry that Hughes’ preface seeks to delineate so firmly.

Hughes from the outset linked memory with the processes of poetry, and so it is perhaps no surprise that the note adheres more closely to generic poetic expectations than does the poem itself. The account of the burial sounds like something out of a Wordsworth poem, offering a

simple and reverential rusticity for a being whose best memorial is nature itself—an oak sapling. Meanwhile, the poem's latter half lies somewhere between a religious text and a science fiction novel. The "requirements of the writing" that Hughes mentions in the note would not seem to be generic ones, or at least, not typical generic ones.

The question that these observations raise, then, is whose understanding of poetry Hughes invokes when he claims to write against the processes of poetry? Even these poems that, as he acknowledges, have given themselves over to those processes depart from poetic expectations. It is almost as though the more attentive the poems are to form, the less they adhere to conventions about content, refusing to engage in cathetic relationships and more predictable emotional responses. In other words, these poems sound like Hughes' other writing, which tends to be vigorously unsentimental. To be sure, the same might be said of much British poetry of the post-war period (Larkin is an obvious example), but even the fact that this aesthetic is shareable suggests that what Hughes writes against in his anti-poems is not some intrinsic property of poetry, but a subjective understanding of what makes a good poem. Hughes himself notes in a radio interview that poems like "Orf" that miss their moment end up like "poem[s] that I recognised as familiarly my own," meaning that the volume's anti-poems were always an attempt to escape from Hughes' sense of his own aesthetic (in Robinson 258). Hughes' admission indicates that the binary he attempts to establish between an anti-poetry that captures his experience and a polished poetry that displaces it is a false one: it is not poetry as such that denies experience, but his own sense of what a poem can or cannot include or do, meaning that Hughes is always in control of both kinds of writing.

However, he seems not to realize this fact: much to the contrary, Hughes speaks of the poetic writing as being full of insurmountable barriers that exceed his control. When he says of the details in the "Orf" note that they "should be there"—that the note recuperates facts as a remedy to the poem's distortions—he misses that they are not in the poem only because his poetic has barred them entry. His instincts may be widely shared in this case—a poem about the burial of a lamb would likely be bathetic, while the poem that resists this information that "should be there" is striking for letting the lamb-life linger and not consigning it to the safe finality of a grave—but Hughes could nonetheless break with convention and write bad, but accurate, poetry. Instead, he decides to give poetic demands precedence over the demands of an accurate recording of lived experience—in other words, to give in to the poetic process once it takes hold. After all, as Hughes acknowledges, he had already missed the moment, leaving poetry as the best way to prevent it from being lost entirely.

Indeed, this is the value of these *ex post facto* poems: they may not get the moment right, but they retain something of the experience, even if that experience is overwritten by often fantastical possibilities. Whether Hughes knew it or not, this mode of retention is what allows for the souvenir bloom that enables the notes to be written fifteen years later. The very inaccuracies that help them find their fullest form as poems spark memories for Hughes that are only obliquely related to the poems' misrepresentations, effectively giving him a second chance to return to a moment he missed when writing the poem. This is not, however, to say that these acts of recovery result in the same kind of information capture, let alone the same kind of writing, as that which appears in notes that record detail more immediately. The most obvious difference is that this moment of restoration is enacted through remembered details rather than

observed details—they are the product of the very processes of memory that Hughes was trying to circumvent in the volume. And yet this memory writing looks very different from that which appears in “Orf,” whether because the memory is now much older, or because it no longer has to triangulate itself against the demands of poetry, allowing Hughes’ diaristic ‘I’ to speak directly instead of yielding to poetry’s intending ‘I.’

When Hughes asserts that certain details “should” be in an account of this experience, then, that sense of obligation points in multiple directions. This may well be a personal “should” that rectifies the poem’s distortions, but it also may be a collective “should” that speaks to a larger social, ethical, or even readerly sense of correctness. Certainly, the comparative sentimentality of the note suggests that what the poem gets wrong is not necessarily the details of the event (although it obviously might be getting those wrong, too), but the timbre of its retelling for an audience that is more likely to think of the lamb as an object of empathy rather than an inevitable livestock casualty. Hughes in a sense gets a second attempt not just at writing about the event, but at articulating its emotional valences, too. The note offers an aesthetic rejoinder as well as a factual one.

Diary, Memory, and the Temporalized Lyric Subject

That these notes can act as rejoinders at all positions them as a unique kind of memory writing. The other poets in this dissertation use memory as the foundation of mimetic writing, effectively championing the poetic process and its distortions over the unvarnished factuality of the kind of diaristic record-keeping that Hughes strives to attain. Hughes takes the opposite approach, and when his more polished poems attain something closer to mimetic enactment than a straight-on recitation of events, he uses the notes as opportunities to redress these poems’ imaginative interventions—to effectively reassert a diaristic ‘I’ in places where the processes of poetry have supplanted it with a formally induced intending ‘I.’ The diary depends on this friction between recollections of the events at multiple moments to create a sense of authenticity, even if that authenticity now belongs to Hughes as observer of those events rather than to the events themselves. The mimetically-oriented poems’ souvenir bloom allows Hughes to overcome their very failure to capture events accurately, thereby displacing both himself and his experiences, by invoking other, non-literary memories of what “should be” in the poems.

This protracted temporality, along with the timelessness and the present urgency of “should be,” raises the question of why these poems are in the past tense at all, and how seriously this pastness should be taken in light of the notes’ present tense responses to them. In previous chapters, I have suggested that the past tense works to insulate the diegetic world of the poem from the speaker’s need to reconcile events or ideas so that s/he can in a sense leave them behind and get on with the business of living. The actions go forever unresolved, with conflicts remaining conflicts and changes going unassimilated into larger patterns of living, but that lack of resolution is cordoned off into its own space away from the subject’s active experience of daily life. Both “Orf” and “Roe-deer” adhere to those trends, despite “Roe-deer’s” attempts to revise the scene back to the ordinary by connecting it with currents of thought that do not allow for transdimensional deer. While the notes return to the events of the poems, they leave the actual recordings of events alone and add detail around them. The diegetic worlds of the poems remain insulated, even as Hughes reanimates them to comment further and embroider on the

events that lie behind them. It is as though the poem as written cannot be interfered with and must be taken on its own terms, even if the experience that might have birthed it is endlessly open for comment.

As noted earlier, Hughes' perceived inability (or refusal) to reenter the world of the poems is central to his approach to the collection as a whole. Because it is "February 17th" that prompts both the realization that these writings might have another life as a collection of poetry and the feeling that they must remain unedited, it might be said that the souvenir bloom that gives rise to the collection's form of Moortown + (paratextual) Diary is traceable to the insulations of the past tense. Indeed, temporality, both at the level of tense and at the level of utterance, is central to this volume. In addition to the many poems that use the past tense to create divided spaces of lyric engagement, Hughes' decision not to revise the poems allows him to comment on the illusoriness of lyric utterance's supposed timelessness. Hughes here says that because these poems speak from a specific moment, these lyric utterances are time-bound by their very nature, and to tamper with that utterance is to lose what animates it. This is radically contrary to the usual convention that reads a lyric moment is a timeless, perpetual 'now.' As a result, rather than attempting to sustain the illusion of the timeless utterance by revising the poems, Hughes instead highlights the inherent temporality of these moments by juxtaposing other moments of utterance to them in the notes.

In doing so, he also emphasizes his distance from the poems' intending 'I.' If Hughes had revisited the poems and altered their utterances, no readers would be the wiser: all they really know of the poems' voice arises from the intersections of form and language. Whether that voice is the product of years of revision or a spontaneous statement is unknowable to them. Hughes could have in effect buried his many moments of revision in the poems' impressions of immediate utterance. To do this, though, would have been to pretend that the passage of fifteen years had no effect on his understanding of the experiences the poem records, and it would have licensed the overwriting of both an experiential and a poetic moment (or anti-poetic moment, if Hughes is to be believed) by a moment informed by the necessary removes and distortions of memory that the volume is so bent on avoiding. This would have worked at cross purposes to Hughes' larger goal of rescuing his writerly, diaristic 'I' of direct reportage from the convention of a poetic/intending 'I.' Because these 'I's are formally identical, Hughes needs to appeal to the writing's larger context to reveal the differences between them; in this case, that means accentuating the anti-poems' roughness, calling them notes, and then using prose notes as a rejoinder. That these past tense poems have a polish that much of the volume does not only foregrounds their degree of departure from Hughes' larger mission of capturing the "authentic fingerprints of the day," a difference that comparison to the prose notes makes even clearer. Hughes in effect refuses to indulge these poetic processes further and so engages with the poems by changing genres entirely.

This poetics is radically at odds with the other poetics this dissertation has explored. Bishop took nearly twenty years to write about her trip down the Amazon in "Santarém"; and while her intending 'I's utterance is readily discerned in the account, it also betrays a great deal of evidence of subsequent reflection about what she has seen, trading the direct charge of the moment for polish, nuance, and an enlarged perspective. This protracted process of revision suggests that for Bishop, the value of the immediate experience is far less important than artistic

polish; and if that process of polishing wears away traces of her direct experience, or if her diaristic voice is superseded by the poetic voice of the intending 'I,' so be it.

Perhaps this is why critics who write on poetries of memory appeal to the presentness of the poem's illusion of a remembering subject: whether Bishop writes of her experiences five years on or twenty, and whether she writes the poem in one draft or hundreds, the utterance that that writing gives rise to is always "now" as far as readers are concerned. They hear an intending 'I' giving an account at one moment, not the many years of Bishop reading the poem to herself in her studio and adding smaller utterances (and moments) to the poem with each subsequent revision. The 'I' is not received as a composite speaker delivering a composite utterance, but as one voice in the process of delivering one oration. Even Roberts' earlier observations about the successful portions of the *Birthday Letters* poems emphasize the importance of a sense of a mourning 'I' "*at the moment of writing*" (emphasis added, 214). That perceived moment of writing—and for that matter, the subject that is understood to be undertaking that writing—is in fact the product of the moment of reading. Heaney can say of his composite subjects and their utterances built from these many moments, "It was still all me," but for Hughes, that composite utterance comes at the expense of the personal reaction and charge that made the events worth writing about in the first place.

Counterintuitively, Hughes' championing of the lived moment allows his poems to make real the illusion of immediacy that Roberts emphasizes, but not necessarily in the way that Roberts intends. Certainly, it does not always happen at the level of the intending 'I's utterance: as Roberts notes, the writing is "objective," and West's description of the poems as "flat" echoes Roberts' disparaging finding of the *Birthday Letters* poems to be "flat and literal." Instead, Hughes' immediate and momentary utterance happens at the level of the documentary and diaristic 'I'—by reclaiming the lyric moment as a "moment of my life that I did not want to lose" by revising the poem (xi). Even though Hughes champions an objective poetics in the Moortown poems, his decision to treat them as documents and souvenirs casts them not just as unexpectedly subjective in their ability to recall particular moments to their author, but actively personal—and, as such, as artifacts of a personal history, carrying with them their own historical moment.

Hughes, then, emphasizes the genuine nowness of his writing over the cultivated, atemporal, mimetic immediacy that is more likely to appear in the work of these other poets. Indeed, while a poet like Robert Lowell is willing to introduce all manner of distortions and embellishments into his presentation of himself and his family so as to give readers a mimetic sense of "the real Robert Lowell," Hughes is largely uninterested in giving readers any such similar sense of "the real Ted Hughes." This difference in priorities speaks to a radical disagreement about the locus of authority in the poems: while for Lowell, it lies with readers, whose judgment of his realness decides the success of his volume, Hughes' approach keeps that authority situated in Hughes the diarist (perhaps over and above Hughes the poet), allowing it to exist beyond both the poem and readers' sense of its veracity. His decision not to revise the poems suggests that this diaristic quality takes precedence over their poetic, aesthetic quality, and that in fact he may be willing to sacrifice their aesthetics to retain that personal, souvenir bloom. Very much counter to Roberts' sense of the intending 'I' as marker of poetic quality, a good poem in this context is not a highly polished, well-wrought art object with a strong sense of an autonomous speaker, but one that is vividly able to remind Hughes himself of specific days

and events that are real because they happened, not because they feel as if they could have.

This is, of course, a problematic position for a poet to champion, and it is perhaps unsurprising that the volumes written after the Moortown poems return to a poetics that is more easily recognized as “good” poetry: neither *The Remains of Elmet* nor *Flowers and Insects* shares the roughness of the diary poems (although, as Roberts argues, the flatter *Birthday Letters* poems do). For *Moortown Diary*, at least, Hughes pushes to the limit the dictum that lyric is the genre of a speaker being overheard by refusing to allow his readers to be the poems’ primary audience, effectively forcing them to read over his shoulder, however much he may guide that reading in the notes. If the poem comes across as unpolished, or its writing as a bit flat, the fault lies not with the poem, but with readers for not having been there to experience the original events whose souvenir bloom the poems retain—a problem that attends the reading of any diary. Words may displace experience, but, as Hughes illustrates, that displacement is not absolute. With luck, an author can claim the words themselves as part of his own experience, his own idiolect, and recognize in them the potential to make memory bloom.

This dissertation has illustrated the many ways in which Lowell, Heaney, Bishop, and Hughes all manage to make memory bloom, whether it is Lowell’s enlarging of memory into literature and the archetypes that run through it, Heaney’s rendering of otherwise mild childhood difficulties as climacteric traumas, Bishop’s reconceiving of the nature of memory itself, or Hughes’ insistence on the personal valences of poetry. All four poets accomplish these translations of apparently remembered experience into poetry by recognizing the very limits of their ability to do so, and by pursuing the possibilities of language to de- and re-face that experience to their most poetically productive ends. To what degree these poems record these poets’ actual life experiences is unknowable, but the degree to which those experiences have taken on a literary life of their own is undeniable. The insulating properties of the past tense are essential to the poems’ ability to take on these autonomous lives: freed from the need to connect to factual truth, they can instead cultivate the kind of truth that literature illustrates best, which is that shared sense of what feels real that Lowell talks about when formulating the “real Robert Lowell.”

This discussion of the past tense has at times strayed from the question of tense’s impact on lyric and lyric reading, but it should be clear by now that these past tense poems require some adjustments to the way we think about lyric subjectivity and temporality. The first adjustment is to expectations about the connections between a speaking ‘I’ and a diegetic ‘I.’ Although it is well known that postmodern poetry has done much to stress the independence of writing from its author, one expects that breakage to be a feature primarily of the more avant-garde writing of the post-WWII period. However, as the foregoing chapters reveal, even these self-forgetful poems by poets who are thought of as representing a fairly conservative poetics still manage to disrupt identifications between speaker and ‘I,’ to say nothing of those between speaker and poet. Moreover, these poets do so under the guise of autobiography, which does not obviously invite such play with subjectivity. As a result, this analysis of these speakerly divisions does not simply reinforce what we already know to be true of poetry in this period, but rather it tells us

that that knowledge is far more widely applicable than we thought.

And yet to say that these poets complicate their own personal identifications with their 'I's does not quite tell the whole story. Their poems are read autobiographically for a reason, with clear invitations within the text to read the 'I's as versions, if not direct depictions, of the poets themselves. These invitations indicate that, while these poets problematize representations of their own subjectivity through their depictions of these 'I's, they do not defeat the notion of a poetic subject altogether: there is still an 'I' and still a dominant perspective in the poems, even if those elements may not be the same things. The resulting poetics does not lend itself well to more typical categorizations that might say, for example, that the subject is an artifact of language and is governed by a poem's linguistic and poetic vicissitudes, or that the subject is the linguistic incarnation of the poet's own experience. Instead, and problematically, both of these positions describe these poetic subjects equally well, allowing these subjects to straddle what one might expect to be opposite ends of a spectrum of poetic and subjective possibility. It is not, then, just that a more experimental vein runs through these poets' work than critics have given them credit for; it is that they manage to join the experimental with the conservative to create a hybridized aesthetic to go with their generically hybridized past tense poems.⁵¹

This generic hybridization signals the other adjustment to our broader understandings of the lyric genre that must be made, this time connected to lyric temporality. Many of these past tense poems suggest narratives even if they are not fully-fledged ballads or narrative poems, but the teleology of narrative poses intrinsic problems for a view of lyric as essentially one long, protracted moment. Assumptions that lyric cannot be narrative have largely been laid aside, and some European narratologists have even studied the workings of narrative in lyric contexts.⁵² That lyric can incorporate narrative is perhaps not difficult to see, but understanding narrative's role in a lyric context requires a bit more effort. The opposition that Jonathan Culler, for example, establishes between attention to narrative on one hand (reading all lyric as if it were a dramatic monologue) and to utterance on the other (as if the speaker or the event of speaking were of prime importance) cannot account for the middle ground that past tense lyrics create.⁵³ Reading them for diegesis converts that diegesis into truth statements about the speakers (and the poets that created them) that are not always warranted; reading them as occasions of utterance

⁵¹ In the past couple of decades, a strain of Bishop scholarship has developed to attend to her more experimental tendencies. *Poetry and the Sense of Panic* offers one version of this criticism, collecting essays that put her work in conversation with that of John Ashbery. Similar such connections have gone largely unplumbed in the work of the other three poets, however.

⁵² Peter Hühn and Jens Keifer's *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry* offers a good overview of this work.

⁵³ Culler articulates this tension most clearly in "Why Lyric?", in which he argues that following New Critical practices of reading the poem as a self-contained fiction can only present the poem as an impoverished narrative that overlooks what lyric does best: "stress on the reconstruction of the dramatic situation deprives rhythm and sound patterning of any constitutive role (at best they reinforce or undercut meaning); it devalues intertextual relations, except when they can be assimilated to allusions made by the consciousness dramatized; and it ignores the characteristic extravagance of lyric, which frequently engages in speech acts without a known real-world counterpart" (202).

places the act of storytelling as such well ahead of diegetic detail. These lyrics are not ultimately just a way of cementing speakerly authority over language, but neither are they just the stories they tell. As a result, it is not enough to say that their moment is a moment in their speaker's consciousness, as de Man does in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," but neither is it appropriate to look for a full narrative arc in every one of these poems. These past tense poems demand a balanced consideration of speakerly consciousness and narratological progression, meaning that the predominating speaker- or utterance-based models of lyric theory are not up to the task of addressing these poems fully. This dissertation makes a start at creating a hybridized reading practice for these hybrid texts by identifying their respective speakerly and narrative spheres and charting the interactions between them, but much more work remains to be done.

Finally, there is the question of what this analysis of poetry means for autobiography as a genre. This discussion has taken autobiography as a comparatively fixed term, which it certainly is not, so that I could focus on its effects on the lyric genre. A different project could think through the question of lyric's effects on autobiography—to say nothing of these particular authors' use of the genre—more fully, but at the very least, my analysis signals the capaciousness and fluidity of the autobiographical genre. It is easy to assume that autobiography has more in common with journalism or historiography than with literature, but as these poets have illustrated, that is not necessarily the case. This poetry shows the ease with which autobiography's 'I' can slide into a more literary 'I' that expresses less fidelity to external events. When this happens in prose works, as when James Frey altered and exaggerated events in *A Million Little Pieces* such that his prose was better thought of as a novel than a memoir, it is an occasion for scandal. That poets can embellish, exaggerate, and alter events without similar repercussions perhaps illustrates that poetic license still trumps autobiographical fidelity. Everyone knows Lowell invented details in *Life Studies*, and generally, no one raises any objections. This forgivingness may say more about audience than genre—Lowell's critics are poetry scholars more often than they are theorists of autobiography—but that a lyric 'I' can shade so easily into an autobiographical 'I' suggests that more research is needed in this arena, too, to determine whether these two 'I's really are cut from the same cloth, or whether basic requirements of the autobiographical genre must be loosened in order to allow a life to become poetry.

This final question is one on which even these poets could not agree, and their subsequent works only deepened the divides between them. A schism famously erupted between Bishop and Lowell in the early 1970s, when the latter incorporated his own rewritings of his ex-wife's letters into the poems that would appear in *The Dolphin* without her consent. Bishop responded in horror, admonishing him that "*art just isn't worth that much*," and embarking on a meditation on the legacy of Lowell's mixing of the autobiographical and the poetic:

In general, I deplore the 'confessional'—however, when you wrote *Life Studies* perhaps it was a necessary movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh and immediate. But now—ye gods—anything goes, and I am so sick of poems about the students' mothers & fathers and sex lives and so on. All that *can* be done—but at the same time one surely should have a feeling that one can trust the writer—not to distort, tell lies, etc.

The letters, as you have used them, present fearful problems: what's true,

what isn't; how one can bear to witness such suffering and yet not know how much of it one *needn't* suffer with, how much has been "made up" and so on (emphasis in original, OA 562).

Lowell may have attempted to shift autobiographical authority to readers in *Life Studies* and again in *The Dolphin* by emphasizing character development over fact (replacing what Lizzie actually said in her letters with what worked best for his vision of her character), but as a reader, Bishop refuses to accept this burden, insisting that the final authority remains with the question of what really happened—not even with the author's view of what happened, which might be expected from an autobiography, but with some objective, perhaps journalistic understanding of fact. Bishop's own work, as I have illustrated, is not without its own problems in this arena, but by the late poems, those problems are presented as themselves a kind of factuality. Lowell's understandings of poetic license and literary authority may work against the kind of autobiographical pact that Bishop wants to uphold, but Bishop's language here suggests that the actual can remain compatible with poetry, even if her own work shows the difficulties attendant to making it do so.

The question of autobiography's relationship to poetry, then, is the one that Bishop herself raises: is art worth more than the factual truth of one's life, or the lives that surround it? Can autobiography's imperative to tell the truth survive poetry's drive to bend that truth into the best possible literary shape? The exchange between these poets suggests that such survival may just be possible, but only if the poet decides that fidelity to life is worth more than the possibilities granted by the writing of it.

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